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UNAUSTRALIAN BEHAVIOUR

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WINTER 2004

TEMPER DEMOCRATIC, BIAS AUSTRALIAN

EDITORIAL

Un-Australian Behaviour

THE GREAT POLITICAL achievement of the Howard Government has been to redefine Australia as a monoculture. In spite of the fact that Australian society is now actually more multicultural than it has ever been, the white heterosexual Anglo-Saxon male sits more comfortably and authoritatively at the cultural centre of our society than at any time since the election of Whitlam, if not of Menzies.

After coming to power in 1996 Howard ostentatiously avoided criticising the policies of Pauline Hanson, though they were based on the obviously mistaken perception that non-whites, and Aborigines in particular, are a privileged group who get favourable treatment by government. Howard also actively sponsored a campaign by intellectuals around *Quadrant* magazine to rewrite the history of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia in terms of paternalism rather than oppression and abuse. 'Bush logic', suggests a Walter Vivian poem, is always infinitely malleable.

More recently, Howard has sought to position the Anzacs in the place of Aboriginal Australia as the true moral and spiritual ancestors of our nation. It was their sacrifice, it is asserted over and over again, that made our freedom possible (as though the Turks were invading us). Maria Tumarkin has found an astonishing insensitivity towards Aboriginal 'traumascapes'—quasi-sacred places marked by a substantial loss of life—in contrast to the growing reverence for their white war-memorial counterparts at Gallipoli and elsewhere. This degree of idealisation has only become possible since the original Anzacs, in all their human fallibility, have disappeared from view. Australia's soldiers, of all wars and eras, have now become *the* example for the rest of Australia to follow. "More than any other prime minister in the post-war era", writes Mark McKenna in an important recent essay, "Howard has sought to gain political advantage by wrapping himself in khaki . . . Since . . . East Timor in 1999, Howard has personally presided over at least thirty farewells and welcome-homes for Australia's defence forces".

Like the cricketers and rugby players Howard is almost as keen to be photographed among, Australia's soldiers are virtually all white and can all be presented as the embodiment of selfless service to 'the nation'. Whiteness and political and cultural conservatism are brought together in a politically fruitful way, so that even white critics of Howard's monoculturalism, disconnected from the essential Anzac tradition of sacrifice, are not truly Australian. Implicitly and explicitly, the concerns and desires of people who do not fit the cultural norm have been presented as selfish, sectarian, divisive or threatening, as though the government-led refusal to acknowledge cultural difference is not political. Even when a deeply paranoid and mean-spirited white Australia is detaining refugees in concentration camps, it is actually *us* who are under threat; from their "moral intimidation". Merrill Findlay records James Jupp's view that "much of the resistance to refugees and asylum seekers comes from people who were born and educated during the White Australia era, or from younger Australian-borns who remain uncomfortable with 'otherness' because 'they have lived very sheltered lives'". Jupp includes most politicians and bureaucrats in this category. As demonstrated by the jurists who found Rodney King to have brought his beating by L. A. police upon himself, where ignorance and complacency exists, idiocy and cruelty soon follow.

The basic economic agenda of the far Right has of course long been embraced by both major parties. At the recent 'roundtable' discussion on think tanks and the media staged by *Overland* and the Victorian Writers' Centre, Andrew Norton from the Centre for Independent Studies said that, as with other right-wing think tanks, the main function of the CIS now is to intervene in the cultural sphere. Intellectuals associated with these think tanks have played a crucial role in advancing a racially exclusive and culturally conservative notion of Australianness. Such cultural division necessarily distracts attention from the growing disparities of income and opportunity that flow directly from the far-right economic agenda. As acknowledged by Peter Holding in this issue, the main challenge facing the Australian Labor Party in the lead up to this year's federal election is to win back white working-class voters who, for cultural reasons, have since 1996 been voting Liberal.

Ironies abound. These groups most loudly proclaiming who is and isn't a real Australian are generally direct offshoots of American organisations and closely follow a political-, economic- and cultural-campaign model established by the far Right in the US. In removing the traditional distance between his office and the military, McKenna suggests that Howard himself has "Americanised the role of the prime minister". As Donald Horne wrote in the special 1985 'Australian' issue of *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, real power in Australia lies with big and ultimately foreign business: Kath Wilson sets out here how business interests have dominated the mass media's treatment of scientific issues surrounding genetic modification of crops and food. At the same time, if Australians have traditionally understood their culture as being most strongly characterised by antipathy rather than acquiescence to authority, as historians and sociologists generally suggest, then the most Australian Australians today must be those individuals and groups who exist on

the cultural margins, largely excluded from a full Australian identity.

Contributors to this issue scrutinise and offer alternatives to current understandings of 'Australianness'. They acknowledge the difficulty of cross-cultural communication and understanding, as well as the importance of this. Martin Thomas observes for example that "in grappling with the question of Australia's capacity—and failure—to accommodate difference in the public culture", Sylvia Lawson's novelised history of the Sydney Opera House "is a tale germane to our unpleasant times". Naomi Parry praises Inga Clendinnen's "timely meditation on . . . cross cultural conflict . . . on misunderstanding". In Marian Devitt's story 'The Crow Tree', Mal expresses his feeling that "I honestly can't cope with more . . . cultural difference". Rolf Heimann suggests how little Australians commonly understand about China. Ouyang Yu writes that like other Chinese-Australian intellectuals he feels excluded from the public sphere: "Being an economic dissident in today's West is equivalent to being a political dissident in today's China". Chek Ling notes however that, through their own comfortableness and greed, along with a fear of being singled out, more established Chinese in Australia often find it profitable to leave the white establishment unchallenged. Dawn Cohen argues that few effective links have so far been made between the Left and the Jewish Left in Australia because Australians generally "have had little exposure to the everyday lives of ordinary Jews". The Australian Left "denies and diminishes anti-Jewish violence".

Other writers examine mythologised white understandings of the past. Laurie Clancy finds that in *The True History of the Kelly Gang* Peter Carey has simplified and ultimately romanticised the Irish-Australian history that forms the basis of many Australians' view of themselves as descendents of a marginalised group. Judith Sackville-O'Donnell argues that in *The Potato Factory*, Bryce Courtenay "has distorted and ignored the vast bulk of documented material on [Tasmanian convict] Ikey Solomon, and created a grotesque Jewish caricature". Tony Birch finds a disturbingly a-historical perspective pervaded media portrayals of the recent Aboriginal 'riots' in Redfern. Once again, the whole history of institutionalised white oppression of Indigenous peoples is ignored and the events are presented simply as part of an Aboriginal problem.

Contributors also assert the value of culture and its ultimate irreducibility to politics. These points are made strongly by Robert Pascoe, who finds in his personal essay that: "One's childhood and the visual clues that give it a pictorial record end up becoming a self-referencing framework that repeats itself endlessly across a lifetime." Findlay adds: "Any writer, any culture-producer, has to believe . . . that our work *can* effect change in some complex, chaotic but very human way".

Acceptance of and support for a multi-cultural (and not merely multi-racial) Australia can only be achieved through a willingness to acknowledge and in places negotiate cultural difference. As with Kolya in Simon Groth's story 'Heavens', sometimes what is needed is the courage not to follow the nightmares of one's parents.

—NATHAN HOLLIER

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✯ 'CRIME', PUNISHMENT & POLAR B(E)ARINGS

Salman Rushdie had a *fatwa* issued against him for a particular novel. Alan Gould (*Overland* 174) exhorts the editors to "ditch[ ]" the magazine's present poetry editor, John Leonard, for his "mendacious" etc, review of Les Murray's *Collected Poems*. This demand, contrary to the Gilbert & Sullivan song, suggests Alan's object is not to make the 'punishment' fit the 'crime', but rather to subject the aforesaid John Leonard to the kind of treatment many of us reserve for the cockroach scuttling across the kitchen tiles or the funnel-shaped web taking form in the corner of the window ledge: *eliminate-at-all-costs!*

The 'John Leonard' under discussion has shown himself to be a capable poetry editor; I thought his selections for *Overland* 173 and 174 were fresh, lively, stimulating, and well-arranged. His poetry editing indicates he knows what he's doing (i.e. selecting poetry for *Overland* and not for another journal) and that he is working with flair and gusto. That's my *opinion*. Selecting poetry for a journal, and writing poetry reviews for it, are different activities. That's practically a *fact*.

Karen Pickering points out (174) that the necessary debate over Keith Windschuttle's writings tends to ensure that Keith Windschuttle gets more and more publicity. Something similar happens when the writings of Les Murray are negatively criticised (*172*, *174*). "Sweet are the uses of adversity"—for some. One result of the polemical process is that 'Australian poetry' starts to look as if its projects—or existence—revolved around the 'for/against Murray' polarisation. There are many poets working creatively, innovatively and excitingly in Australia whose work would need copious, intensive and exhaustive analysis in order to produce the necessary details that might conceivably seem to tie it to one or the other of the aforementioned poles. Writing about Australian poetry may need to catch up with under-noticed poets whose contributions are changing the concept of 'Australian poetry', its field and its provenance; to 'catch up', as listeners at myriad venues regularly do, with some of these poets' boldness, subtlety, amplitude, difference.

—Kerry Leves is a NSW poet and critic.

✯ KATE SHAW RESPONDS TO CULTURAL VITALITY

In *Overland* 174, the autumn edition's special supplement on cultural vitality, Chris McAuliffe's paper ('Selling Secret Lives') ends on a jarring note. He begins with an interesting analysis of the fluid relationship between culture and subculture, moves on to the well-worn theme that subculture as "bohemian rebellion" is oppositional, experimental and challenging, and slips straight into the implication that cultural policy that seeks a place for subcultures is doomed: it "defuses their challenge", dilutes their "bohemian *frisson*"; almost inevitably, "the cultural vitality you expected, or planned, isn't the vitality you wanted".

McAuliffe does question whether subculture's entry into the broader cultural domain really does destroy it. This is a more nuanced position than the simplistic "paradox" that cultural vitality can be "predicted but not managed", and is a useful contribution to evolving thinking on the role and potential of local government policy.

Instead of leaving it here, however, McAuliffe casts a further warning that policy interventions such as "putting venues on life-support out of respect for their glory days" are "worrying" efforts to "short circuit" cultural vitality. I presume he's referring, at least in part, to the Esplanade Hotel.

A couple of years ago the City of Port Phillip put some policy objectives in its local planning scheme that support places with 'local cultural value'. They specifically try to ensure that any development around the Esplanade Hotel does not compromise its 'cultural significance'. In addition to heritage controls which protect the Esplanade building, these policy objectives try to achieve continuity of the Espy's use as a live-music venue.

It's an intervention that has attracted criticism, particularly from people who think they know about culture. The critics say that we need uncertainty in the creative fields, to shake out complacency and receive the stimulus of regeneration. It says government intervention is anathema to the free spirit of subcultures, that regulation constricts flow and change. It says let the Espy go, the live-music scene will reappear somewhere else. But the global pressures for use of land are such that low-cost pubs, clubs and living spaces, empty sheds on riverbanks and docks—the breeding grounds for alternative subcultures—are key targets for urban regeneration projects in advanced market economies throughout the world. Redevelopment and infill projects, warehouse conversions and gentrification mean that places in the interstices of western cities

are becoming harder to find. There are not many options in Melbourne for the live-music scene. Intentionally or not, the criticism of government planning reduces to a pretext for letting the market rip.

You only have to go to Europe to see that it is just not true that regulations compromise good outcomes. And German and Dutch city governments are using cultural policy to protect places of low-income cultural production. The Berlin Senate recently gave heritage protection to a half-bombed-out squat that has been a centre for alternative subculture since the Wall came down, and by designating it a 'culture house' in the city plan has ensured the continuity of its use. The designations have also prevented the place from being demolished for redevelopment. The City of Amsterdam has a five-year program of buying old warehouses on the docks for use as cheap living and working space for artists. The program is explicitly premised on the fact that these places are disappearing and that if there is no intervention it will be the market alone that shapes Amsterdam's space and culture.

These interventions are not without their European critics of course, but the East Berliners I spoke to in the alternative scene—who have long struggled against highly interventionist and repressive government—find it perfectly reasonable that government policy is used to protect place. East Germans are finding life under capitalism not as comfortable as they had hoped, and are less concerned about cultural policy interventions than the current state support for corporate real estate development.

The critique of cultural policy also implies that, for art/music/cultural products to remain fresh and original, the active marginalisation of these subcultures should continue (in the classic subcultural model, McAuliffe points out, popularisation is "the beginning of the end"). This position does not stand up to close scrutiny. In *The Field of Cultural Production* (Polity Press, 1993) Pierre Bourdieu suggests that the high cultural but low economic capital of the avant-garde artist allows those with a calculating eye to turn art into commodity—a conversion that would be devalued with increasing popularity of the product, in a "systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economics". In other words, the art collections and musical choices of those in the know are so much more valuable if only a few people know where to source them. Might cultural policy rescue the status and wellbeing of the artist from her subjugation to the product?[1]

In regard to the Espy the notion of life-support is simply not substantiated. The Espy is pumping and apart from its general 'indie' air, the scene is not fixed: it moves through jazz, soul, rhythm 'n' blues, rock 'n' roll, country, punk, funk, rap, hiphop, techno and continues to evolve. The music changes but young bands love playing at the Espy now as much as they did ten and twenty years ago. Just look at the gig guide if you haven't been there recently. The majority of acts are young Victorian bands most of whom you've probably never heard of.

Policy interventions such as these do not create some kind of artificial cultural viability where there would otherwise be none. What the Espy policy does is create the best possible conditions for continuity of use as long as there are proprietors willing to run it and punters to make it economically viable. Nor do these interventions constrain the continuation or disappearance and reappearance of the more interstitial, slippery subcultures.

It is unexamined arguments that give regressive governments justification for abandoning our cities to the market, that I find worrying.

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Polity Press, 1993, p.39.

—Kate Shaw is completing a PhD on the politics of place protection at the University of Melbourne.

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SUSPECT MEMORY

The 'unexpected' Iraq morass

ON THE *SUNDAY* program of 11 April 2004, the Coalition's Defence Minister Senator Robert Hill admitted that he did not foresee that things would be as bad as they now are in Iraq. "It was obviously impossible to predict how it would work out," claimed the Minister.[1] But of course the Iraqi morass *was* widely predicted by opponents of the war. To give but one example, in *Overland* 170 I wrote:

> 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 Shi'ite 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 prior to 1958) again being ransacked by foreign powers;
> —anti-US feeling within Iraq that will only be aggravated by war.

Critics of the war have predicted accurately almost every outcome of the war: no weapons of mass destruction; no withdrawal of US forces upon removal of Saddam's regime; no miraculous burgeoning of pro-Western liberal democracy; ongoing war and violence following the intervention.

In the same article I referred to a report from US think tank, the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), which was unambiguous about the role of oil and the need for a permanent US military presence in the Gulf. 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.

A political refugee from Saddam's Iraq, Sami Ramadani has pointed out there are now fourteen large US military bases in Iraq, and the US-engineered constitution puts Iraqi armed forces under the command of the occupying power.[2] The idea is clearly for this occupier to be 'invited' to stay in Iraq after the handover of 'power' on 30 June 2004, or until whatever date the so-called handover is postponed.

Frankly, the notion that the US intended removing its military forces from Iraq at the earliest possible opportunity after its intervention was as fanciful as the so-called threat posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD) prior to the invasion. There is only one kind of democracy acceptable to US interests in Iraq—one that invites them to stay on and that ensures continued access to Gulf oil reserves.

Following the First Gulf War, it was the US military bases in Saudi Arabia which were the guarantors of 'Gulf stability'. In the wake of September 11, the cooling of Washington's relationship with the Saudi Arabian autocracy, and its successful toppling of Saddam's regime, the US announced in

SOMEWHERE ON THE ROADMAP TO ... ERR ...

late April 2003 that it was shutting down its military operations in Saudi Arabia. All US planes were removed and nearly all of its 5000 troops would leave by the end of that summer.[3]

The removal of the bases from Saudi Arabia met a key al-Qaeda demand. It was anathema to al-Qaeda for the 'US infidel' to have its military bases located in the most holy of Islamic countries. Yet there was no sanctimonious outcry at the US yielding to terrorist demands when it removed its bases from Saudi Arabia. This was reserved for Spanish voters who ejected a government that had led them into an unpopular war and had lied about the true identity of the Madrid bombers for perceived political gain.

Sanctimony also found a home in Australia's domestic political scene even prior to the war. Howard initially accused opponents of the war of "spending most of their time attacking America" and of giving "encouragement to the leadership in Iraq".[4] He has now moved on to characterise Latham's call for the return of our troops by Christmas as an action that "would be seen by terrorists and enemies of our allies as an enormous victory, an enormous win".[5]

Admittedly in promising to bring the troops home by Christmas, Latham unnecessarily opened up a political opportunity for Howard. He would have been wiser to focus upon Labor's criteria (as opposed to time line) for a withdrawal of troops and Howard's refusal to provide any such criteria. Howard has refused to go beyond extremely general statements about the pre-conditions that need to be met for our military withdrawal from Iraq. He has made vague statements such as, "Our plan has always been that you stay there until you have finished the job"[6] and that we have a responsibility "not to leave until, on an objective assessment, our job has been done".[7]

It is difficult to see how staying until "you have finished the job" constitutes any type of "plan". But more importantly, Howard has continuously avoided stating what facts will lead to an "objective assessment" that our job has "finished". Despite the silence on this point one thing seems clear enough. Howard's reasons for deciding that the job is "finished" are unlikely to have anything to do with the reasons that we were given for us undertaking the

"job" in the first place. The "job" of depriving Saddam Hussein's regime of WMD was a fantasy. Even those who still seek to somehow deny this could hardly argue that any such job had not now "finished".

If the reason for participation in the war was not WMD but 'regime change' then, equally, it would appear that this goal has also been achieved. It was achieved with the destruction of Saddam's government and the establishment of the US-led administration in Iraq. Alternatively if what was meant by 'regime change' was the creation of an alternative Iraqi regime, this goal will be achieved on 30 June 2004 with the formal transfer of power to an Iraqi authority, unless the US decides to shift the date. If, on the other hand, what many critics of the war said was correct, and the war was really about oil, or the US geopolitical goal of redeploying its military bases from Saudi Arabia into Iraq, how will this affect Howard's view as to when our job might be "finished"? If the commitment is to stay until widespread politically motivated violence in Iraq ends, this is likely to be an extremely long time, certainly years, if indeed it is achievable at all.

Exactly what 'job' are Australian troops doing in Iraq? It is unlikely that they are doing any kind of 'job' (apart perhaps from guarding our diplomats) that would not be done in their absence by US troops. Their main purpose is to give symbolic political–diplomatic support to Bush's adventure. When that job is 'finished' is likely to depend on what George Bush tells our own man of steel.

Despite Latham's gaffe he has persisted with taking Howard on over the war issue. In doing so he is entering territory that is regarded by most political commentators as Howard's turf. A degree of political danger is certainly involved given that most of the media (especially Murdoch press) supported the war and given the susceptibility of voters in marginal electorates to Howard's fear-based politics. To win power Labor must regain the loss of large parts of its blue-collar English Speaking Background (ESB) constituency particularly in NSW and Queensland. Labor's representation in Sydney has contracted to the fourteen seats it holds in the western and south-western areas, each of which is notable for high concentrations of less affluent Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) voters. Labor's most reliable two-party-preferred basis constituency are now social professionals (teachers, lawyers and the like) and NESB blue- and white-collar workers.[8]

Attitude surveys reveal that one of the main reasons why the blue-collar ESB voters Labor must win over have recently voted for Howard is that they see his approach to border protection as being "far more in tune with their values and their strong sense of Australian identity".[9] These are the same voters that Howard will want to try and hold onto by convincing them that they face a real and imminent security threat from terrorism and that his close relationship with President Bush is the best guarantee they can find to abate that threat.

Latham knows that the US alliance is popular with the Australian electorate. He knows the US alliance frees up resources for health and education that might be demanded for defence if it were not for the alliance. He knows that voters in the marginal seats may well fear a terrorist threat. But he appears to be prepared to take a risk that he can appeal to the "strong sense of Australian identity" by convincing voters that our real security interests lie closer to home and that the US alliance need not mean subservience to George Bush's government.

The elite of the press gallery, whose opinions have a habit of 'trickling down' to affect the broader public opinion, seem to believe that Latham is engaging in an exercise of political folly and is running a risk that the US alliance will become an election issue.

Michelle Gratten stated:

> Washington will know not to expect any favours from a Labor Government . . . Wins by Latham and John Kerry would make for easier relations but . . . the alliance would still have more distance in it than now. Latham clearly believes that as the year goes on the situation in Iraq will get worse and that will work against the PM. Howard thinks Latham has miscalculated over the troops and related issues. The die is cast: who is right will be one ingredient in the mix of the election result.[10]

Paul Kelly was more condemnatory and stated:

> [Latham] is close to making the US alliance an election issue . . . These are the riskiest decisions Latham has taken as ALP leader . . . The Hawke-Keating-Beazley generation was genuinely pro-American. It worked for years to establish the legitimacy of the ALP as a manager and upholder of the US alliance after the disastrous decades of the 50s and 60s . . . Surely Labor has not forgotten that there were two Vietnam elections, 1966 and 1969, and Labor lost

An excessive number of politicians on both sides of politics, as well as a number of important media commentators are so 'pro-American' that they seem incapable or unwilling to accept that the national interest dictates that we act on facts not propaganda.

both . . . The impression at this stage is that Latham just doesn't get the idea of the alliance.[11]

If he is to successfully challenge Howard over the Iraq policy and the manner in which Australia should interpret its obligations under the alliance, Latham will need to watch his language. In an interview on *Lateline* on 7 April 2004 he stated of the Iraq war:

> It started out as a search for weapons of mass destruction that now evidently don't exist and can't be seen as part of the war against terror *for that reason* [emphasis added].[12]

This approach is fraught with political danger. The reason the foray into Iraq was not part of the war on terror was primarily because there was no actual or likely link between Saddam and al-Qaeda, not because of the absence of WMD. The political danger is that if the occupiers of Iraq come up with anything that can even arguably be described as a WMD, Latham's own words may be turned against him.

Latham has also been set a task due to the fact that prior to his ascension to the leadership, Labor started out with a tremendously convoluted policy on the issue of the war. Some members of the parliamentary Labor Party apparently thought that Labor policies could be conveyed to the electorate with the same intricacies as might be referred to in addressing an audience of diplomats. Labor initially stated that it would oppose the war if it did not have Security Council support unless it could be proved that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction or had proven links with al-Qaeda, or if some Security Council members 'unreasonably' vetoed the war. Later Labor adopted a simpler approach that it would oppose the war unless it had Security Council support. But it could never quite muster the courage to say that Australia should not be militarily involved in Iraq, with or without Security Council approval. Interestingly only Bob Hawke, perhaps Labor's stoutest ever defender of the US alliance, articulated this position. On 4 March 2003, Hawke stated on *Lateline* that the US and Western Europe had been responsible for putting Saddam Hussein in power in the first place and that al-Qaeda would welcome an invasion. Hawke said:

> I suggest to you if there's one thing that Osama bin Laden would be praying for at this moment, it is that the United States particularly without a United Nations resolution should be attacking Iraq . . . You're serving the interests of terrorism because what will happen is that you'll have an increase in repugnance against a superpower with its few allies who are going in there to do something which is not necessarily to be done by war . . . You are making a more unstable, a more dangerous world.[13]

There are two possible reasons why Labor adopted such a qualified opposition to the war. The generous assessment is that if Labor opposed the war on the grounds that Saddam possessed no WMD and after the invasion such weapons were found, it would have been susceptible to more wedge politics by Howard. Howard would have asked voters how they could ever trust Labor with national security given that it did not heed the intelligence advice of our most important allies. The sub-text to those ESB voters that Labor needs to win over would be that you should always believe and follow those of your own (Anglo-Saxon) kind. Under these circumstances the analysis may have been that it was safer for Labor to adopt a 'wait and see' approach on the issue of WMD and then to criticise the government if they were not found.

A less generous assessment is that senior figures within Labor's parliamentary party did exactly the same thing as the Liberals. They allowed their fundamentally pro-US orientation to lead them to uncritical acceptance of US and UK intelligence on the issue of WMD in Iraq. Fresh from reading the now largely discredited Blair dossier, on 29 September 2002, ALP shadow foreign minister Kevin Rudd told Tony Jones on *Lateline*:

> There is no debate or dispute as to whether Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction. He does.[14]

Yet there were a number of facts in the public domain that should have led any Australian political party to adopt a healthily sceptical approach towards US and UK intelligence.

First there was documentary evidence of a desire, dating back to the days of the Clinton administration, by the neo-conservative advisers to the Bush administration to take military action against Iraq. The longstanding desire of Bush advisers to go to war in Iraq meant that a motive to create a pretext for war was present. Second there was a credibility problem. Efforts by the Bush administration to link Saddam to September 11 and al-Qaeda were frankly laughable. Third, and perhaps most importantly, there was a credible body of evidence already in the public domain to suggest that any military threat from Iraq had already been contained.

UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, who had voted for Bush for President, had publicly stated that by 1998 the chemical weapons infrastructure of Iraq had been destroyed either by Iraq itself or by UNSCOM. The biological weapons program was gone with all the major facilities eliminated. The nuclear weapons program was eliminated, as was the long-range ballistic missiles program.

According to Ritter, as I pointed out in the *Overland* article, following the job done by UNSCOM after the First Gulf War, in order to produce WMD Iraq would have to procure complicated tools and technology through front companies that would likely have been detected. If Iraq was to produce or deploy nuclear or chemical weapons these would have been detected by satellite and air reconnaissance and destroyed in air strikes. Ritter was hardly alone in his assessment. There was no shortage of other credible analysts who were publicly stating that the military threat posed by Saddam was contained. Neither was there any shortage of reliable predictions that the result of the invasion would be the morass that the US and its allies now find themselves in.

Yet despite this available evidence there was an apparent acceptance by some in Labor ranks that significant WMD would be found after the invasion of Iraq. There may also have been a utopian acceptance that somehow a pro-Western liberal democracy might spring up in Iraq and lead to the solution of all of the problems in the Middle East, including the problems between Israel and the Palestinians.

After the event, senior Labor figures attacked Howard on the basis that he lied to the Australian people about the existence of WMD. Howard countered that he had not lied but had simply acted on the intelligence that was presented to his government. While there is some evidence that the Howard government had not been forthcoming with intelligence that did not serve its pro-war agenda, Labor's attack had a certain lameness about it. No criticism was forthcoming from Labor to suggest that even if the government had not been dishonest, it had been incompetent, that it had failed in the crucial task of having made an objective, independent and sufficiently critical analysis of foreign intelligence supplied to it. Instead of such an attack a Senate committee was set up and largely bipartisan comments emerged about the so-called 'intelligence failure'.

Labor could never move from its criticism of the Howard government for having lied to a criticism that it failed to take a sufficiently critical approach towards US and UK intelligence, because senior Labor figures fell hook line and sinker for the same intelligence. Those that encourage an objective and critical approach towards the US, even within Labor circles, are immediately suspected of being 'anti-American'. Wait for more, especially from the Murdoch press, that renders this charge against Mark Latham.

It seems that even post Vietnam and in the context of the new and complex threat posed by terrorism, a kind of McCarthyism is developing. An excessive number of politicians on both sides of politics, as well as a number of important media commentators are so 'pro-American' that they seem incapable or unwilling to accept that the national interest dictates that we act on facts, not propaganda. This should be the case even if the source of the propaganda is the intelligence agency of an ally.

They seem equally oblivious to the importance of distinguishing between the US alliance in general and the roguish nature of the Bush administration. This is after all an administration that has:

> —boasted about its preparedness to operate outside the norms of international law;

—shamelessly promoted the dangerous and internationally de-stabilising doctrine of pre-emption;
—announced its preparedness to use 'mini nukes' on the battlefield;[15]
—wrecked, for the foreseeable future, the emerging doctrine of lawful intervention on humanitarian grounds in cases of ethnic cleansing or imminent large scale loss of life.[16]

Perhaps it is Paul Kelly who just does not "get" the alliance. If you actually read the ANZUS treaty you will see that it is about security in the Pacific and that it commits the parties "to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations".

Labor should have taken a more objective, independent, simpler and more decisive stance against the war in the beginning. Had it done so Latham's task in now convincing voters that it is not in the national interest for us to do the Bush administration's bidding on the other side of the world, might have been all the easier. Nevertheless Latham can be confident that he will be vindicated in his assessment that things are only going to get worse in Iraq. Whether this will gain or cost him votes, or will be a largely neutral factor, is, at this stage anyway, harder to assess.

—APRIL 2004

1. Senator Robert Hill interviewed by Laurie Oakes on *Sunday* program, Channel 9, <sunday.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/political_transcripts/article_1528.asp>.
2. Sami Ramadani, 'Now for the truth about Iraq', *Age*, 9–10 April 2004, p.9.
3. See Matt Kelley, Associated Press, 29 April 2003, <www.signonsandiego.com/news/military/20030429-1450-us-saudiarabia.html> and Paul Koring, *Globe and Mail*, 29 April 2003, <www.globeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20030429.wxsaud0430/BNStory/International>.
4. 'Howard's Warriors', by Mark McKenna in *Why the War was Wrong*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, p.182.
5. Stated by Howard in an interview by Barrie Cassidy, 4 April 2004, *The Insiders*, ABC TV, <www.pm.gov.au/news/interviews/Interview773.html>.
6. Stated by Howard in an interview with Steve Liebmann on 31 March 2004, *Today Show*, Channel 9, <www.pm.gov.au/news/interviews/Interview765.html>.
7. Stated by Howard in an interview by Barrie Cassidy, 4 April 2004, *The Insiders*, ABC TV, <www.pm.gov.au/news/interviews/Interview773.html>.
8. Birrell & Healy, Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University *Sunday Age*, 7 December 2003.
9. ibid.
10. Michelle Grattan, 'Blunt Latham Puts Distance Between "Equal Partners"', *Age*, 8 April 2004, p.4.
11. Paul Kelly, 'Danger in Isolation', *Weekend Australian*, 10–11 April 2004, p.28.
12. Latham interviewed by Tony Jones on *Lateline*, ABC TV, 7 April 2004; <www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2004/s1083523.htm>.
13. Hawke interviewed by Tony Jones, 4 March 2003, *Lateline*, ABC TV, <www.abc.net.au/lateline/s798351.htm>.
14. Rudd interviewed by Tony Jones, 29 September 2002, *Lateline*, ABC TV, <www.abc.net.au/lateline/s685074.htm>.
15. Guy Rundle, 'Arms and Humanity' in *Why the War was Wrong*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, p.156.
16. See Hilary Charlesworth's discussion of this doctrine in 'Law and the War', *Why the War was Wrong*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, pp.40–5.

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JUNK SCIENCE™

Mystic campaigns and phantom greenies

Jeffrey M. Smith: *Seeds of Deception: Exposing Industry and Government Lies About the Safety of the Genetically Engineered Foods You're Eating* (Scribe, $39.95)

A FEW MONTHS AGO, just after the Howard Government approved commercial farming of genetically modified (GM) canola in Australia, a number of 'disinterested' authorities opened fire on those who might oppose this move. In the firing line were not the majority of Australian consumers and farmers who don't want GM food or food crops,[1] but a dangerous syndicate of "elite" ill-informed "luddites" who "spooked" state politicians into banning these crops by mounting "hysterical" "perverse" "anti-science" "fear campaigns" to sway public opinion against scientific "consensus".[2]

This "multinational, well-resourced and unscrupulous" group of powerful extremists, warned the *Australian*, ignored the fact that "there has not been a single documented case of serious ill-health resulting from food containing GM ingredients".[3] The *West Australian* warned of the unscientific "politics of fear" and "populism playing to prejudice and ignorance" on the basis of "quasi-religious belief"[4] and the *Australian Financial Review* cautioned against "the usual noisy clutch of anti-science groups".[5] The *Herald Sun* warned of a "backlash from fearmongers such as Greenpeace" peddling "conspiracy theories" and "scaremongering to fill green collection tins" with "a new green mysticism that threatens rational thinking". The *Age* chimed in, endorsing scientist Jim Peacock's (erroneous) claim that "at least 30 billion meals containing GM crops had been eaten around the world over the past six years with no adverse effects on human health or the environment yet reported".[6]

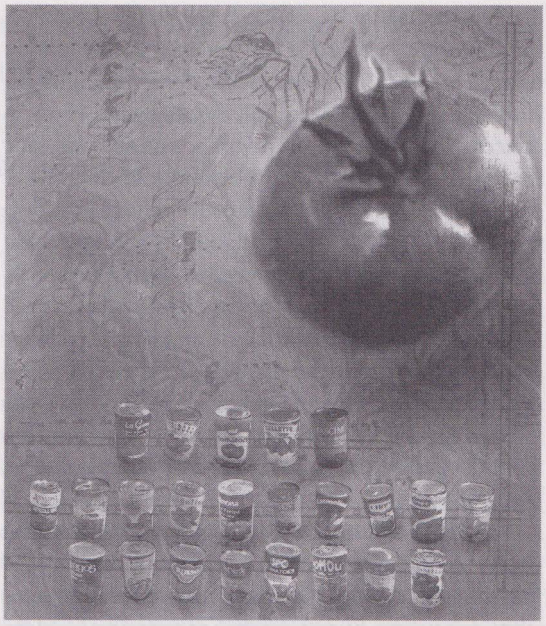
Another scientist, Patrick Moore, wrote an extensive *Age* feature that exposed those of us who oppose GM food as the "extremist" "anti-science, anti-technology, and anti-human" losers we really are. Moore, once a member of that "ratbag group of activists" in Greenpeace, was now, sensibly, a turncoat; appalled by the "campaign of fear . . . based largely on fantasy and a complete lack of respect for science" and the "intellectual and moral bankruptcy" of people who oppose a technology that could rescue third-world children from starvation and blindness, if only those beanie-wearing elites would let it. GM foods, he said, are "even safer than conventional plants and foods".

What gave Moore the authority to make such (unsupported) claims? Was he a geneticist, perhaps, or a molecular biologist? Was he a food chemist, an expert in experimental microbiology, or a plant physiologist? According to his website, Moore is a forest ecologist and private consultant. Elsewhere he is known as an advocate for the logging, mining and plastics industries.[7] Genetic microbiology is as foreign to Moore's field as urology is to a dentist; yet Melbourne's 'quality' broadsheet bestowed on him authority in a highly specialised area, sourcing his article not from a peer-reviewed science journal, but from the *Biotech Bounty* issue of *American Enterprise*, a magazine produced by the neo-conservative US think tank of the same name. Brazenly pro-war and pro-GM, *American Enterprise* pitches itself to "conservative activists", "members of congress", "military officers" and "business executives".[8]

That the *Age* republished Moore's piece is symptomatic of—among other things—the Australian media's alarming propensity to uphold 'scientist' as some one-size-fits-all, secular, disinterested, ideology-free authority. When I asked *Age* 'Opinion' editor Paul Austin about the misplaced 'authority' of Moore and the questionable source from which his claims were republished, he said the argument, not the arguer, "is king". Fair enough. And the following week he published a riposte by a Greenpeace executive, albeit one that occupied much less space than Moore's original attack.

Still, the muck had been smeared, and this exchange hardly represented the dimensions or truth of the debate. Invariably, the scientists who dominate the pro-GM media campaign and make erroneous claims of 'scientific consensus' have fiscal connections to biotech companies, 'sympathetic' think tanks, or government grant and regulation bodies.[9] Few have expertise in the area of genetic science. When the *Herald Sun*'s Andrew Bolt claimed that the state governments' moratorium on GM food crops was based on "green mania" and "green mysticism that threatens rational thinking", he told readers to "let me get the experts to say it in words that have more clout". The expert chosen to settle the matter was Professor Peter Doherty, who was quoted as saying that scientists "are pretty surprised and appalled" and that the anti-GM state governments were swayed by "a religious movement" nursed by the "chattering classes". Yet like Dr Patrick Moore in the *Age*, Professor Doherty has no training in areas of science most relevant to GM crops (he trained in veterinary science and immunology). An online trawl reveals him to be the patron of BioMelbourne, a body established to "promote the specific interests of the Victorian biotechnology sector", whose role is "progressing [sic] bio-business", "connecting biotechnology, business and government" and playing "a specific role . . . as influencer [to ensure] influential input into the industry's direction and development".

Similarly, the *Age* does not reveal the interests of its quoted 'authority', Dr Jim Peacock, who is on the boards of three biotech companies and on the payroll of one as an 'adviser'. He is also an adviser to the Howard government. Dr Adrienne Clarke, quoted in media reports and features, earns $80,000 annually as the 'Victorian Biotechnology Ambassador'.[10] Anthony Coulepis, who wrote a pro-GM



K. Wilson, transgenic tomato series 1, 2000, mixed media on canvas

Herald Sun feature, is executive director of AusBiotech, and published with pro-Howard campaign body, the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), which lists GM seed giant Monsanto among its clients. Mike Nahan, whose pro-GM articles appeared nationally, has no qualifications in genetics, food chemistry or agriculture, and is on staff at the IPA; as is Jennifer Marohasy, author of several GM articles; as is John Hyde, author of newspaper features on GM; as is Alan Moran, who wrote in the *Financial Review* that Bracks was "pandering to irrational green hysteria". Neither Hyde nor Moran have scientific qualifications.

Industry connections do not in and of themselves suggest scientific dishonesty; nor are scientists the only authorities who have a right to speak about GM products. Yet contrary to the media-generated impression of scientific consensus and widespread claims that there is "not a scrap of science" to support reports of the ill-effects of GM foods, many independent scientists, medical researchers and physicians are warning of the real and documented—not "hypothetical" or "theoretical"[11]—dangers. World-renowned geneticist David Suzuki, for example, has warned that "any scientist or politician who assures you that these products are safe is either very stupid or lying." Australia's Dr Rosemary Stanton (qualified in biochemistry, pharmaceutical chemistry, nutrition and dietetics) has warned of

dangers of GM foods, saying many benefits claimed for them are "absurd". Australian medical practitioner Dr Cate Clinch-Jones and epidemiologist Dr Judy Carman have warned of "scientifically valid concerns raised by independent scientists" and said that GM foods have been deemed safe only "as a consequence of a political directive which overrode the warnings of the US Food and Drug Administration's own experts." Disinterested authorities such as the Public Health Association of Australia say that no further GM foods should be approved "without comprehensive independent safety testing undertaken and published in peer-reviewed journals", of which there are none in Australia. None of these sources were quoted in mainstream newspaper reports.

AUSTRALIANS ARE unknowingly eating foods produced using gene technology. We have done so for the past eight years. Not that this is cause for concern: according to our federal government, questions about the safety of GM foods are rooted in irrational fears and unscientific hysteria. GM, we're assured, is the answer to third-world starvation (remember the same claims for food irradiation twenty years back?), and those religious nutters and anti-capitalists opposing it are immoral elites killing impoverished children. We're also assured that GM is only an extension of traditional breeding techniques; that millions of people (and animals) have been consuming GM foods for decades without ill-effect; that GM food has been rigorously tested and found to be safe; and that GM crops have little impact on the environment, reduce reliance on pesticides and are profitable. GM even offers a "cleaner, greener" environment.[12]

In *Seeds of Deception* Jeffrey M. Smith carefully unravels each of these myths, and in the process exposes the components of a vastly subsidised and overgrown biotech food industry[13] and its bedfellows in governments and on food regulation bodies internationally. In a cautious but compelling piece of investigative journalism, Smith documents in forensic detail the elements of a genuine conspiracy: doctored research and bribes to researchers; sackings and public vilification of whistleblowers; blackmail and intimidation of scientists and farmers; media gagging and legal bullying; 'sponsorship' of politicians; and multimillion-dollar PR campaigns that include the creation of bogus authorities and 'scientific communities', whose (fictitious)[14] science 'experts' discredit dissenting scientists through online peer 'debate'. The most mercurial conspiracy theorist couldn't have cooked up a more toxic recipe for cover-up and compliance.

But this is no theory. A combination of meticulous, referenced investigation and a crash-course in microbiology, *Seeds of Deception* is as much a book about democracy as it is about what is possibly the greatest scientific fraud of our age. It reveals how science, once the servant of the people, has become the servant of industry.

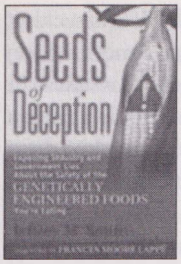
The book begins with the story of Dr Arpad Pusztai, a senior scientist with fifty years' experience, considered to be at the top of his field internationally in experimental biology. Eight years ago, a team headed by Pusztai was commissioned to create a GM testing model to be adopted across Britain and the EU. But the pro-GM Pusztai became "shocked" at the "flimsy evidence" and "unconvincing case" that had swayed governments into wholesale approval of GM foods, against the concerns of doctors and food scientists. One of these foods was GM potatoes. Consumed throughout the US, these had been spliced with a gene that gave them in-built pesticides or 'lectins'. A world expert on lectins, Dr Pusztai knew they were safe for consumption. So when he fed laboratory rats lectin-producing GM potatoes, he didn't expect any problems.

His team was shocked to discover that not only had the nutritional values of the potatoes changed, but rats fed on them suffered damaged immune systems and became significantly more vulnerable to infection and disease than the control group. Their organs were damaged and they had smaller, less-developed brains, livers and testicles, among other anomalies. A proliferation of cells in their stomachs and intestines signalled a potential for cancer. All this after only ten days of test-feeding on the GM potatoes.

The most interesting finding came next:

> From the evidence, it was clear that the lectins were not the major cause of the health damage. Rather, there was some effect from *the process of genetic engineering itself* that caused the damaged organs and immune dysfunction of the adolescent rats [my emphasis].

Study after study documented in *Seeds of Deception* supports this assertion. It seems those religious nutters and immoral luddites may be right: there's good



World-renowned geneticist David Suzuki has warned that "any scientist or politician who assures you that these products are safe is either very stupid or lying." Australia's Dr Rosemary Stanton has said many benefits claimed for GM food products are "absurd".

reason nature never intended genes to cross the species barrier---or for that matter, for an organism's own genes to be inserted into or 'switched off' from its DNA. It is on this detail that this book is invaluable, describing in a thorough and engaging style the profound changes that occur within the *whole* DNA structure and signalling when a foreign gene is forced into it. Genetic modification of food is not, Smith explains, simply a matter of a tomato happily accommodating a fish gene and thereby becoming a tomato that doesn't freeze, or a tomato whose shelf-life extends to ninety days. The essential nature of the tomato is changed—it is no longer a tomato, but an impostor; an unevolved organism that produces new (and 'incorrectly folded') proteins, allergens and other toxic by-products never before consumed. (Patrick Moore's question to *Age* readers, "what possible risk could there be from a daffodil gene in a rice paddy?", demonstrates a breathtaking ignorance of genetic science.)

Pusztai, Smith explains, was "in a terrible bind". He knew that the industry-designed 'studies' of GM foods approved in the US would not have picked up his findings. He also knew it would be some time before his own study was completed, peer-reviewed and published, during which time millions of unsuspecting consumers could (and, as it turned out, did) suffer catastrophic health consequences. As his team was (according to the EU) the only one in the world conducting sound and thorough research in this area, Pusztai compiled his preliminary findings for publication and media exposure, backed by his colleagues and his research laboratory director. Consequently, he was sacked, and unable, for intellectual copyright reasons, to reveal his research. Legally prohibited from commenting on his own study, Pusztai was initially unable to defend himself against his accusers. But many other scientists, farmers and doctors (including those on the World Health Organisation) back up Pusztai's findings with their observations and warnings.

So begins a deft and engrossing book that documents every dirty trick the biotech food industry and beholden governments have come up with to silence opposition and downplay the acute health and food security dangers of GM products, which include processed foods and even 'health' products. Many medical case studies of new, debilitating diseases traced directly to the consumption of specific GM products are documented, belying the *Australian*'s (and many scientists') claim that "there has not been a single documented case of serious ill-health resulting from food containing GM ingredients". In 1989, for example, around 5000 people across North America experienced a previously unknown disease (later called Eosinophilia-Myalgia Syndrome or EMS) causing debilitating lifetime paralysis and thirty-five deaths. The only common link between the sufferers was that they had all consumed a particular brand of health supplement made by a Japanese manufacturer. Researchers including Charles Yanofsky, Professor of Biology at Stanford University, found that genetically modified bacteria used in the manufacturing process of the health supplement caused "the higher levels of toxic substances" responsible for the new disease. Showa Denko, the manufacturer, took responsibility and reportedly made $1.2 billion in out-of-court payments to the victims. Alongside medical reports, Smith documents many cases of media bullying and censorship, including one in which the multinational giant Monsanto—a name synonymous with GM food—was responsible for the withdrawal of two critical television documentaries and the sackings of their reporters and producer.[15]

MONSANTO OWNS 91 per cent of the GM crop market and 23 per cent of the world's seed companies. With representatives on public health and food regulation bodies internationally, this is the company that insisted its Agent Orange, used in the Vietnam War, was safe; as was its electrical insulator PCB, out-

lawed in 1978 because of links to cancer and birth defects. Monsanto is widely known for patenting seeds that have been carefully bred and grown for centuries by generations of Indian farmers, who must now pay to plant their traditional crops, and cannot without license grow the wheat to make their traditional chapati. The company has successfully litigated against Canadian canola farmers whose crops were contaminated by neighbouring GM canola. For its vast environmental damage, including poisoning of rivers, Monsanto is one of the very few companies found guilty, under Alabama law, of 'outrage'—a conduct "so outrageous in character and extreme in degree as to go beyond all possible bounds of decency so as to be regarded as atrocious and utterly intolerable in civilised society". Despite US courts finding the company guilty of negligence, trespass, nuisance and suppression of the truth (among other crimes), Monsanto, its subsidiaries and its partners (which include Murdoch agencies), have spread like weeds internationally, gaining influence in media and governments.

Largely about the US and UK experience, *Seeds of Deception* has been released in Australia at a time when the Howard government has welcomed Monsanto into the fold, taking the unprecedented step of allowing the company's Roundup Ready™ canola to be grown commercially in Australia; a move that has been described by GeneEthics Network director Bob Phelps as a "blank cheque for GE canola growers to contaminate the environment and their neighbours with foreign genes and toxic chemicals." The canola is engineered to be resistant to Monsanto's Roundup™ herbicide, allowing farmers to saturate their crops with chemical herbicides without killing their canola produce. The move to allow this is not based on evidence-based science (neither Monsanto nor its GMO colleague Bayer has published any data on the claimed benefits of GM canola), and the federal government's Office of Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) "did not comply with the law", says Phelps. "It forgave Monsanto's lawbreaking and non-compliance with safety standards which makes the company unfit to hold the license."

Nor is this initiative based on export market demand. Europe and Japan favour imports from countries that are GM free—a status Australia has enjoyed until now. The US economy lost around $12 billion net in two years when Europe refused to import US corn because of fears of GM contamination (now, through the WTO, the US is seeking monetary 'compensation' for this). America then tried to dump this corn into third world markets in what was spun as an act of altruism. This altruism spin is one Monsanto has successfully employed for its 'poster-child' (as Smith calls it): the widely publicised GM Golden Rice™, which, it claims, has vitamin A levels that could prevent blindness and malnutrition in billions of children in Asia and Africa. Yet Smith explains that other plants and rice varieties common to these regions (red rice, for instance) contain higher levels of vitamin A than Golden Rice™, and lab tests indicate that each child would have to consume fifty-four cups, daily, for any effect, according to Rosemary Stanton. One vitamin A pill every six months to each and every child in these regions, at a tiny fraction of the cost of Golden Rice™ (an estimated 4 cents per pill), could also prevent blindness.

Nor is the government's decision based on public demand. Surveys and polls conducted by newspapers, farming groups, environment bodies and the biotech industry indicate that the majority of Australians don't want GM crops in Australia. Surveys also indicate that we want our GM food labelled. "Virtually no imported foods produced using gene technology are labelled as such," says Phelps. Most of these are imports from the US and Canada. (*Seeds of Deception* contains an action-plan for avoiding these foods, and a list of anti-GM organisations in Australia.) Howard, says Phelps, has stalled labelling efforts with "the incredible claim that labels and compliance might cost three billion dollars a year". (This claim is repeated on the IPA website.) Meanwhile, his government is spending around $100 million a year on biotech food industry research (compare this with the small change—around $250 thousand—for organic food research). Another $10 million has gone on a government campaign to assure the public that GM foods could be even safer than conventional food.[16]

As Greenpeace executive Steve Sawyer points out, to call GM opponents anti-science is like calling those without DVD players anti-science. "Such crops are no more 'science' than refrigerators, nuclear weapons or washing machines. GM crops are commercial product."[17] Yet newspapers continue to claim that 'greenies' "hate GM . . . because it's science, not religion".[18] The temporary ban on commercially grown GM food crops has prompted a stern

tut-tutting from newspaper editorials and federal government ministers, who claim in newspapers and Parliamentary debate that this move is a surrender to populist fear-mongering, a triumph of hysteria over science.[19] Meanwhile, State Opposition leaders are continuing to hammer the misleading 'scientific consensus' line. Victoria's Robert Doyle, questioned about the GM moratorium, cautiously explained to ABC listeners: "My answer to these things is: go with the science. It's as simple as that. It might not be popular with a few inner city greenies, but if the science tells you [to] proceed [with GM food] then have the courage to believe in the science and the advice of the science."[20] Perhaps someone should quote him Suzuki's axiom.

1. Two thirds of Australians would not, given the choice, buy genetically modified food, according to an AC Nielson poll. Polls taken by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the biotech industry indicate that a large majority of Australians don't want GM crops in this country. A poll taken by the SA Farmers' Federation revealed that 80 per cent of its members did not want GM crops and supported a moratorium. Many farmers' groups oppose GM crops, including the Australian Wheat and Barley Boards, the Grain Harvesters Association, the SA Farmers Federation, the Network of Concerned Farmers and the Biological Farmers of Australia. Many in the dairy industry also oppose GM. For the UK experience see Andy Coghlan, 'UK Public Strongly Rejects GM Food', *New Scientist*, 24 September 2003.
2. See also countless items in the *IPA Review*. See also Mike Nahan, 'Luddites are running the show', *Australian Financial Review*, 3 April 2003; Patrick Moore, 'The blindness of the Greens', *Age*, Opinion, 15 February, 2004; and The Hon. Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans [2.48 pm], NSW Hansard, Gene Technology (NSW) Bill, Gene Technology (GM Crop Moratorium) Bill, p.1436 and *Australian*; Michael Warby, 'Why bother with balance and accuracy when you have virtue?', <www.ipa.org.au/Speechesandsubmssns/mwarbyABC.pdf.>
3. Editorial, *Australian*, 23 March 2004.
4. Jennifer Marohasy, 'WA takes a commercial risk in shunning GM', *West Australian*, 1 April 2004; Mike Nahan, 'The New Luddites' Editorial, *IPA Review*, March 2003; Mike Nahan, 'Biotech—The Green's Waterloo?', *IPA Review*, September 2002; David Tribe, 'GM-food: Secret Scientists or Obfuscatory Opponents?', *Quadrant*, July–August 2000, C.S. Prakash, 'Can Genetically Engineered Crops Feed a Hungry World?', *IPA Review*, July 2000.
5. Alan Moran, 'Making a meal over GM ban', *Australian Financial Review*, 30 March 2004.
6. Andrew Bolt, 'Safe, good, banned', *Herald Sun*, 2 April 2004; and 'Victoria should not extend the moratorium on genetically modified canola', *Age*, Editorial, 22 March 2004.
7. Moore has been on the payroll of timber companies including the British Columbia Forest Alliance. He was a guest of Australia's National Association of Forest Industries and its (bogus) community front, The Forest Protection Society; the Canadian Pulp and Paper Association; the Westcoast Energy and BC Gas; BHP Minerals; Canadian Mining Association and the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada consultant to the largest manufacturer of PVC in Canada, IPEX, to "intervene in the environmental policy of the Toronto 2008 Olympic Bid". See *Disinfopedea*, Center for Media & Democracy, accessed May 2004, <www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=Patrick_Moore>.
8. See <www.taemag.com/about/>.
9. I make this claim after close study of the forty-five newspaper reports that appeared in canola-growing states of Australia. Even those few in the university sector are in receipt of grants by biotech companies. Conversely, the many independent Australian scientists and doctors who oppose GM, including the high-profile Dr Rosemary Stanton, were not quoted.
10. I obtained this information from GE-Free Victoria, which itself obtained it from "a phone conversation with a government department secretary". However, I have been unable to verify it elsewhere, having obtained the Biotechnology Strategic Development Plan for Victoria, which contains no budget figures. Phone calls and an email sent to the Science Technology & Innovation Division of the Department of State & Regional Development, asking it to confirm this figure, have not been responded to.
11. As claimed by the Institute of Public Affairs, sponsored by Monsanto. See <www.ipa.org.au/Units/Biotech/fishandchips.pdf>. Andrew Bolt, in 'Modify your ideas, Bracks' (*Herald Sun*, 24 March 2004), claimed there is "not a scrap of science to back up this move".
12. This is a claim made by Monsanto in its media releases and echoed in many media outlets (key 'greener, cleaner GM' into Google to get an extensive list). Not surprisingly, it is a claim parroted by the biotech industry's Australian guns-for-hire, the folk at the Institute of Public Affairs. See the IPA website for many such claims.
13. Notably, Smith does not include the pharmaceutical industry in this book. His argument excludes some life-saving pharmaceuticals that are manufactured using GM technology, including insulin for diabetics.
14. See George Monbiot, 'The Fake Persuaders: Companies are creating false citizens to try to change the way we think', *Guardian*, 14 May 2002.
15. This is not unique to the biotech industry, but is a common feature in 'science wars', having parallels in the pharmaceutical industry. Readers may remember a similar scenario described by Meryl Dorey in *Overland* 172, in which ABC journalist Megan James was sacked following the withdrawal of her documentary, *Vaccination: protection at what price?*.
16. A brochure produced by the federal government's Gene Technology Information Service assures the public that "Genetic modification has the potential to provide foods that are healthier, safer . . .".
17. 'Why opposition to GE crops is based on sound science', *Age*, Opinion, 23 February 2004.
18. See Alan Moran, 'Making a Meal Over GM Ban', *Australian Financial Review*, 30 March 2004 and any number of IPA articles on this subject. See The Hon. Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans [2.48 pm], NSW Hansard, Gene Technology (New South Wales) Bill, Gene Technology (GM Crop Moratorium) Bill, p.1436, and Michael Warby, 'Why bother with balance and accuracy when you have virtue?', <www.ipa.org.au/Speechesandsubmssns/mwarbyABC.pdf>. See also countless items in the *IPA Review*.
19. Andrew Bolt, 'Modify your ideas, Bracks', *Herald Sun*, 24 March 2004.
20. ABC Ballarat, Presenter: Dominic Brine, 26 March 2004.

Katherine Wilson is Overland's co-editor. A longer version of this article with more detail can be found on Overland's website: <www.overlandexpress.org>.

"WHO GIVES A FUCK ABOUT WHITE SOCIETY ANYMORE?"*

A response to the Redfern riot

ON 17 FEBRUARY this year the *Herald Sun* informed readers that the 'bitter ghetto' of Sydney's inner-city Redfern 'had gone to war' in a battle against both the NSW police and the nation. In the days after the riot, headlines and editorials condemned Redfern to the singular status of a drug-infested slum, absent of any social function beyond performing the role of the Other within the shadow of the corporately sanctified 'globally informed and vibrant metropolis' that is Sydney in 2004.

The suburb of Redfern is located within Gadigal country, which is part of the Eora nation. Many in white Australia have little knowledge or interest in the cultural and historical specificity of this geographical information. Redfern is also located close to where the British first landed in Australia in 1788. It was the Eora people who first encountered this imperial nation that not only 'danced with strangers' but killed them as well. In Redfern today a small patch of land known as Pemulwuy Park commemorates the life and death of an Eora man, Pemulwuy— 'the Rainbow Warrior', who led a concerted guerrilla resistance against the British in the 1790s until he was captured, murdered and had his head cut off, which was then secretly sent to Britain as the trophy that accompanied the violence of dispossession.

The history of the relationship between Indigenous people and the state from this moment forward has been dominated by systematic attempts to decapitate Indigenous communities. This recent incident, the Redfern 'riot', was an outcome of a confrontation between the NSW police, members of the Redfern community and a few 'outsiders'. The clash followed the death of an Indigenous youth, Thomas (T.J.) Hickey, who died in hospital after being found impaled on a steel picket fence after crashing his pushbike. During the riot, which occurred during the late hours of Sunday night into early Monday morning, the police, suited in appropriately labelled 'riot gear' were pelted with rocks, bottles and a sundry arsenal of missiles that had been earlier stored in 'wheelie' rubbish bins. As a result of the clash, police claimed that forty to fifty of their members had been injured, although it has since been reported that very few police suffered any serious injury.

Thomas Hickey was 17 when he died. The cause of the accident that led to his death is contested and will be the subject of a NSW judicial inquiry. The police claim that they were alerted to the scene of an accident in Redfern, where they found Thomas Hickey impaled on the fence after falling from his bicycle while riding through a public housing estate. The police then attempted to revive Thomas at the scene. Although police state that they were not looking for Thomas, witnesses to the incident have provided statements that a police vehicle was clearly in pursuit of him. The police deny this. While criminal charges have been laid against some of those involved in the riot, no members of the NSW police force have been cited for provocation or violence despite witnesses stating that police had not only incited the initial confrontation but had themselves acted violently toward members of the Redfern community.

Subsequent press headlines and electronic images focused attention on the actions of Indigenous youths who were involved in the incident. This was

* The comment of Redfern resident and community spokesperson, Lyall Munro, repackaged by *Herald Sun* journalist, Andrew Bolt, and used as a rhythmical mantra against what he calls the "hate-spewing Aboriginal 'leaders'" of a separatist Australia (*Herald Sun*, 18 February 2004, p.19).

of no surprise. It is not every day that local media is presented with the gift of a domestic version of 'violent street clash' film footage that most often comes to us from the safe distance of a Middle Eastern or Third World 'hot spot' just as we are sitting down to dinner. Such images provide suitably dramatic evening TV absent of the substance or context that could provoke thinking or reflection. Although some media commentators labelled the latest Redfern images a new and 'frightening' instance of an assault on Australian 'values' there is nothing to sustain this hyperbole. Australia has a long history of political protest and 'civil unrest' being explained away by political leaders and editorialists as isolated phenomena.

Australia also has a long history of institutionalised police violence against Indigenous communities. Subsequent to the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission conducted during the late 1980s, which investigated the deaths of Indigenous people within the police and prison system, it was concluded that not only had Indigenous people been the victims of a repressive regime, but that white Australia's history of the occupation of Indigenous land and country had been reliant on particular forms of violence enacted to dispossess Indigenous people of both land and cultural identity. If people fail to recognise the connections between this history and contemporary social, economic and political structures that inform relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia, then of course the Redfern riot will make little sense beyond it being labelled as 'mindlessness', which of itself provides a suitably ignorant explanation for white Australia to cling to.

The extent to which the Redfern police were involved in the death of Thomas Hickey is yet to be decided. But considering the whitewashing of past inquiries into violence committed against Indigenous people across Australia (with the Deaths in Custody Commission and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Bringing Them Home* report standing as recent telling examples) it is certain that any government investigation into Hickey's death will be met with scepticism.

IN THE IMMEDIATE HOURS after Thomas Hickey's death young Indigenous people, including children, began mapping the footpaths and walls of Redfern with their grievances, writing that the "Police Killed T.J." and "Police murder, don't trust them". These young people were not acting out of ignorance of the circumstances that led to Thomas Hickey's death, but rather, through the knowledge and experience of existing relationships between young Indigenous people and police. Posters also appeared on street corner lamp-posts warning Redfern's residents of the potential dangers that lay in its streets; "Wanted: child murderers—there is a gang of child killers operating in the Redfern area—they can be easily identified as they all dress the same". And while the media speculated about the direct cause of Thomas Hickey's death (Was the boy chased by police? Did he panic when he heard police sirens in the distance? Or was the cause of his death more 'simply but tragically' an 'unfortunate' accident?) his mother, Gail Hickey, was in no doubt as to what had happened to Thomas: "these dogs here killed my son . . . the police fucking killed my son" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 2004).

Gail Hickey was grief-stricken on the day after her son's death, as were others within the Redfern community, many of whom knew Thomas Hickey well. Ray Minniecon, the director of the Crossroads Aboriginal Ministries, commenting on the time between Thomas's death and the subsequent riot twenty-four hours later remembers that particular Sunday morning in Redfern as a moment when "an Aboriginal mother grieved with her family and friends over the sad and tragic loss of her son" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 February 2004). During that afternoon the NSW police had decided to act against the community who had gathered to remember and grieve for Thomas and his family. They barricaded one end of Redfern's Lawson Street at one o'clock that afternoon. And by five o'clock police had blocked any access, in or out, of the street. Minniecon's reflection on the level of the antagonism displayed by police was that it did more than exacerbate a very tense situation and the justifiable anger of people. The police action disregarded the spiritual and emotional needs of a mother when what she needed most was compassion and support—"I saw an insensitive system attack that mother in a very insensitive and inappropriate way and at the most inappropriate time of her life".

We should not be surprised then that this anger was directed at the police. Nor should it surprise anyone that those who confronted the police appear to have come well prepared. Although most likely unaware of it, those who would later write in the

letters pages of the daily press 'we do not condone acts of violence in Redfern' were in fact condoning an endemic system of violence perpetrated against Indigenous people that inevitably produces a violent response when no other defence is available.

Despite the comments of ALP federal politician Kevin Rudd, that "it just didn't look like Australia to me" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 2004), supported by media mock-horror that the Redfern riot was new and 'un-Australian' behaviour (is it possible to stage a patriotic riot?), Redfern, and other Indigenous communities across Australia subjected to a colonial siege mentality have in the past produced the occasional riot. While historically some global colonial powers have used the state's armed forces in their attempts to subdue Indigenous communities, in Australia it has been the dirty work of police (including the Native Police force) to quash opposition to the forces of colonisation, whether through direct killing, imprisonment or the removal of children from their families. In the case of Redfern this role has extended to removing families from homes that are subject to eviction and demolition orders. Additionally, it is not surprising to discover that some of those involved in the confrontation with police had apparently been incarcerated in institutions such as the notorious Kinchella Boys Home in NSW, known in the past to have carried out extreme acts of violence and state-sanctioned torture against young Indigenous men. I do not raise this here as a justification for violence (although the causal relationship should be obvious), but to claim that these forms of state violence that have been 'condoned' in Australia for more than two hundred years continue to be practised today, with law enforcement agencies cleaning up the mess of a situation that the majority of white Australians have benefited from while never having to confront their own complicity in such actions.

In the days after the riot any value that might be ascribed to Thomas Hickey's life was absent. His very minor 'criminal history' was dragged through the press as if he was a top shelf 'Boyz 'n tha 'hood' gangster. The media reacted with a typically orchestrated frenzy, momentarily transferring the chaos of Baghdad to the 'war zone' of Redfern, adding an ironic twist to 'think globally, act locally' sloganeering. While the Indigenous activist, Lyall Munro, was criticised by the media, politicians and talkback czars for claiming that young Indigenous people in Australia were subjected to harassment similar to that experienced by Palestinian youth, none in the press or the halls of parliament seemed to have a problem with police themselves describing the streets of Redfern as a "riot scene in the Gaza Strip" (*Herald Sun*, 17 February 2004) or even "an English soccer riot" (*Age*, 18 February 2004). That some in the Redfern community responded to a culture of violence and racism with violence of their own is without doubt. It is important to accept this in order to come to terms with the long-term effects of racism and disadvantage in Australia. Or should *we* expect people subjected to social and economic racism to accept their situation through the more acceptable and pitied role of the demoralised but pacified fringe-dweller?

The issue of inter-community violence within Indigenous communities was also raised in the aftermath of the riot, although the media exploitation of this very real issue conveyed no sense as to how this problem might be dealt with. It preferred to use the now 'topical' issue of domestic violence and drug use within Indigenous communities to highlight the 'helplessness' of the situation, thus allowing the media to report the 'highlights' of the contemporary manifestation of the 'Aboriginal problem' absent of informed and responsible coverage. What we received as viewers and readers was a focus on the perceived dysfunctionalism that labels Indigenous people culpable for crimes committed against them, whether it be from outside agents of state control or violence committed against women (in particular) within the Indigenous community.

Right-wing populist responses to Redfern were expressed with more directness than the 'grave concerns' of the liberal-minded. The NSW Opposition leader, John Brogden, made his intentions clear when he claimed on the morning after the riot that "bulldozers should flatten the area known as The Block" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 2004). This rhetoric was supported by the democracy-feigning 'Your Say' pages of the tabloid press, suggesting some very hard medicine that would save the 'Australian way of life' through rubber bullets and a shoot-to-kill policy (*Herald Sun*, 18 February 2004). Although some of the broadsheet media coverage was not so openly hostile toward the Redfern community, they in fact displayed a more insidious form of racism, be it delivered with subtlety, through the trope of benevolence.

Those who would later write in the letters pages of the daily press 'we do not condone acts of violence in Redfern' were in fact condoning an endemic system of violence perpetrated against Indigenous people that inevitably produces a violent response when no other defence is available.

THOMAS HICKEY'S LIFE was eventually documented by the print media. Space was found to commemorate his life after the week of dramatic 'Anger burns' headlines began to wane. Once the "rock and blood strewn streets of this black ghetto had calmed" the media needed a new take on post-riot Redfern. It would be supplied by Thomas Hickey's funeral, which no doubt provided a fresh 'human interest' story for those who had consumed the violence of Redfern, but now needed something more. On the day of Thomas's funeral *we* shared in the 'tears and cheers for TJ'. *We* were introduced to his young sisters and friends from his home community in Walgett, NSW (they were briefly allowed the privilege of appearing to be human). Even the *Herald Sun* got into the good-news act, producing a front-page feature piece on 'Aunty Joyce—the rock of Redfern' (*Herald Sun*, 21 February 2004).

But it was the *Sydney Morning Herald* which got it so wrong in its attempt to provide 'balance'. A week after Redfern it produced a remarkable photograph of a young cousin of Thomas Hickey, along with two of his sisters. This image could sit proudly in any coffee-table book entitled (perhaps) 'Happy Indigenous People'. The banner headline above the photograph claimed that "it takes a riot for Australia to care about these children". Does it really? In the days, months and years before the Redfern riot did Australia really care about these children? Obviously the Redfern riots of May 2001, or those of 1998, or other documented riots that had gone before those and this most recent event had not done enough to entice *us* to care about such children with any stamina. And given that in the weeks after the riot the only discussion of Indigenous communities in the press had returned to the new millennium's version of get-off-your-lazy-black-arse rhetoric, that absolves the wider community of its social and economic responsibilities, a riot does not really seem to have shaken the nation at all. Don't panic over this riot in Redfern. It is only a moment, the half-time entertainment between reports on the current account figures and very important gatherings of Reserve Bank governors. Put interest rates up half a point for three consecutive months and then we would witness panic (possibly even a riot).

What will happen from here is uncertain. It is most likely that Thomas Hickey's name will be remembered in the wider community as little more than an archived news item. Meanwhile young Indigenous people will continue to die as a result of violence, most of them in the shadows of Australia's psyche. Some of these children will die within their own communities, others alienated and alone. And unless they are able to provide a photo opportunity to accompany a briefly documented statistic they will die anonymously. They will not be forgotten by the wider community as they will have never been remembered. But we must remember these young people, and in life not death. White Australia also needs to discover its memory of its own history of violence.

There is something else here that we must remember. As a result of events that occurred in Redfern on 15 February a 17-year-old Indigenous boy named Thomas Hickey is gone from not only his mother, but from *us*—all of us. As he lay on a Redfern footpath bleeding to death Thomas was in the arms of a NSW police officer who later expressed what I believe to be a genuine sense of grief and sadness over the injury and death of this boy. This is an irony difficult to contemplate. Thomas told the officer that he wanted to see his mother. He also asked if he was going to die. Other Indigenous kids contemplate this thought too readily and too often. Many of them have a fatalistic, but perhaps a frighteningly informed view of life—and death. If we really do not want to witness yet another Redfern riot we should place more value on the lives of these young people.

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FIRST AS A TRAGEDY, SECOND AS A FARCE ...

Traumascapes, memory and the curse of indifference

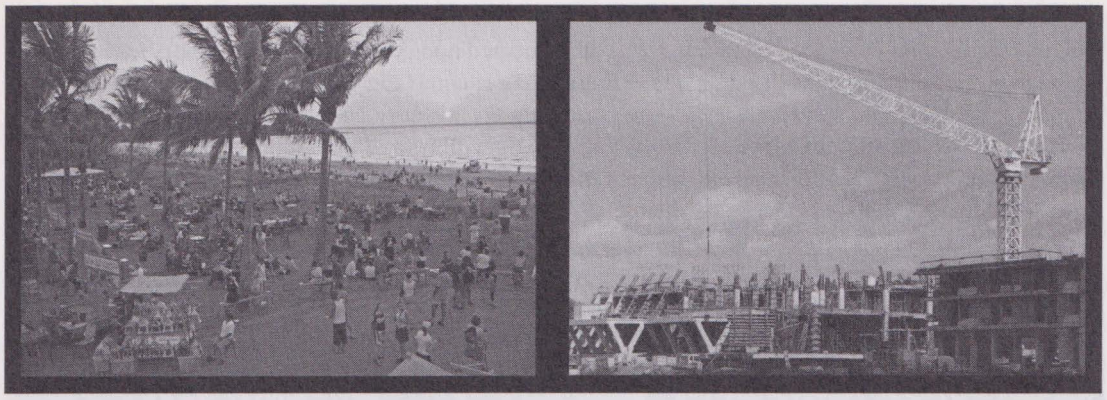
HOW MANY more newspapers can proclaim that 'history repeats itself' as if it were a harmless cliché? Newspapers tell us Iraq is becoming the new Vietnam. *What can you do? History repeats itself.* A new wave of violence in Kosovo is turning into an all-out conflict yet again. *What did you expect? That's how it works.* And so the Chechen women in Grozny pick through the debris of their city, just like the 'rubble women' of Berlin did in the aftermath of the Second World War. And in the US, the lingering shock of September 11, the so-called unprecedented terrorist attack on democracy and the free world, bears a striking resemblance to the aftermath of what Walter A. Davis called "the first act of global terrorism"—the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.[1]

It's worth asking why, in this day and age, the fact of history repeating itself is usually noted with resignation—imbued with sadness and self-irony perhaps, but resignation nonetheless. This resignation to the fact that certain kinds of relationships and certain kinds of histories are bound to recur have, I believe, huge political and social implications. In the words of Jay Arthur, both as a nation and an idea, Australia "comes into being by repeated acts of colonisation".[2] To this day these *repeated acts of colonisation* sustain the neo-colonial project of securing "the land emotionally and spiritually for the settler society".[3] Many forms of colonial violence, both overt and barely discernible, are repeated and re-enacted in government policies, media coverage, academic discourses, on the train, in the schoolyard, at the pub; and most potently in our relationship with the land.

For six years I have been trying to chart the legacies of neo-colonial and other kinds of violence by studying the fate and social power of what I've termed *traumascapes*—physical places marked by one or a series of tragedies. Focusing on the relationship between trauma and lived experiences of place, I sought to understand how loss and reckoning are inscribed in and transmitted through the land, and how the recurrence of violence shapes life-histories of Australian places.

In Australia, historian Ken Inglis tells us, there are more than four thousand memorials to the First World War spread over the continent.[4] Why, then, this ever-growing stream of pilgrims to the Turkish countryside? To the extent that the number of people coming to Gallipoli every year simply could not be accommodated at the original site. In 1999, eighty-four years after the event, ANZAC Day dawn services, usually held at the Ari Burnu sacred site where ANZACs first landed in 1915, had to be moved to a larger site three hundred metres north. And this year, in 2004, people kept coming despite the threat of a terrorist attack. Why do we need Gallipoli now more so than ever before?

This is not a rhetorical question. As the site of mediation between the nation's past and its future, Gallipoli gives us a space for the performance of what the great French sociologist and philosopher Emile Durkheim called 'piacular rites'.[5] Piacular rites are rituals in which the living pay their dues to the dead. Importantly, these rites are not just expressions of care and respect for the deceased; they are practical and symbolic steps to reaffirm the strength and solidarity of the community of mourners. It's



Left: Sunset Markets, Courtesy of Mindil Beach Sunset Market Association. Right: Mindil Beach Casino construction, NTGP Collection, Northern Territory Library

through these rites that the morale of a group or a whole nation can be renewed and collective moral foundations strengthened, particularly at the times of history-making upheavals.

And to speak of the present era as a time of upheavals is, if anything, an understatement. After the Port Arthur massacre, September 11 and, perhaps most significantly, the Bali bombings in October 2002, Australia no longer appears exempt from the constancy and breadth of pain and uncertainty, which have been enveloping the world. These tragedies, in which Australians see themselves as victims, have been paralleled by events on our shores in which we can view ourselves as silent accomplices. Witness the *Tampa* stand-off, the Children Overboard Affair and the sinking of *Siev X*, which led to the death of 353 asylum seekers.

Amid the trauma and loss, traumascapes offer us a degree of consolation that was once provided by religious institutions. No matter how profane the tragedies that occurred on their soil, traumascapes are the closest to sacred sites that we have in contemporary Australia. Those places have come to embody our traumatic histories; it is to them that we turn to mourn, remember and make sense of the pain and loss around us.

Gallipoli is just one example. On 24 April 1998, Prime Minister John Howard opened the $1.6 million Hellfire Pass Memorial on the infamous Burma–Thailand railway, where thousands of Australians perished between 1942 and 1943. A group of former POWs and widows went on a pilgrimage to the site at the time of the memorial's dedication. A year later, another party of Australian pilgrims visited the Sandakan POW Camp in Borneo. Between 1942 and 1945 Sandakan Camp held more than 2700 Australian and British prisoners, of whom only six survived. From the mid-nineties, the Australian government has spent $750,000 to upgrade the Sandakan Memorial Park, which now includes a memorial to POWs and an interpretative pavilion. Tony Stephens wrote in the *Age*: "having created their own sacred sites at Gallipoli, in France and Belgium, and at Hellfire Pass on the Burma–Thailand railway, Australians are staking out another at Sandakan".[6]

MAYBE THIS IS why the story of Mindil Beach terrifies me. Mindil Beach is one of Darwin's premier tourist sites. A fifteen-minute walk from the city, the spectacular beach is the location of the Diamond Casino and Hotel Complex as well as Darwin's famous Sunset Markets, which attract over 400,000 visitors every Dry season.

So far so good, except that Mindil Beach is also an Aboriginal burial ground, used well into the 1930s by the Larrakia people (on whose land Darwin was built) and other indigenous peoples from the nearby areas. Both as a beach and a burial ground, it is an integral and sacred part of Darwin's indigenous history and culture. Like reefs, sandbanks, seabeds and saltwater itself, Australian beaches, Nonie Sharp tells us in *Saltwater People: The Waves of Memory*, form part of the inherited clan-owned Aboriginal territories, especially along the tropical coast and islands of Northern Australia.[7] Today, Sharp says, beaches are considered practical and spiritual inheritance for many saltwater Aboriginal peoples.

Yet look at Mindil beach now, dug up by contractors, marched on by thousands of tourist feet, with sewerage pipelines going right through. There must be many places like this across Australia—sites that only become identified as burial grounds through acts of desecration, places that reveal their history only when violated.

BETWEEN 1977 and 1980, due to construction works for the new Casino, human remains were uncovered in the sand dunes of Mindil Beach.[8] The bodies were buried with their skulls towards the beach, covered with sheets of corrugated iron.

The Mindil Beach dead were disturbed time and time again. Their ancestry was questioned garishly and at length. Were the dead drowned Indonesian fishermen, or Aborigines, or perhaps vestiges of unmarked and unreported mass graves of the Second World War? So far-reaching was the controversy over the remains that a full Coronial Inquest was called. Aided by David Ritchie's exhaustive research under the auspices of the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, the Inquest made its conclusions clear.

The dead were indeed of Aboriginal and mixed descent. The area around Mindil Beach *was* now recognised as a known and extensively used indigenous burial ground.

AS THE CONTROVERSY died down, the remains were re-buried in a traditional ceremony on a memorial island especially created in the area. Just over a decade later, in 1991, the bulldozers were at it again. Historian Lyn Riddett says postcards depicting the first re-burial ceremony were still available in newsstands around the city when Darwin City Council went ahead with the maintenance works at the beach.

Inevitably, more remains were unearthed. Faced with an embarrassing situation, the Council ended up co-operating with the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority to help erect a memorial at the northern end of Mindil Beach. Designed by Larrakia artist Richard Barnes and consisting of Tiwi and Larrakia funeral poles, the memorial would, it was hoped, act as a ceremonial and physical safeguard against the possible future desecration of the site.

Acts of desecration are not undone by memorials. Was the recurring violation of the burial ground, asks Riddett, symptomatic of the transient and fragmented non-Aboriginal social memory in the North? People come and go and the bureaucratic and community memory continuum gets broken down. Or was the history of Mindil Beach as a burial ground—a place notionally sacred to most cultures—simply not important enough to remember?

It matters a great deal that the events I am retelling happened in the 1980s and 1990s, within the reach of most people's memory. It matters that the repeated disturbance of the Mindil Beach ground wasn't another colonial transgression that happened back in the dark, colonial times. The responsibility for what happened at Mindil Beach cannot be ascribed to past generations or our misguided colonial forebears.

Is this important? In the US, Europe and the Middle East, as Annie Dillard has written, people "live on dead people's heads".[9] Under one suburb in St Louis, she says, archaeologists have recently found thirteen layers of human occupation, one on top of the other.

But at Mindil Beach, the last of the dead were buried in the 1930s, maybe even later. These people whose heads we've been walking on are part of the living families and of the existing chains of kinship. They belong to and hold together life-stories of places and events that are resolutely part of this world.

THE STORY of the disturbing of human remains at Mindil Beach does not stop here. Neither does it start in the late 1970s with the contractors descending on the site. The infamous Adelaide Coroner, William Ramsey-Smith, had dug up Mindil Beach in the late nineteenth century during his search for scientifically valuable skeletal remains—the search that took him around Aboriginal grave sites right across South Australia and the Northern Territory. Some of the remains from the Darwin area, sold by Ramsey-Smith to museums and medical schools in Sydney, England and Scotland, were only recently returned to the Larrakia people after years of lobbying.

Today Mindil Beach continues to be desecrated, if in less obvious ways. What else is Darwin's immensely popular Beer Can Regatta, held annually at the beach, than an officially sanctioned ritual of desecration? In postcolonial Darwin, anthropologist Bill Day writes:

Aboriginal cemetery at Mindil Beach. Shows Pukamani poles erected by Tiwi people from Bathurst–Melville Islands. Jeffs Collection, Northern Territory Library

> where public expressions of racial superiority are illegal, the festival makes a powerful unspoken statement authorising task-directed white drinking in public places. Aborigines, who are noticeably absent from the Mindil Beach festival, are further displaced by the appropriation of the supposedly empty landscape for the predominantly White festival.[10]

Further, the festival can be seen as making a mockery out of the widespread campaign against Darwin's Aboriginal drinkers. A 1983 amendment to the Northern Territory Summary Offences Act makes it an offence to consume alcohol in a public place within two kilometres of a licensed outlet, and is regarded as a "transparent attempt to clear the streets of indigenous drinkers while doing nothing to address the underlying problems".[11] While Aborigines are forced to drink in city parks and vacant lots, Mindil Beach, their burial ground, is used for a white festival, renowned for its culture of officially condoned, excessive alcohol consumption.

Does this story end? Are the Mindil Beach dead left in peace? "Sooner or later, any society that would like to know itself as 'post-colonial'", writes historian Ross Gibson, "must confront an inevitable question: how to live with collective memories of theft and murder?"[12] For Australia this confrontation is a long way away, dissolved as it is in the transience of memory and the permanence of disrespect.

"It would be nice", wrote anthropologist Michael Taussig, "if the dead could be tucked away, far away, so there would be two worlds, one for the living and one for the dead."[13] But as Taussig knows too well, all we seem to have is one world where the living cohabit with the dead. As a traumascape, Mindil Beach is marked by recurring violence, loss and seething disquiet. It is also literally a common ground between the living and the dead—a place which reveals, if only we cared to look, the complexities, obligations and connections between the living and the dead. These obligations and connections are well beyond what we usually have in mind when talking of 'honouring the dead', 'laying them to rest' or 'paying our last respects'.

Yet when it comes to suffering, it's Us and Them all over again. Could such desecration and forgetting happen to a non-Aboriginal sacred site? Recently, Slavoi Zizek, a Professor of Philosophy and Psychoanalysis at the University of Ljubljana took objection to the often-voiced question raised by September 11, 'How could it happen HERE?' The real question, he said, is 'How could it happen ANYWHERE?'

A burial ceremony from Mindil Beach, a photograph from the 1930s, CURNOCK Collection, Northern Territory Library

Similarly, while the Mindil Beach dead are not protected from amnesia, indifference and barely disguised disrespect, we should consider none of our dead to be safe:

> The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.
> The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.
> The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.
> And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.
>
> *Elie Wiesel*[14]

1. Walter A. Davis, 'Death's Dream Kingdom: The American Psyche after 9/11', *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* (8:1), Spring 2003, p.128.
2. Jay Arthur, 'The Eighth Day of Creation', *Journal of Australian Studies*, June 1999, p.67.
3. Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, CUP, Melbourne, 1996, p.151.
4. See Kenneth Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, Miegunyah Press at MUP, 1998.
5. See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1976.
6. Tony Stephens, 'Memories of an evil place laid to rest', *Age*, 19 March 1999.
7. Nonie Sharp, *Saltwater people: the waves of memory*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2002.
8. The history of uncovering human remains at the Mindil Beach site between the late 1970s and the present day has been documented in the work of anthropologist David Ritchie and historians Lyn Riddett and Sam Wells. See Lyn Riddett, 'Think Again: Communities which Lose their Memory: the Construction of History in Settler Societies, in *Journal of Australian Studies* 44, 1995; David Ritchie, 'Mindil Beach Bones', Paper delivered at 'Under the Banyan Tree' Luncheon Seminar, State Library Northern Territory, 12 April 1989, unpublished; Samantha J. Wells, *Town Camp or Homeland? A History of the Kulaluk Aboriginal Community*, Report of the Australian Heritage Commission, 8 November 1995.
9. Annie Dillard, *For The Time Being*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.
10. William Day, *Aboriginal Fringe Dwellers in Darwin, Australia: Cultural Persistence or a Culture of Resistance?*, PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, Department of Anthropology, 2001, p.350.
11. William Day, *Aboriginal Fringe Dwellers*, p.351.
12. Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, UQP, St Lucia, 2002, p.83.
13. Michael Taussig, 'Dying is an Art, Like Everything Else', in *Critical Inquiry*, (28:1), Autumn 2001.
14. Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, New York, October 1986.

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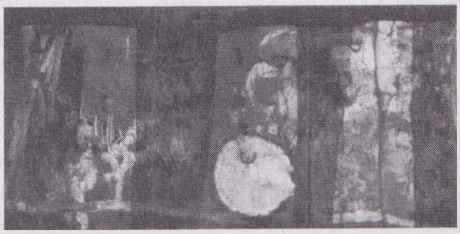
personal essay | **ROBERT PASCOE**

LANDSCAPES OF CHILDHOOD



Frank Hodgkinson, *Time of the Last Cicada* (1963), University of NSW Union

MELBOURNE'S NEW Federation Square is quickly winning the approbation of the Australian public. It manages to provide a postmodern container for various representations of national images. The jumble of buildings invites the visitor to make an individual journey through the irregular spaces and angles of the structure. As Philip Goad explains, these 'intrafilaments' (spaces between buildings in the shape of oblong filaments) remind visitors of the inner-Melbourne laneways they might have explored as children. This concept is extended inside The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, a late addition to Federation Square. The gallery concentrates exclusively on Australian art. Contemporary Indigenous artworks are juxtaposed with the classic iconic images of Australian landscapes. The effect is to question our assumptions about whether the iconic images are ever ultimately capable of speaking to all of us, Indigenous or other, in quite the same way.

We all have our favourite paintings in the Australian rural landscape genre. Our choices seem arbitrary. "The boot of the European has left a lasting imprint on the Australian landscape", I contended in 1979, yet that tough enduring landscape has a life of its own and will draw us, Indigenous or other, into its spell. Our great landscape artists help us understand our emotional connection with aspects of that landscape. There are paintings that I have taught to Australian history undergraduates many times, and I can be genuinely enthusiastic about, such as Tom Roberts' *Shearing the Rams*, or Frederick McCubbin's *The Pioneer*. But these paintings do not touch me deeply inside. They seem like distant stories of long ago, of people and struggles that seem far removed from my own preoccupations.

There are also those paintings that strike into the emotional core of who we are. These canvases draw us inexorably into their imagined world. For me personally these important Australian landscapes are an eclectic scatter of images. The way Fred Williams twists his brush to produce images of trees along the spine of mountain ridges is one. The elegant sweep of a broad river in an Arthur Streeton landscape is another. The exotic curve of the tree trunks and branches in a John Glover canvas, sitting happily against curved hillsides in the background, is a third.

Recently I returned to the place where I had spent my earliest remembered boyhood, from the age of 4 to 7, 1957 to 1960. Apart from a fleeting visit in the summer of 1970, it was my first look at the Queensland coastal city of Rockhampton in half a lifetime. As the plane made its final approach to the airport I looked out the window and was startled to see before me an Arthur Streeton landscape! It was a collision between what I had expected to see in this tropical landscape and an image from the bank of Australian landscape paintings I carry inside my head. Over the next few hours and days other images came tumbling out, as I kept seeing glimpses of my favourite paintings.

With my uncle, Maurie Briggs, as host, we drive around the town that first afternoon. It is a warm and clear winter's day, perfect for visual acuity. The landscape of Rockhampton unfolds in front of me like a succession of fine artworks. We go to the lake in the Botanic Gardens. It is one of those scenes from the interior of the continent, black waterbirds buoyed lazily at the lake's edge, framed by weeping trees. It is the scene depicted in William Charles

Piguenit's *The Flood in the Darling, 1890* (c.1895). A clump of trees seems to float above the water of a river in flood. The sudden excess of water in an otherwise dry landscape is a perennial feature of Rockhampton life. The Fitzroy River makes its way gently across the flat open country west of Rockhampton like the Hawkesbury in Arthur Streeton's *The Purple Noon's Transparent Might* (1896). There is a deceptive languor about the Fitzroy that every few years makes it rise above its banks and effortlessly swallow up acres of Rockhampton's streets and buildings. Barbara Webster's account of the famous 1918 flood (*Marooned*, 2003) captures this sense of aquarian envelopment.

We next drive to Bouldercombe, a hamlet on the outskirts of town. The road ends in a blind alley at an extinct mining site. There is the same sense of enclosure in Streeton's *Fire's On!* (1891). In that painting the construction of the Lapstone railway tunnel offers us a point of intersection with the head of the valley. At Bouldercombe I feel the same need to move further into the welcoming folds of the valley. Above us are the outlines of trees progressing in straight rows along the ridges, just as Fred Williams would have them. In *Hillside Landscape, 1* (1966) there is a sparse, almost abstract, convention of landscape notation that makes our viewpoint indistinct. Inside the valley it is easy to lose one's bearings and to experience the same sense of directionlessness. Maurie Briggs once owned a house in this valley, in whose backyard, shadowed by these ridges, I played as a boy.

How a child frames such images is significant, for the angle of vision and the width of the canvas of the child's imagination are plainly going to make a difference to the way these images are kept in memory. There is no doubt why these paintings reappear as glimpses of the landscape we observe—the boy's mind has captured certain angles of his surroundings and stored these in his mental bank of images.

Sternly flat landforms, few of the gently modulating folds, no plateaux to interrupt the horizon—these are some of the geological features of the Rockhampton environs, looking inland. Rising between the township and the nearby coast, however, is the most prominent feature of all—Mt Archer—a constant presence in a Rockhampton childhood. We could see it from the back steps of our house on Gladstone Road. Mt Archer is like a John Glover

William Charles Piguenit, *The Flood in the Darling*, 1890 (c.1895), Art Gallery of NSW

painting, such as *Launceston and the River Tamar* (c.1834). Its hillsides are curved and gently sloping. Its trees are gums curled by the ocean gales. Its foliage is pleasantly layered: grasstrees and bushes of banksia complement the upper storey of supple gums.

Frank Hodgkinson's lesser-known *Time of the Last Cicada* (1963) is a meditative view of the Australian landscape—looking through open-curtained windows onto an Australian bush scene, with the feeling that one is sheltering from the natural world outside. This is a constant preoccupation of life in Rockhampton and its holiday villages on the coast—nature viewed from the safety of a wooden verandah or the treetops glimpsed through the windows of the upper floor. The North Queensland houses on stilts provide a double living space—there is the upper space, feminine kitchens and bedrooms, brightly lit by the sun, and there is the masculine lower space—where young boys play and the men gather to hear the races on the radio or tinker with their car parts.

Then there are the gaps in one's imagination. There were certainly some striking absences from the Rockhampton landscape. I did not encounter any towering edifice, such as a major educational building or a large Protestant church. These were buildings I met later in life, first at Yarra Park School, under the shadow of the MCG, then at Melbourne High School, and finally at the University of Melbourne. Each set of buildings was significantly grander than the one before. My adolescent years in inner-suburban Richmond helped me to appreciate new landscapes—those of John Brack, Albert Tucker and Danila Vasilieff. Then my eyesight began to fail around the age of 15 and the boyhood images became burnished in my consciousness.

My boyhood town also lacked the urban intimacy of, say, the Italian piazza. Rockhampton is a big, blustery country town, with generously proportioned streetscapes, lined with houses on stilts in the North Queensland manner. It shares nothing with the classic Italian townscape. As Italo-Australians told me how desolate they felt in encountering the Australian townscape for the first time, I understood they were missing something from their particular childhood.

There are landscapes in which we are tourists, merely gazing, and there are others in which we become active participants. When the figures in the landscape appear more naturally disposed, as in the Heidelberg School masterpieces alluded to earlier, we feel an immediacy of connection. But there is another strategy of emotional involvement in an environment—we see it in the strangely close-up angles of Jeffrey Smart's Italian urbanscapes. We are used to seeing roadside scenes from the comfort of our car speeding down the autostrada—he makes us spill into the surrounding scene. Rushing out from the preschool near the Catholic Cathedral one afternoon when I was about 5, I ran straight into a car on the busy main road outside. This collision with a car on Gladstone Road thrust me face to face with the reality of bitumen. The immediacy of bitumen in the Jeffrey Smart paintings is equally arresting. Smart connects Italy and Australia via the universality of the industrial landscape. Childhood accidents—ripping a tender shin as one leaps from the rainwater tank at the back of the house, tumbling off a slide in the Botanic Gardens—are collisions with landscape. The sentimental image of lost children in the Heidelberg School landscapes summons up anew these early moments of fear and anxiety.

Rockhampton is much more than a store of childhood images, of course. It is the taste of pawpaw, mango and watermelon. It is the pithy language of the adults around, expressed in aphorisms such as "I do not want to be the richest man in the cemetery!" (Maurie Briggs) and "Keep smiling because the world loves idiots!" (Ken Ferrer). It is the scent of tropical flowers, the shock of jacaranda in October, and the thunder of summer storms.

Its visual memory is reflected in certain paintings. These find their reproduction and emulation in mass-cultural form, variously in places like teatowel designs, *Australian Women's Weekly* photographs or in the *Victorian Readers* used in schools. So one's childhood and the visual clues that give it a pictorial record end up becoming a self-referencing framework that repeats itself endlessly across a lifetime. The old cliche, 'We know what we like', becomes 'We like what we know'.

Thanks to Tessa Biddle, Rosemary Clerehan, Joe Pascoe and Ross Williams for their comments. The Goad article appeared in *ABV* 42, 2002, pp.6–15. The Ken Ferrer quote is taken from the SBS TV program *Australia By Numbers: Rockhampton 4700* (Carita Ferrer, 2001).

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A 'WAGGA-WAGGA' IN CHINA

The culture of cartooning in the sleeping giant

THE YOUNG GUARD at the Tian'anmen (Gate of Heavenly Peace) reminded me of a goanna which, to avoid being photographed, keeps sliding to the far side of the tree trunk. If you approached it from the south, it'd turn north, if you came from the west, it'd turn east. Tourists who wanted to snap its beanstalk figure and its grimace of long-suffering resentment had to hunt it in packs and surround it from all sides like wolves.

Here's a tip worthy to be included in Lonely Planet books: When choosing a travel companion, pick one who has neither camera nor video recorder. For the first time I felt full sympathy with the Chinese who so hate Westerners pointing their digital equipment at 'picturesque' things. We quickly tire of picture-postcard views, but we turn into frenzied paparazzi when a 120-year-old grandmother in rags appears on the scene. Popping volleys of flashes into her wrinkled old face, we follow her as if she were Nicole Kidman. And unable to move faster than a snail, there is no escape for her.

The trophy shot for dinner-table conversations has been obtained: Look how low she's bent over her rickety cart, it almost seems like she's walking on all fours! But boy, look at the scowl on her face! Not very friendly, is she?

In a narrow lane in Beijing I saw a father wiping the bottom of his baby through the ingenious open-backed pants of Chinese infants. I walked past discretely when I heard an English voice behind me doing the soft soundtrack for his video recording: "and here . . . we have . . . er, a typical street scene in old Peking . . . a proud father attending to his duties".

It is worth mentioning that the guard on Tian'anmen, when I walked past him again, wore a beaming smile as he was being photographed by a proud Mongolian-looking father who had positioned his baby at the bottom of the podium. Evidently a happy souvenir of a visit to the capital and as such totally acceptable. We Westerners, on the other hand, are assumed to have sinister motives. And with good reason, it seems.

Modern digital cameras abound in China (well, in the big cities), as do cell phones. Young Chinese in the crowded McDonald's show each other their latest lap-top computers. Children in school uniforms constantly send text messages, and even street sweepers suddenly tinkle with Wilhelm Tell overtures and start searching for their mobiles within the folds of their quilted layers.

The spectacular leap of China into the future is no myth. Beijing is surrounded by half a dozen ring roads, and more are being built. The cars are as modern and numerous as in any Western country. Away from the freeways, and especially in rural areas, the traffic is more interesting with odd three-wheeled vehicles and ancient lumbering contraptions. And bicycles of course.

I had never seen cordless mouses for computers until I visited the spic-and-span offices of the *China Daily* newspaper. Do we make modern computers in Australia?

Some twenty of my little children's books had already been published in China. In contrast to the American editions, they are well-printed on excellent paper. The translations posed some problems though; I remember answering a long list of que-

ADAM LEE

Does China have a free press? Of course it does. As long as one does not attack the government and its policies.

ries, for instance: "What is a Wagga Wagga?" (I had introduced a character as the mayor of Wagga Wagga). I was especially embarrassed by the question about an artefact from the Chung Chi Dynasty. I had invented this era without an inkling that my work would one day be translated into Chinese.

We also visited the premises of the hard-line *People's Daily*. These were more Spartan, and the editors and cartoonists seemed more formal. They became less forbidding after a banquet where waiters kept our glasses filled, and we discussed journalism and cartooning.

Does China have a free press? Of course it does. As long as one does not attack the government and its policies. That would be irresponsible. And no cartoonist would dream of caricaturing a leading politician. That, I explained, is half the fun of cartooning in the West. That is the very reason why we love cartoons: when we are unhappy with politicians and their machinations, we love seeing them lampooned in cartoons. It must be very frustrating, I hinted, to have a perfect government that does not need to be attacked. I don't know whether this was translated correctly, or whether the faces remained inscrutable in honour of that old Oriental tradition.

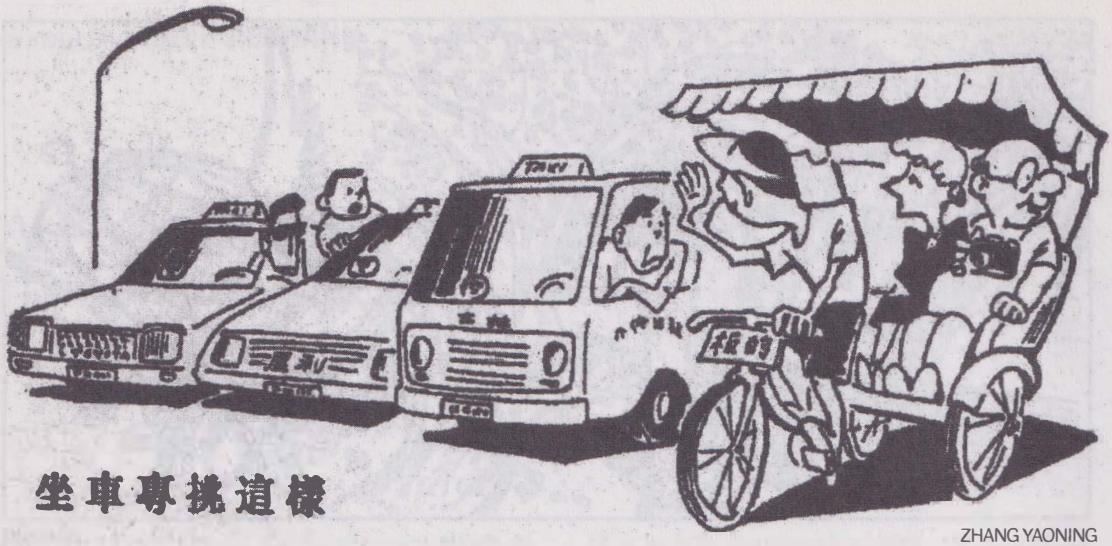
On my flight back I came across an article in the Singaporean *Straits Times*, written by Hu Shuli, the founder and editor of the premier Chinese Business magazine *Caijing*. It was accompanied by a cartoon by Adam Lee in which the Chinese freedom of the press was symbolised by a bird flying free but within a cage. I quote from the article:

> So, while the line between the permissible and the prohibited has shifted, it still exists. Some of us walk right up to the line, even nudging it occasionally. Crossing it, however, remains another matter . . .

That a resident of China can publish such words, albeit overseas, without fear of being dragged out of bed in the middle of the night, shows that China has made considerable strides away from authoritarianism.

I visited the retired art director of the *People's Daily*, Fang Cheng, in his apartment in Beijing. It was humble by Australian standards: narrow concrete stairs, peeling paint, the smell of boiled vegetables, electric wiring hanging in disarray. It brought back memories of Eastern Europe and Cuba.

Fang Cheng is 81, still paints and is currently writing a book on humour. Chinese humour is not always accessible to Westerners. Much of it is a play with words, as the Chinese language lends itself to odd interpretations and amusing mistakes. An equivalent in English would be the following example from a 'Carry-On' type of film: "I want to speak



ZHANG YAONING

I was reminded of the Kliban cartoon 'Out of the way! Here comes a cartoonist!' Traffic virtually had to stop for us, as we were accompanied by police cars with flashing lights behind and in front.

to the manager!" "The manager's gone for a pee." Then the manager appears, carrying the letter 'p' that had fallen from a sign. To explain such jokes to foreigners is as tedious a business as Chinese explaining their gags to us.

Just as Australian cartoonists have a menagerie of useful, easily recognised characters that come with an extensive engram of meanings (Ned Kelly, Robin Hood, Saint Peter, Little Red Riding Hood) so the Chinese have their 'ghost catchers' and other beloved mythical figures, whom they instantly recognise. We would require a lengthy introduction to Chinese culture to understand.

Considering the modest lifestyle of Fang Cheng, who is a national treasure, it was surprising how we visiting cartoonists were treated. I was reminded of the Kliban cartoon 'Out of the way! Here comes a cartoonist!' Traffic virtually had to stop for us, as we were accompanied by police cars with flashing lights behind and in front. We raced through red lights and toll booths, soldiers snapped to attention. Not everybody was impressed: some cyclists ignored the policeman's whistle when we crossed the road and whizzed past us with the resentful faces of mere mortals.

Studying English is popular among the young, and certain expressions seem to have taken their fancy, among them 'be careful'. I must have heard it a thousand times. Uneven kerbstones, overhanging trees, protruding metal pipes were constantly pointed out to me in a most theatrical manner, accompanied by a sing-song chorus of "be cayfool!" When I saw even the tiniest puddle ahead, I could also notice everybody in happy anticipation getting ready to point and to call out a gleeful: "Be cayfool!"

In Singapore, when I put my suitcase into the Left Luggage for a day, the man informed me proudly that he'd accept any currency, but when I brought out my Chinese yuan, he shook his head. I could not believe it. Here we have a country with a billion-plus population, a stable and rapidly growing economy and a major trading partner, yet their money was no good.

Australian banks advertise the daily exchange rates for the Samoan Tala, but not for Chinese currency. China has often been called a sleeping giant. I think it is us who are asleep!

Rolf Heimann is 'Lofo'. His latest book is Life's like a Crocodile *(Little Hare).*

A TREE THAT HIT THE GRANITE CEILING*

To live, intellectually, as a Chinese in Australia

I've spent my 1st 10 years
constructing myself into an Australian
i'll spend my next 10
deconstructing it[1]
—Ouyang Yu

RECENTLY, on hearing that a poet/artist friend of mine was intending to move to Sydney I thought of his tree, a tree that I had seen years ago hanging on a wall in his sitting room, a tree that I fell in love with at first sight. I made a phone call to him to check if it was available for sale.

"Sorry but I've given it away to someone else," Zhang said.

"What was it that decided you to move to Sydney?" I asked.

"Money." He explained how hard it was to make a living as a graphic artist and that he was hoping for a better life in Sydney with his new job as a sales manager in a warehouse. Then he said "Ouyang, there is nothing one cannot give up on. You know that, to live, I have given up on poetry writing and I have given up on doing oils and I have now given up on being a graphics artist. There is nothing you can't give up on, really, except life."

THE CONCLUSION

These words keep coming back to me: "to be asian in australia is to live on the reverse side of the paradise".[2] As I said in a recent interview with a Hong Kong newspaper, "living in Australia is like living in hell".[3] I hear an echo of this experience from Chinese intellectuals I know in Australia.

What has now become obvious is that those Chinese intellectuals who came to Australia on or around the 4 June incident in 1989, with great hopes of freedom and democracy, have found these things but, ironically, have had little use for them. Like sunshine and clean air, two great qualities of Australian life most admired by Chinese nationals, freedom and democracy will not get them a job or food here in the land of plenty, nor satisfy their spiritual and intellectual needs. Another friend told me that if he had known that Australia was a society with such an overwhelming concern for economic success and an enormous contempt for intellectual pursuits he would not have wasted many years attending one course after another but would have gone straight into the lawn-mowing business and have it made by now!

It is not as though no-one is happy. People from China with minimal qualifications—secondary-school graduates, factory workers or trades persons—in Zhang's words, "just love it" in Australia. They make more money in months than they can in years in China and they tirelessly buy one house after another, happily unaware of any cinemas or theatres or literary festivals around them, where they wouldn't see their faces anyway. They are "exiling themselves in money".[4]

Most Chinese-Australian intellectuals I know have now given up, particularly those whose medium of expression was the pen, now less mighty than the penny. Ding, the short-story teller, has been running a company selling television sets. Ma, a poet and novelist, has now started his business in a milk

* Adrian Chan used the metaphor of 'the glass ceiling'. He was putting it mildly. Quoted in Vin D'Cruz and William Steele, *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia*, Monash Asia Institute, 2003, p.61.

bar. Shi, a poet and artist, has been doing street portraits for a number of years. Yuan, a Sydney-based Chinese short-story writer with, I think, a great potential, has now become owner of a grocery store. Zhu, a brilliant literary critic well known in China, has returned after having lived for many years anonymously in Australia.

What happened?

In *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*, the poet meditates on a future when "this world eventually/will/ be under christianity and an english one at that" and is asked what he is going to do. He says:

ah well
i'll speak chinese
i guess[5]

But that is easier said than done. In reality, writing Chinese in Australia, like writing in Latin, is committing intellectual and poetic suicide, speaking into a void. Despite dozens of Chinese-language newspapers in Australia, there is virtually no space given to poetry and no money for it if any is ever published. This has now become worse since the closing of two major newspapers in Sydney, *zili kuaibao* (*The Independent Monthly*) and *donghua shibao* (*The Chinese Post*).

The end result: Zhang has three unpublished collections. Shi no longer bothers even putting his many and varied poems together and others, like Fang, disappear altogether from the scene, becoming instead successful businessmen. Ma, whose poetry I have featured prominently in *Otherland* (No. 4, 1998), revealed to me, when telling me about his new acquisition, the milk bar, that he has realised the only thing that is valuable in this country is money.

Self-mockingly, I wrote a Chinese poem titled, 'I'm one of the New-age *niugui sheshen*'.[6] The only difference I see that I have from those Chinese intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution is that I partly enjoy the role that this new country has assigned us. In parties that I have been to here in Melbourne I have observed an interesting phenomenon. People with doctoral degrees in FOTH (my own coinage meaning Fields Other than Humanities) and who subsequently have good jobs in high-paying companies, turn out to be the well-to-do, relaxed and comfortable ones. At the parties I threw, all kinds of *niugui sheshen* came: artists, poets and writers living on the margins of the society. For them, there doesn't seem to be any hope of success.

WHITE MULTICULTURALISM[7]

We all know multiculturalism is a good thing. It keeps everyone in their ethnic place. Guess who is on top? One might argue that Asian women writers fare quite well alongside their Australian counterparts. I had never quite worked out why until recently when a friend cited three reasons for their success: firstly in this essentially male-oriented and white society Asian women writers are valued for their exotic appeal and so-called mysterious qualities; secondly Asian women writers do not pose an ideological challenge or threat to their Australian counterparts, male or female, because the kind of stories they tell comfortably fit our image of ourselves as superior and of their societies as backward; and thirdly publication and promotion of their work matches our expectations of ourselves as supporters of the weak, the unrepresented, the downtrodden and the unspoken-for, as critics of Asian male-chauvinism.

I sometimes do feel that if we do not offer the whites miserable stories of China, if we do not tell them a story along the politically correct lines, if we ever dare speak our mind, and our heart, we shall be accused of being "unlovely"[8] or writing "in-your-face grunge".[9] To make myself lovely, I guess I'd go for a sex change and, ultimately, a skin-colour change.

So far, probably as a result of multiculturalism, all my books have been published by people of 'ethnic' origins, which to put it another way means they have all been rejected by mainstream white Australia.[10] One of the consequences of having a fake multiculturalism in place is you can leave the multiculturals to themselves and have nothing to do with them again. Nowhere is this shown more clearly than in *Australian Book Review*, which under Peter Rose has become increasingly irrelevant to Asian intellectuals. Over a three-year period from No. 228 (January 2000) to No. 255 (October 2003), one Asian wrote six reviews[11] and four books by Asians were reviewed. Who is missing out under this white Australian book review? In the three years important books by Asian scholars and writers were not reviewed in that magazine. They include Mabel Lee's translation of the Nobel Prize winning author Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*;

Shen Yuanfang's *Dragon Seed in the Antipodes: Chinese-Australian Autobiographies* (2001); Ghassan Hage's *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (1998); Tseen Khoo and Jacqueline Lo (eds), *Diaspora: Negotiating Asian-Australia* (2000); Hsu-Ming Teo's *Love and Vertigo* (2000), a Vogel Prize winner; Ien Ang's *Alter-Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture* (2000) and *On not Speaking Chinese: living between Asia and the West* (2001); and Dewi Anggraeni's *Neighborhood Tales: A Bilingual Collection of Short Stories* (2001). None of the four titles that I've had published in the past three years, all sent to the magazine, was reviewed. They are *Bastard Moon: Essays on Chinese-Australian Writing* (as *Otherland* 7, 2001), edited by Wenche Ommundsen; *In Your Face: Contemporary Chinese Poetry in English Translation* (as *Otherland* 8, 2002); *Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-colored Eyes* (Wild Peony, 2002); and *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* (Brandl & Schlesinger, 2002), shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Award in 2003 and awarded the Festival Award for Innovation in Writing at the 2004 Adelaide Bank Festival of Arts.[12]

Can we conclude from this that, where Pauline Hanson left off, certain white Australian intellectuals stepped in, keeping their Australian culture from being 'swamped' by Asians?[13]

Thus, it is small wonder that Asian intellectuals, such as me, not only criticise their original home country which they have since left behind but also the adopted country that they become a physical but not spiritual citizen of. Their sword-pen cuts both ways and, indeed, it cuts with three edges, the third edge cutting ourselves. I often wonder why I even entertained the ideas of moving to Australia, of deciding to become its citizen, of using English to express myself, of resisting any temptations to go back to China, of continuing to waste my time trying to communicate with a deliberately ignorant West.

In hurting China and Australia we, or I, hurt ourselves in a way that mediocrely patriotic Australian critics and intellectuals never dare. They have so far never experienced the need for migration, for either economic or intellectual reasons.

Against this background, it is not surprising that every book that I write tends to attract multiple rejection: twenty-eight in the case of *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* and twenty-one in that of *Foreign Matter*, an award-winner that I had to publish by myself. It gets to a degree where I realise: "For me, the Western world is finished. I now do my own stuff and go it alone, in this new world of self-creations".[14] But perversely, I prefer the bare-bone, nothing-to-be-gained 'freedom' here than going back to China. A true artist must do everything in his or her power to fight against this spirit of mammon. In a sense, he or she must be an economic dissident.

LIVING AS AN ECONOMIC DISSIDENT

I know I must be mad to say this. In an age when we all worship an economic god and when one's motto is 'never say no to money', as one of my Australian friends put it, turning oneself into an economic dissident would be a disaster, a self-annihilation. Being an economic dissident in today's West is equivalent to being a political dissident in today's China. Writing poetry, for example, is an economically dissenting activity in this country, an "un-Australian activity".[15] It is saying no to money, like Hari Kunzru, who rejected the $12,000 John Llewellyn Rhys Award because he was against the sponsor's "hostile line towards black and Asian Britons".[16]

To be an economic dissident is to resist the temptations of the market by refusing to participate in it and to follow other Chinese intellectuals who have given up on the artistic and ideological pursuits they once regarded as valuable. It is to spend a small proportion of one's earnings on educational and intellectual developments rather than to invest all one's earnings for more gains, living the cycle of 'money generating more money' as so many of my fellow Chinese have succumbed to or been forced to succumb to. In terms of real art, immediate success or failure is not the real measure. Time is.

THE TREE STORY, AGAIN

After I hung up, the tree kept me awake half the night. According to Zhang, it was a willow tree growing by the river bank in his village in Northern China. Unlike the soft and weeping willows found in Southern China, this willow tree was wonderfully straight and upright, standing tall and beautiful in winters and summers. Before he came to Australia, Zhang had painted five or six of them in a sequence, one winning a top prize in a graduation contest, one collected by the National Gallery of China and a couple sold to Taiwanese businessmen. This last he kept and had brought to Australia. His words rang

in my ears when he told me his story: "I am 34 and I feel that I am a very lucky man. Why? Because, at 16, I felt I was so lucky that I had managed to live to 16 in a village that was dead poor and now I have managed to live to more than double that age."

I admit that I was brought to the verge of tears. What made me feel doubly sad is the fact that that tree seems to have withered and disappeared against a granite ceiling, invisible but omnipresent in Australia. I wish Zhang good luck in his future career and hope he makes so much money that he is able to not care about all this.

1. Ouyang Yu, 'Soul Diary: key words', unpublished manuscript, 2003.
2. 'Soul Diary'.
3. The interview as yet not published. Zhang told me that he sometimes felt that "it was like living in hell" in Australia.
4. Ouyang Yu, Chinese interview by Li Xianglan, "A 'tree' permanently resident in an alien soil: on Ouyang Yu, Australian-Chinese poet and literary translator", *The Epoch Times*, 27 October 2003, p.10.
5. Ouyang Yu, *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*, Wild Peony, 1997, p.47.
6. *Niugui sheshen*: literally, cow monsters and snake demons, has three meanings: monsters and demons, forces of evil, and enemies of all descriptions, and was a reference to all the intellectuals under a cloud during the Cultural Revolution.
7. Vin D'Cruz describes this variety of multiculturalism as "Anglo monoculturalism [that] is being passed off quietly as multicultural". See Vin D'Cruz and William Steele, *Australia's Ambivalence towards Asia*, Monash Asia Institute, 2003, p.57.
8. Cameron Woodhead, untitled review of *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, *Age*, 22 February 2003.
9. Pam Allen, 'Postcolonial cross-cultural, in-your-face grunge', *Island* 93/4, 2003, p.172.
10. Papyrus Publishing, publisher of my first English poetry book, *Moon over Melbourne and Other Poems*, is run by German migrants; Wild Peony, publisher of my two English poetry books, *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet* and *Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-colored Eyes*, is run by an Australian of Chinese origins; and Brandl & Schlesinger, publisher of my first English novel, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, is run by Australians of Hungarian background.
11. Thuy On is the one single Asian woman allowed to review books there.
12. If you write a novel as an Asian-Australian and get shortlisted, you are amazed to see it not being shortlisted as fiction but as something called 'Community Relations', as if that was all your writing is concerned with.
13. There are others that are equally exclusive such as *Quadrant* and *Words with James Griffin* on ABC TV, a program overwhelmingly made up of whites that often put me to sleep; the only Asian that appeared on TV in nearly a year and a half, from 9 June 2002 to 16 November 2003, was the Indian historian, Ramachandra Guha (6 July 2003).
14. Ouyang Yu (ed/trans), Introduction to *Loving: the best of both words*, Otherland Poetry Series IV, 2003, p.i.
15. From my title of a sequence, 'Writing poetry: an un-Australian activity', *Foreign Matter*, Otherland Poetry Series No. 3, 2003, p.1.
16. Jason Steger, 'Making a Big Impression', *Age* (Review), 29 November 2003, p.6.

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Those Mysterious Invasions

Mice on the stairs, small claws scattering,
an army of mice, before the tin roof sings drops
and random drums. Gutters' single notes
turn to an orchestra of rain;

and the smell, nothing so tender, so powerful:
the whole house front to back, upstairs to down
impregnated with the scent of breaking drought
by the angel of a million scattering feet.

CONNIE BARBER

WHITE GHOSTS and CHINESE MIDDLEMEN DEVILS

Thoughts on racism and political opportunism

ON THE LAST weekend of February 2002 an abridged introduction by Geoffrey Blainey to a new selection of Henry Lawson's short stories and poems was published in the *Australian*. I really enjoyed the article. Blainey spins a good yarn, and his language is both felicitous and melodious. Towards the end of the article, while lamenting the waning of Henry Lawson's star over the past forty years, Blainey surmised: "He (Lawson) also suffers a little from the present vogue for political correctness because he was sometimes hostile to the collective presence of the Chinese in Australia." My Saturday breakfast coffee took on a new flavour at that moment, and the tropical outlook from my raised verandah in suburban Brisbane took on a new hue. Will Geoffrey Blainey go to his grave seizing every opportunity to avenge his war against Asian immigration in 1984? It seems that the ghost of White Australia has taken hold of him permanently.

According to Blainey, Henry Lawson is regarded by many as "the most inspiring and craftsman-like of all Australian writers, living or dead". So it is all the more intriguing that Blainey should surmise as he did. My guess is that Lawson's loss of popularity has more to do with our concern these days to be identified with the 'winners'. Lawson was a loser. His life was punctuated by spells of drunkenness, prison (for minor debts and maintenance-payment failures) and the mental hospital. I just cannot imagine that readers attracted to Lawson would be put off because of his poems about the Chinese, which were few and far between. Lawson was more a chronicler of the times than an opportunist Chinese-bashing to advance his own standing. He was no populist Pauline Hanson or John Howard. Nor did he need to be.

The scar of Blainey's ill-fated campaign against Asian immigration in 1984 must be so deep. He almost lost his position in the pantheon of Australian historians. He retired early from his university. Until then he was the most widely read historian in Australia. He had been a Professor of History at the University of Melbourne for twenty years and Chair of the Australia Council, the peak institution overseeing the cultural development of Australian society. He was also Chair of the Australia–China Council. While the storm broke in 1984 Blainey had actually launched his public campaign two years earlier. In his 1982 ABC television history of Australia, while looking down a valley in Victoria where the Chinese diggers had once been persecuted, he said into the camera:

> In the gold era (1850s), Australians had also experienced what is now called a multicultural society. Their experience convinced them that such a society didn't work; and at the time clearly it didn't work.

That was Geoffrey Blainey, a national icon, beaming into almost every home in Australia, just ten years after the burial of the White Australia Policy. For two thirds of the twentieth century no coloured races were allowed into Australia. The 30,000 Chinese who were in Australia at Federation in 1901, and allowed to remain because of the international relations imperative of the all-conquering British Empire, dwindled to fewer than 10,000 by 1947. By then the Chinese had been invisible in Australian society for decades.

But the Chinese occupied a special place in the minds of white Australia: one in every nine men in the colony of Victoria was a Chinese during the gold rush period of the nineteenth century. The subsequent demonisation of the Chinese in the decades leading up to federation of the six colonies in 1901 rendered a scar on our national psyche—that dormant fear of being swamped by aliens: beings who were low on the totem pole of humanity, contemptible, untameable, and most of all given to defiling 'unprotected' white women through their obsequious guises.

Thankfully the past thirty years have seen gigantic changes to all that. Yet despite all the firecrackers let off at Chinese New Year functions in Chinatown malls and the Sheraton and Hilton entrances around Australia, and in spite of the presence of VIPs from the upper echelons of mainstream Australia at such functions, are the ghosts of White Australia still hovering about?

When the White Australia Policy was ended in the early 1970s, the Chinese who were allowed in were largely the English-educated middle class. Their numbers were small and they were keen to assimilate. They took up jobs in the professions and melted into the suburbs. Then Vietnam fell, and in 1976 the first boatload of refugees arrived in Australia. Australia responded admirably, in part to appease our conscience, if subconsciously, for supporting the Americans in an unholy war. However, the continuing inflow of these refugees in the ensuing years, through transit camps in Asia, bestirred the dormant scar in our national psyche.

In 1988, four years after Blainey's anti-Asian immigration campaign, John Howard, then Opposition Leader, said publicly that to maintain social cohesion in the community he was in favour of reducing the level of Asian migrants coming into this country. But he recanted soon after, when he lost the leadership of the Liberal Party to Andrew Peacock: "I regret the anti-Asian slant. I don't have a prejudiced bone in my body, and that did cause me a degree of personal unhappiness."[1] Was he honest, or was it all to do with positioning his party in the electorate and himself in the party? Historians in future will see that episode with different eyes: there is little disagreement now that Howard's strategy of demonising the asylum seekers, through the *Tampa* incident, to bolster his re-election chances in 2001, was entirely unethical.

I have often wondered if the similarity between Howard's and Blainey's views on Asian immigration is mere coincidence, given that Blainey's rehabilitation appears to coincide with Howard's reign as Prime Minister of Australia. After his early retirement from the University of Melbourne, Blainey became the founding Chancellor of Ballarat University in rural Victoria; a few years ago he was invested with the AC, Commander of the Order of Australia; early in 2001 he was the longhaired, ruddy-faced, avuncular historian on the national television series to celebrate the Centenary of Federation, from which his own contribution to race relations in 1984 was omitted, in the episode covering the White Australia Policy; in 2001 he gave the Boyer Lectures on national radio, an honour bestowed by invitation from the Chairman of the ABC, Donald McDonald, said to be close to our current Prime Minister; and in 2002 a major scholarly conference on his work was held in Melbourne.

In 1996 Pauline Hanson made her now notorious first speech in Parliament: "To survive in peace and harmony, united and strong, we must have one people, one nation, one flag . . . I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians . . . They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate . . . A truly multicultural country can never be strong and united". Howard did nothing to challenge her jingoistic offerings and, on Radio 2UE in September 1996, seemed to defend Hanson: "I certainly believe in her right to say what she said. I thought some of the things she said were an accurate reflection of what people feel." Later in Parliament he said "People are entitled to attack the present immigration levels without being branded bigots and racists". He had been asked by Kim Beazley, then leader of the Opposition, if he would exercise leadership and state unequivocally that Hanson's views on racial issues were hurtful to many Australians, and did not reflect the kind of society that Australia was or wanted to be.

While many of Hanson's pronouncements were less than erudite, they held enormous appeal for the growing mass of despondent people in the bush and in the poorer suburbs—people left behind by decades of social and economic change, people who felt themselves becoming 'losers'. Her besmirching of Asian peoples was a natural adjunct to her populist political platform—finding easy scapegoats to

I have often wondered if the similarity between John Howard's and Geoffrey Blainey's views on Asian immigration is mere coincidence . . .

legitimise the pining for a lost 'golden era'. When the *Tampa* incident occurred in late August 2001, Howard implemented the jingoistic solution of Hanson's policies on refugees—turn them out to sea, stating: "That boat will NEVER land in our waters—NEVER."

BUT ARE CHINESE Australians concerned about the evolving character of Australia, as revealed in this sordid affair and the persistent fear of the culturally different? How many of them see the parallel in the demonisation of the Chinese in the half century leading to Federation one hundred years ago, or really care about it if they do? The Chinese were economic pawns when they first arrived, but they soon became political pawns, the subject for competitive demonisation by politicians of one hue or the other. The ALP, it should not be forgotten, was founded on the White Australia mantra.

But all that is in the past! Not quite. For even today the Chinese still seem mainly to react, and hardly ever to stand up and be counted. The reactions from Chinese Australians to Pauline Hanson's first speech hardly went beyond demanding the right not to be singled out and proclaiming that we pull more than our weight. The *Tampa* incident seems not to engage them: 'It's not really about us. We are all right!' Perhaps the Chinese in Australia are still infected with the images others have of them: "*I like the Chinese . . . They only come up to your knees . . . They are . . . ready to please.*"[2]

How did the Chinese get such an image? Recalling an incident in a Chinese restaurant in Melbourne in the 1970s I can still feel my sense of shame and muted outrage when I found the well-groomed waiters bowing and scraping in front of small parties of white businessmen lunchers, while I could not get any attention. On arrival, one noticed me and more or less looked askance. Thinking about it now I realise that the starched linen, the colour scheme and the tastefully presented menu were direct imports from the British colony of Hong Kong, just like the young waiters who would in due course graduate as doctors and dentists. Posh Chinese restaurants had just become fashionable then. I was not the target clientele, and not many ordinary Chinese were. When I went back with a few office colleagues some time later, for a farewell function for one of the English expatriates, I was received with much ado. I had made the grade, perhaps, as a typical Chinaman, feting his colonial superiors.

Thirty years later Annette Shun Wah, a well-known television presenter with our national and 'ethnic' broadcasters, registered with a theatrical agent after her debut in *Floating Lives*. In that film she played the role of the married daughter of a migrant family in Australia, living in Germany with her German husband and their child. The film was about migration, with dialogues in Cantonese, English and German, echoing the experiences of this Hong Kong family that migrated to Australia. In due course three offers came, each of them as a waitress in unrelated productions.

Deep in the psyche of Australia, the image of the Chinese as a servile people seems intact. It is not surprising, given the proscribed status of the Chinese and the denial they generally resorted to for the greater part of the twentieth century. On the other hand, there is also the problem of the token Chinese, the bastard child of benign tolerance, first conceived in the thawing period of White Australia after the Second World War. *"We appointed her to the board of the Corporation. Didn't you know? We announced that . . . last year."* That appointment, to a multi-million-dollar government business undertaking, was of a Chinese who did not appear to have any substantive qualifications for such a position. There are many Chinese Australians who clearly do. Why do the power-holders pick such samples from the Chinese community?

Alas, getting the 'right' Chinese community leaders on side is generally regarded by political parties as a worthwhile electoral move. There is a belief in 'working' the ethnic communities, and there are electorates in which the Chinese vote is potentially pivotal. And appointments such as the one above are often no more than thinly disguised pork-barrelling—rewarding potentially 'useable' Chinese

leaders, from the public purse, in return for potential electoral support from that community, and financial donations to the rewarding power-holders' party during the triennial election campaigns. But why do the Chinese 'community leaders' remain complicit in the perpetuation of images of the Chinese that are less than honourable? The answer, in all probability, lies in the pursuit of their personal interests with little regard for the consequences on their fellow Chinese—the quintessential middleman mentality inherited from their forebears in the southern ocean.

THE CHINESE HAVE been in South East Asia for centuries. By the middle of the nineteenth century Chinese community leaders had become an integral part of European colonial governments in South East Asia, primarily as outsourced, government-sanctioned revenue collectors. For the bulk of the Chinese, the coolies, these 'community leaders' might as well have been middlemen devils. The lives of the coolies were at the mercy of these Chinese overlords, whether it be in working conditions, or the manner in which their hard-earned money was channelled back into the coffers of these middlemen, through their interconnected opium, gambling and spirit (liquor) farms.

Opium farming was by far the worst of the inhumanity that these overlords perpetuated. The *kongsis*, which ran the opium farms, were the largest financial conglomerates in the British colonies of Malaya and Singapore. The Chinese coolies smoked more and more as addiction took its natural course, until their emaciated bodies were no longer equal to the task of labour and toil. They were then left to themselves to end their short and brutish lives. Many more would be got from where these wretched souls came from; the reservoir of poor and desperate people in China was huge.

The British colonialists did not mind these happenings at all. After all, in response to the Qing government's burning of the 20 000 boxes of raw opium confiscated from British merchants, Great Britain waged a deliberately prolonged punitive rampage in China, ending in 1842, to establish once and for all the unfettered right of the British Empire to sell opium in China. Besides, the colonial administrators did not have labour from amongst their own ranks to do the dirty work of distributing opium. In the colony of Singapore, the revenue from opium farms collected by Chinese middlemen devils for the colonial administrations in the late nineteenth century was always more than 40 per cent of the total revenue collected in that colony. To use a faded Australian colloquialism, the attitude of these Chinese middlemen devils could be boiled down to 'I'm all right, Jack!'.

THE CHINESE COOLIES came to Australia in the mid nineteenth century, often 'recruited' by Chinese middlemen in the concession port cities of southern China. Some of the coolies were in fact kidnapped. In Australia many in the gold rush periods were indentured to entrepreneurs back in the treaty ports of China. In the Palmer River goldfields in North Queensland, they worked as miners for their Chinese overseers, or carried heavy loads along the notorious Palmer track, where the fierce local Aboriginal clans were alleged to have committed atrocities against them. The conditions they suffered were appalling. The following account is by a colonial officer, J.D. Crawford, who wrote for the Imperial Government of Great Britain in 1887:

> the wretched Chinese slaves and bondsmen . . . were used by their Chinese masters or owners as cheap pack-animals for the conveyance of rice; and each immigrant was burdened with a full sack to carry on his back over a hilly, desolate, and almost shelterless country. The trials of that journey for man and beast can only adequately be expressed by the experience of miners pursuing the same route, who found at every fresh turn a new horror, either a dead horse or a dead Chinaman. The men lay unburied where they sank down exhausted, their loads untouched, their bodies uncared for, and utterly unheeded by their passing companions, who perhaps regarded death as a happy release from a life spent in bestial drudgery.[3]

That was not all that the Chinese coolies had to endure. But did the Chinese middlemen in the British colonies in what is now Australia care? Some did. When the six colonies federated in 1901, not even successful middlemen escaped entirely the odium of their position. But for the descendants of the early Chinese, emancipation is now not such a big issue. They have survived, assimilated, and Australia has changed for them to take their rightful place. Survival does appear to be an issue for those who have come in the past twenty-five years. Survival in the spiritual sense, that is, and this can take many forms.

Some put great effort in preserving the 'Chinese culture'---dances, weekend classes in Cantonese or Mandarin, and the exposition of it through poetry, literature, art, music and calligraphy. Some celebrate the traditional festivals with a certain gravity. In the main this is not unnatural for first generation immigrants, and this tends not to be a significant impediment to emancipation. What is significant is the obsession with becoming a Chinese community leader and receiving gongs of one sort or another, often through manipulations and sometimes with the help of corrupt methods, all of no apparent interest to the powers that be.

CHINESE AUSTRALIANS SEEM to have short memories. Few are conscious of Geoffrey Blainey's role in sustaining the ghosts of White Australia. Many now write off Pauline Hanson as an ignorant woman. Some seem to be still afflicted with the delusion of being inheritors of the gentry-scholars of the Middle Kingdom. And too many Chinese 'community leaders' still hanker for snapshots with John Howard and Philip Ruddock, whenever these politicians are 'working the ethnic vote', despite the damning revelations about their part in the 'children overboard' saga. At a recent Queensland Day celebration, a message from the organising committee suggested that the Chinese might like to take part in a multicultural display: perhaps a few Chinese dressed in traditional costumes . . . ? The Chinese community middlemen generally are compliant with such requests. Most I fear do not know any better.

And so one hundred years after the Chinese became an officially rejected people and thirty years after the White Australia Policy was buried, the Chinese in Australia still allow themselves to be treated as cultural curiosities, and their all-too-often self-appointed leaders to become modern-day Chinese middlemen. When will the ghosts of White Australia and the toadying devils from Asia stop tangoing about to the fitful strains of 'Advance Australia Fair'?

1. Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the Remaking of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2001, p.91.
2. *Monty Python's Contractual Obligation Album*, Arista, 1980.
3. J.D. Crawford, 'Notes on Chinese Immigration in the Australian Colonies', quoted in G.W. Beattie, *The Settlement and Integration of the Chinese in Brisbane*, PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1986, p.117.

Chek Ling is a longtime activist among Chinese-Australians. He came to Melbourne to study engineering in 1962 under the Colombo Plan. In retirement he continues to pursue his passion for integrity in public life and for social justice.

Today

Today, eating a currant bun
I remembered a cobbled alley
a brick bakery wall with a hole
the shape and size of a biscuit tin
into which my young self hollered
Two penn'orth of yesterday's buns.
On that day in the morning cold
pressing my face against the hole
I inhaled the fragrance of fresh bread
until I exchanged my pennies
for a crumpled brown paper bag
filled with yesterday's buns.
Their sweet taste is on my tongue
as I eat today's inferior product.

JEAN THORNTON

AN ANCIENT PREJUDICE IN THE NEW AGE

Antisemitism in alternative Australia

AT A BYRON BAY human rights conference, philosopher Raymond Gaita presents an unpopular view on definitions of genocide. "He must be Jewish", comments one local academic to another during the tea break. In a hairdresser nearby, a cutter asks me about my husband. I correct the assumption that my partner is male and she changes pronouns with the same fluid ease as she does hair colour. When it emerges, however, that I am Jewish, her scissors freeze and jerk alarmingly.

Local newspaper, the *Echo*, hints that there is a Zionist plot to control the US. On the paper's website, the editor lists as evidence each Jew in the Bush administration, ignoring the number of Jews active on the left. He prints a letter boldly headlined 'War, banks and Zionism: a nasty mix' and another quoting from the *Protocols of the learned Elders of Zion*.[1] When Jews protest, the editor is unmoved. Clearly unaware of the alarming increase in violence against Australian Jews he writes "if . . . any Jewish person were treated like Muslims are treated in our country, the din would deafen Jehovah".

Some months later *Here and Now*, a free spiritual magazine, reprints Mahatir's infamous speech attacking Jews, describing him as a "rare example of an honest politician willing to state the obvious". A subsequent editorial endorses Mahatir's view that Jewish people get others to fight their battles for them, while disparaging the attempts of local Jews to fight for themselves by writing letters of concern about the previous edition. Both editions of the magazine are widely available and freely distributed at local cafes, yoga spaces, and most community venues, without question, concern or comment.

Byron Bay has frequently been at the forefront of alternative Australia. Examining its gaps in thinking can provide a window into the difficulties wider progressive Australia has in differentiating antisemitism[2] and its differentiation from appropriate critique of Israeli government policy.

The Byron Bay Jewish community is arguably the most diverse in the country. Its umbrella organisation, Rainbow Kehillah, estimates that there are approximately 1500 Jews living in the area. Its membership includes left-wing activists in a broad range of areas, many of whom are empathic to the Palestinian plight. Despite a potentially shared agenda, attempts to develop an alliance of mutual understanding between local Jewish and non-Jewish left-wingers have been unsuccessful. Lack of appreciation of cross-cultural differences in relating to history is one confounding factor. White Australian culture generally values looking forward rather than examining the past. Gallipoli is long ago. Ireland and England are encountered in the Christmas tree, if not in the reconstructed family tree, but memory of songs, dances, oppressions and traditions are minimally retained. For white Australians, time is linear, and the collective past is not recognised as a major part of individual psychological reality. Jewish culture, in contrast, has survived not simply by remembering both the blessings and the horrors of the past, but to some extent by experiencing the past and present simultaneously. In the Passover Seder, every Jew annually recounts the 5000-year-old story of our freedom from bondage in Egypt as if it happened yesterday. They do not talk of their ancestors having been slaves, they say 'we were slaves

in Egypt'. Boundaries with the past are more fluid, and communal history is transmitted as part of the individual self.

The differing Jewish and Australian approaches to history each have survival value, as well as disadvantages. Ignorance of the differences makes talking to each other about antisemitism problematic. For many progressive Byronites, conspiracy theories like the *Echo*'s view that Zionists control the US, are innocuous new ideas, that deserve their day in court. For Jews, they reflect a terrifying past.

The first documented conspiracy theory against Jews occurred in 1144, in Norwich, England. William, a Christian boy, was found dead in the woods, and locals accused the Jewish community of murdering him to use his blood in a ritual re-enactment of the crucifixion. Later, the story was recycled, and Jews of Norwich were murdered in the name of Jesus. Throughout Europe, this sequence of conspiracy theory followed by a pogrom has been regularly repeated. Immediately *after* the Second World War returning holocaust survivors were murdered by Polish villagers, following rumours that their former neighbours were hoping to reclaim their stolen homes.

For most Australians, antisemitism is equated with Nazi Germany, and has little to do with current or future reality. The Australian experience of the Turks at Gallipoli or the Japanese during the Second World War has been that past enmities are circumstantial, and unlikely to repeat themselves. Therefore, they are best forgotten if we wish to build a friendlier future. For Jews, antisemitism is an ever-present ongoing force, with a cyclical, repetitive quality. Forgetting about it is tantamount to suicide.

Hitler's use of the yellow star to ensure Jews were always vulnerable to attack had historical antecedents. In 1215, Pope Innocent III introduced a ruling that Jews had to wear a yellow patch at the front and back of their clothes. In 728 AD, the Islamic Pact of Umar obliged Jews to acknowledge subservience to Muslims. There were periods of relative ease, but Jews usually had to comply with laws of humiliation, like wearing a yellow belt to identify them as inferior.

Christian attacks on Jews have waxed and waned both in Roman Catholic and Protestant countries. During the inquisition, Jews were forced to convert to Catholicism, or die. The Spanish Jewish community was destroyed by Queen Isabella who orchestrated the burning at the stake of twenty thousand Jews for secretly practicing their religion. In May 2003 the Vatican announced its intention to canonise her as a saint.

Communication between Jewish and gentile Australians is further muddied by two factors. Firstly, the proportionately small numbers of Jews in Australia means that many Australian gentiles have not had a Jewish friend. Secondly, Australia has the world's second highest number of holocaust survivors per capita. Many holocaust survivors prefer invisibility as Jews; for fear that visibility will bring antisemitic violence. They avoid public identification as Jews, except in religious contexts. Consequently, Australians have little exposure to the everyday lives of ordinary Jews in all their diversity. However, the Jew as a symbol looms large in the Australian left-wing imagination—as a victim of the Nazis, and as an oppressor of Palestinians—thanks to Jewish visibility in literature, film and the mass media.

In left-wing symbology, the victim is the good guy who is hurt by the oppressor, but never initiates serious harm, and the oppressor is the bad guy who perpetrates violence but cannot be seriously hurt. While Jews exist as symbols, the past and the current living relationship between gentile Australians and Jews remains largely uncharted and unconscious. Australian dissociation from its own European history renders most Australians unaware that there is a 2000-year-old history of anti-Jewishness that has seeped into the English language, and the European and Christian heritages that inform current Australian discourse. One aspect of that antisemitism is the Australian difficulty in understanding how Jews can be a people and Jewishness both a culture and a religion. Henry VIII introduced the separation of church and state, so that he could divorce his wives. The concept spread to all Western culture. Separation of church and state was a primary force in the separation of religious, national and cultural identity experienced by White Australians. That separation is not part of Semitic cultures.

Australians want to impose on Jews the same gradient of identification that they have with Christianity. You are 'a Jew' if you practice the religion and only 'from Jewish background' if you don't. I eat pork, and sometimes doubt the value of organised religion, but none of this dilutes my Jewish identification. I was raised by devoutly atheist parents who are as unequivocally Jewish as I am.

White Australians are oblivious to their inheritance of non-Jewish privilege and its automatic invitations to membership of country, culture and Christianity. They so take for granted their own national belonging they are unable to differentiate it from legal citizenship. They are therefore blind to the impact of the historic denial of citizenship on Jews. Antisemitism kept Jews from embracing a safe identity both as Jews and as citizens of their geographic locale. In the early nineteenth century, the French and American revolutions gave Jews constitutional citizenship in those countries, but equality was not complete. In Paris, the reforms triggered conspiracy theories that Jews were plotting to take over the world. Emancipation spread through the rest of the Western world, but during the next 150 years, when social or economic circumstances triggered a new wave of antisemitism, Jews in Russia and Europe were often stripped of basic civil rights. Their descendents have inherited that insecurity.

Progressive Australians often attempt to free themselves from their history by a unilateral declaration of independence from the past. They feel no link with the antisemitism of their ancestors, and therefore do not understand that both they and I have been profoundly affected by it. Identifying the borders of one's identity is an essential aspect of self-determination, and for most groups, those borders are controversial. Any white proclamation on how Aboriginals should define themselves would rightly be viewed by progressive Australia as a racist intrusion. Yet, in its heart, left-wing Australia has difficulty extending that respect for self-determination to each individual Jew. Traditionally, birth or conversion, not belief, defines a Jew. Politically motivated attempts to force either religious or ethnic identification on individual Jews have recurred throughout history.

Nazi antisemitism defined a Jew as anyone with one Jewish grandparent, irrespective of religious belief, because genocide requires a racial definition. Hitler's repeat tutorial that citizenship was no protection from antisemitism was deeply absorbed by Australian Jews, who then embraced Zionism and an ethnic as well as religious definition of self.

In current left-wing anti-Zionist ideology, there is a push to deny Jews a cohesive ethnic identity, so as to dismantle any Jewish claim on Israel within the pre-1967 borders. If Jews are not a people, and only a religion, then Jewish claims to any part of Israel becomes a claim for a particular religion to control a country: an untenable position for most left-wing ideologies. Ironically, left-wing attempts to hijack definitions of Jewish identity indirectly support the religious right wing. Right-wing Jewish fundamentalism privileges religious practice in Jewish identity. Religious definition of self ensures greater religious practice, and therefore furthers rabbinical control of the community. The failure of current discourse to define the term 'antisemitism' introduced in 1879, further muddies the waters.

In Europe, some Jews were avoiding persecution by converting to Christianity. A German atheist and anarchist activist, Wilhelm Marr, furious that Jews were escaping the abuse he felt they deserved, founded 'The anti-Semitic League' to clarify that he was not just anti the Jewish religion, but anti the Jewish people. While the word 'Semite' includes Arabs as well as Jews, 'antisemite' did not, and was specifically directed against Jews. Many Jews keep the term to maintain historic continuity between the violence of the past and the present. Continuity of memory of racist violence is viewed as a tool in its dismantling. Like the terms 'racism' or 'sexism', 'antisemitism' covers a scale of prejudice. It can mean extreme hate and violence at one pole, and at the other pole it can also embrace subtle, unintentional insensitivity, devaluation, objectification or stereotyping of Jews.

An examination of contemporary discourse exposes a frequent confusion between appropriate critique of Israeli government policy and antisemitism. Sometimes appropriate critique is incorrectly viewed as antisemitism. Sometimes antisemitism is subtly disguised as left-wing critique. The conflation in both directions causes progressive Australians to feel irritated by what seems to them to be false cries of 'wolf'. They doubt that antisemitism is a major problem today.

Yet according to the Stephen Roth Institute Annual Report 2002/2003, there has been a 97 per cent increase in major violent antisemitic incidents in Europe since 1999.[3] Verbal antisemitism has become socially acceptable, and is commonplace everywhere: from polite dinner party repartee to soccer-match chants. In Australia, the 2002 Executive Council of Australian Jewry Report on Anti-Semitism notes that the previous year witnessed the highest number of antisemitic incidents since it began keeping records.

Many progressive Australians fear that taking antisemitism seriously means abandoning the suffering of Palestinians. They need to locate Jewish victimhood in the linear past so that the Jewish community can occupy the mutually exclusive category of oppressor.

There is a strangely uniform response when Byronites hear about antisemitic assaults on Jews. They look away, and unemotionally say, "It's because of Israel". When told about any other crime, most people respond with initial empathy and concern rather than with an attempt to explain it away. Left-wing Australia denies and diminishes anti-Jewish violence, because its real cause is unthinkable: flourishing antisemitism. European-based cultures want to think antisemitism was born with Hitler, and died with the holocaust. Arab cultures want to think Arab prejudice against Jews only started after 1948. Byron Bay residents believe that they are always the champions against prejudice, never the perpetrators.

Many progressive Australians fear that taking antisemitism seriously means abandoning the suffering of Palestinians. They need to locate Jewish victimhood in the linear past so that the Jewish community can occupy the mutually exclusive category of oppressor. Our cries for help with antisemitism are viewed as an unruly attempt to jump categorical ship. Denial of the antisemitism puts us firmly back in our oppressor place.

A close look at other common responses denying antisemitic violence further exposes subtle anti-Jewish prejudices, alive and well in the left-wing Australian psyche. "But what about racism against Muslims in Australia?" Housed in the closet of this rejoinder is a belief that Jews cause anti-Muslim abuse, or that we are churlishly demanding attention for antisemitism, wanting to steal the focus from our Arab neighbours. It is as if Australians experience themselves as referees in a football match, where the winning team is the one which has suffered the most racism. Unable to integrate its two stereotypes of Jews as oppressor and victim, the left-wing mind ricochets between them. When Jews are seen as the oppressor, they are viewed as invulnerable to hurt and the response to antisemitism is often: "You Jews can look after yourselves". Lurking here is the myth that Jews are all rich and powerful, and that will protect us from violence. When they are seen as victims the response is often "You are paranoid, and oversensitive".

Scratch the surface of your average Aussie and you will discover the view that a Jew complaining about Australian antisemitism is a wimpish drama queen, unable to take the rough and tumble of the 'harmless' teasing that constitutes initiation into the great Australian tradition of racist larrikinism. Jews found refuge from the evil German Nazis in hospitable, safe Australia, but now we need toughening up. In a striking similarity to what women who have been sexually abused hear, there is a suspicion that we are exaggerating the abuse to get attention. It is hard for Australians to grasp that for Jews there is no such thing as harmless abuse. Failure to condemn local racism inevitably emboldens those who enact it.

Initially, when Jews have attempted to identify subtle antisemitism in Australian left-wing rhetoric, a frequent response is "It can't be antisemitic because Chomsky [or some other Jew] has said it". Prejudice in a comment lies in its content, not in the characteristics of its speaker. Left-wing Australians have no trouble understanding that Pauline Hanson or Maggie Thatcher could be sexist. Yet the possibility that internalised antisemitism may lurk within left-wing heroes seems to be inconceivable. The problem with this gap in the progressive imagination is that when viewpoints of individual Jews are used to deny antisemitism, the Jewish community feels it cannot afford public diversity of Jewish opinion, and that it must present a false united front. The united front and the denial of antisemitism bounce futilely off each other, leaving both sides frustrated in a repetitive cycle now embedded into the social ecology. The cycle ultimately impoverishes the diversity of thought and freedom of expression in both the Jewish community, and the general left—a diversity that is essential for a sustainable, humane social ecology. Who begins the cycle is a chicken and egg argument. If either party

initiated a change in their own behaviour, the cycle would shift.

The lesson we have learnt from the physical environment is that no matter how urgently we want to protect the sugar cane, it is dangerous to introduce cane toads to eat the bugs that eat the cane. Studying the impact of each activist strategy on the social ecology of affected communities, with the same thoroughness as we afford studies of our physical environment, would support more constructive communication leading to more effective and sustainable transformation.

1. *Protocols of the learned Elders of Zion* is a nineteenth-century document, forged by the Russian secret police, purporting to be a Jewish plan to take over the world.
2. The term 'antisemitism' has frequently been misinterpreted to mean hostility to all Semites. Antisemitism is spelt without a hyphen to clarify its actual meaning as prejudice against Jews.
3. Stephen Roth Institute Annual Report 2002/2003, 28 April 2003. Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism, Tel Aviv University. The Stephen Roth Institute operates the world's largest library on anti-Semitism, and is rigorous in what it defines as antisemitic.

Dawn Cohen is a freelance writer with a background in Pyschology.

From this day forward

We sit amongst lovers secure together
watching the sea swallow the sun. Waves flow
forwards and are forced back like lovers

compromising as we compare ourselves
to other couples scattered across the sand

like rotting seaweed. Tomorrow we will
be displaced by fresh seaweed and new lovers
watching night conquer day comparing

bonds, see, they will say, we sit more closely
together, our hands entangled, theirs merely
touching, they have not laughed and we have

kissed longer and harder than Aphrodite
and Adonis but there is no justice
to declare a winner in this contest.

NATASHA LESTER

DISTORTION AND CARICATURE

Ikey Solomon in Bryce Courtenay's *The Potato Factory*

BRYCE COURTENAY'S *The Potato Factory* was first published in 1995[1] and there have been few complaints about it from the Jewish community. I find this surprising, as nobody could accuse Courtenay of being subtle:

> Even should a Jew breathe in wholly gentile air, when it comes out again it is converted to Jewish. To be a Jew is a condition like a dose of the colic, only for a gentile it isn't catching.

Set in the first half of the nineteenth century, in what Courtenay refers to as less enlightened times, *The Potato Factory* traces the lives of three transported felons—two of whom are of the 'Jewish persuasion'—from their homes in the east end of London to the penal colony of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania).

In his selection of characters Courtenay portrays an interesting study in contrasts. The two Jews, Ikey and Hannah Solomon, are "creatures of the dark hours"—dirty, furtive and predatory—who are so consumed by greed and hate that they are unable to form meaningful relationships or make a go of it in the new colony. Whereas the gentile, Mary Abacus, possesses a "naturally sunny disposition": despite coming from a background that would have floored anyone else (consumptive mother, drunken father, enforced prostitution, acid-scarred face, and so on), she manages to make a success of her life in Van Diemen's Land, founding Cascade Brewery and teaching orphans to read.

But this brief summary does not do justice to *The Potato Factory*'s wonderfully complex plot nor convey Courtenay's extraordinary use of language. For example, Ikey Solomon is referred to as "the little Semite" and a "rapacious and vile member of the Christ-killing race"; while Hannah is given the evocative line: "Ya fucked her, didn't ya? Ya fucked that 'shiksa' bitch!"[2]

In making Ikey and Hannah Solomon grotesque figures of fun, Courtenay is treading dangerous ground, as they are not fictitious characters. They really existed. What is more, many of their descendants still live in Australia. Mary Abacus, on the other hand, is fictitious. No such person ever existed, or, I would argue, could possibly have existed. For the record, Cascade Brewery was founded by Peter Degraves, a free settler, in 1831.

I don't have a problem with Mary Abacus being fictitious. *The Potato Factory* is described, if somewhat discreetly in the book's acknowledgements, as "good historical fiction", defined by Courtenay as "fact that went undiscovered at the time it happened". I interpret this to mean that good historical fiction is about adding plausible meat to the dry bones of recorded fact. "I am extending my mind all the time," Courtenay reportedly said in *Time* magazine (12 February 1996), "'What if' is the most important thing in my life." What if, indeed!

In fact, not a great deal of 'what if' is necessary: despite having been born more than two hundred years ago in the slums of London, Ikey Solomon is remarkably well-documented. I mention this because Courtenay is at pains to point out the enormous amount of research that went into the writing of *The Potato Factory*. In an interview for the *Jewish News* (8 December 1995) he is quoted as saying:

In making Ikey and Hannah Solomon grotesque figures of fun, Courtenay is treading dangerous ground, as they are not fictitious characters. They really existed. Many of their descendants still live in Australia.

> It took me twenty years to learn Ikey Solomon. I know him backwards and forwards . . . By and large I've made him the character he was. I've been very careful and thorough. I had two researchers in Australia and one in England working full time for two years to uncover the world of Ikey Solomon.

An interview for the *Canberra Times* (11 November 1995) reports Courtenay as saying much the same thing:

> *The historical details in* The Potato Factory *are immaculate* . . . They are the outcome of relentless hours of digging and research, assisted by three full-time researchers in Tasmania . . . You cannot write things into a century that don't exist and you cannot eliminate things that are critical to it . . . That would be cheating. Intellectual deceit.

And again, a little further into the interview: "He considers what he has done to be serious biographical study. *He has invented very little about Ikey himself*" [my emphasis]. Similarly, in a radio interview with Bob Hughes on 2BL (12 November 1995), Courtenay emphasises that he had three researchers working almost full-time for around two years, and that he personally searched through records in Tasmania and in the British Museum's Reading Room. And if, by some remote chance, you should find *The Potato Factory* just a tad anti-Semitic, Courtenay has a riposte. In the preface he writes:

> In these more enlightened times this book may be regarded as virulently anti-Semitic; in the terms of the time in which it is written, it is an accurate, albeit mild account of the prevailing attitudes to the Jews of England. These were dark times, bleak times, hard times, times where a poor man's life was regarded as less valuable than that of a pig, a poor Jew's far less valuable even than that.

But this justification is sanctimonious cant. Far from perfect, this period was for the Jews of England one of growing religious tolerance. And rather than having been treated harshly, all the available evidence strongly suggests that as a convict in Van Diemen's Land, Ikey was treated with considerable leniency, not just by the standard of the day but even by modern standards. Contrary to what Courtenay has written in *The Potato Factory* there is simply no evidence that Ikey was ever put to hard labour, flogged, or became a flagellator. Instead, he appears to have served out his time in the relatively cushy position of a convict clerk or prison orderly.

Nor should we take seriously Courtenay's claim that he has invented very little about Ikey Solomon. The crude Jewish caricature that bears his name in *The Potato Factory* has little in common with the complex personality that is the documented Ikey Solomon. An outline of Ikey's life, and of Courtenay's depiction, follows. It will of necessity be pared to the bone, as there is little that Courtenay and I agree upon.

IKEY (ISAAC) SOLOMON was born in the east end of London in or around 1785, somewhere within the vicinity of Petticoat Lane, one of the very poorest parts of London. As was quite common for that time and place, Ikey began his working life at about the age of 8, hawking fruit or other small items around the neighbourhood streets where he quickly fell into the company of gamesters, prostitutes, prigs (thieves) and such like characters. By 10 he is described as a pickpocket, though accounts differ as to his success. According to one, he did not have the right temperament for thieving, and was far better at organising and planning robberies than he was in carrying them out. It was as a minor criminal that Ikey spent his teenage and young adult years.

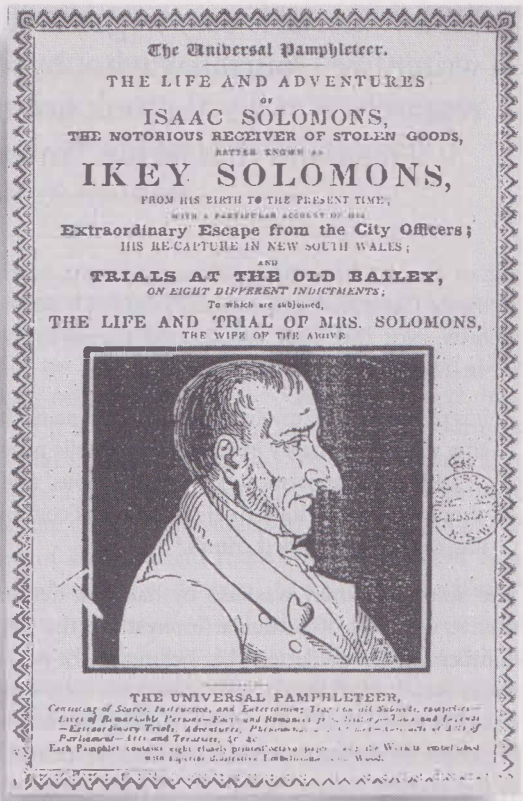
On 7 January 1807 he married Hannah Julian in the Great Synagogue, Duke's Place, London. Their first child, John, was born the following year and a second son, Moses, about two years later. Shortly after, Ikey was found guilty of "feloniously stealing" and imprisoned for six years in one of His

Majesty's hulks. After his release he returned to London and set up business as a buyer and seller of stolen goods. By the mid 1820s Ikey was one of the biggest receivers in London, or to use the vernacular of the period, 'top of the tree'.[3]

This merry life, however, came to an end on 23 April 1827 when he was arrested and placed in Newgate Gaol. But a month later Ikey escaped from custody. While this day is the most documented day of Ikey's life there is very little information on what he did next. All that can now be said for certain is that by about August 1827 he had reached New York and freedom.

It goes without saying that the escape out of England of so notorious a criminal did not pass unnoticed and, unfortunately, his family back in London suffered the consequences. On 20 September 1827 Ikey's wife, Hannah, was found guilty of receiving and sentenced to fourteen years' transportation. My interpretation of the evidence suggests that, for all sorts of complicated reasons, Hannah had been framed and in all probability was found guilty of a crime she did not commit.[4] Unlike Courtenay, I see Hannah as a tragic figure. She was by now the mother of six children, four of whom were under the age of 10. In February 1828, accompanied by her four youngest children, Hannah sailed for Van Diemen's Land on the transport ship *Mermaid*. Her two oldest sons, John, now about 20, and Moses, about 18, also sailed for Australia but independently as 'gentlemen to settle'. The *Mermaid* reached Hobart in June 1828.

Ikey was later to claim that he was in New York when he "learned from the newspapers" that his wife had been transported and, seemingly on the strength of this, made up his mind that he would sail to Hobart to be with her. As Hobart was part of a British penal colony this was, for a man in his position, a reckless decision. He arrived in October 1828 and, being a well-known London receiver, was recognised by the convicts almost the moment he stepped ashore. According to one account, as he walked along the 'straggling streets' of Hobart Town, the convicts called out to him: "Oh Ikey my boy—my boy, how are you? . . . what a cursed lucky fellow you have been!" Yet it was only after much legal wrangling that he was forcibly returned to London for trial at the Old Bailey. His trial, which took place in June 1830, caused a sensation and was extensively reported in *The Times*. As there are strong


The Universal Pamphleteer.

THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES

OF

ISAAC SOLOMONS,

THE NOTORIOUS RECEIVER OF STOLEN GOODS,

BETTER KNOWN AS

IKEY SOLOMONS,

FROM HIS BIRTH TO THE PRESENT TIME;

WITH A PARTICULAR ACCOUNT OF HIS

Extraordinary Escape from the City Officers;

HIS RE-CAPTURE IN NEW SOUTH WALES;

AND

TRIALS AT THE OLD BAILEY,

ON EIGHT DIFFERENT INDICTMENTS;

To which are subjoined,

THE LIFE AND TRIAL OF MRS. SOLOMONS,

THE WIFE OF THE ABOVE.

THE UNIVERSAL PAMPHLETEER,

similarities between it and Fagin's trial, it is possible that the young Charles Dickens attended it and used it as the basis for the trial scene in *Oliver Twist*.

Unlike Fagin, Ikey was not hanged. He was found guilty of receiving and thieving and transported back to Van Diemen's Land. He spent time in Richmond Gaol and at Port Arthur and in 1835 was finally permitted to live with his family. But by then the family had been largely apart for eight years and the reunion was not a success. After a month Ikey and Hannah agreed to separate. This separation seems not to have been permanent as there is a letter dated 2 March 1843[5] in which Ikey claims that he was now living with his wife and had been for some time. Ikey died in Hobart in 1850. Hannah moved to Melbourne where she died in 1877 at the age of 87.

It is clear even in this brief outline that Ikey Solomon had the sort of extreme personality that caused people to reach for their pens, and it is largely because of this that he is so well-documented. This documentation consists of more than sixty newspaper reports from the *Times* (London) and the various Vandiemonian newspapers; three contemporary pamphlets (two of which contain a likeness or draw-

All this material is easy to get hold of. It would be almost impossible for a writer like Courtenay who, by his own admission, had three full-time researchers at his disposal, not to be aware of it . . . bearing in mind his claim that he has "invented very little about Ikey". . .

ing of Ikey); chapters in various editions of the *Newgate Calendar*; and his and Hannah's convict records. Not that Ikey appreciated the attention, for in 1830 he was to complain:

> it is painful for me to observe my injured name day after day unnecessarily inserted in the public papers . . . under the appelation [sic] of 'notorious' as if I were a hardened Murder[er] or capable of committing the most hardened crimes.[6]

The Solomon family was also by nature a demonstrative one and of particular interest are the large number of personal letters that belong to the period when Ikey and Hannah were convicts. Ikey, especially, seems to have had a need to justify his actions to people in authority whom he seems to have held in the highest regard. Seven of his letters have survived. They cover a period of fourteen and a half years from 18 December 1828 to 2 March 1843.

All this material is relatively easy to get hold of: the *Times* is on microfilm in most major libraries; the three pamphlets are in the Mitchell Library, Sydney; and the Vandiemonian material is held in the Archives Office of Tasmania, Hobart.[7] So it would be almost impossible for a writer like Courtenay who, by his own admission, had three full-time researchers at his disposal, not to be aware of it. So, bearing in mind Courtenay's assurances that he has "invented very little about Ikey" and that "the historical details in *The Potato Factory* are immaculate", I will compare Courtenay's Ikey Solomon with the documented Ikey Solomon.

THE POTATO FACTORY is a very thick book. My copy runs for 666 pages, and Ikey and Hannah Solomon are consistently portrayed as physically repulsive and morally corrupt. It is hard to imagine any book in English, this side of the Holocaust, in which Jews are depicted in such a derogatory manner. Courtenay drags out all the old Jewish clichés and stereotypes. Ikey and Hannah are avaricious, miserly and ugly. It opens with a description of Ikey Solomon:

> Ikey Solomon was so entirely a Londoner that he was a human part of the great metropolis, a jigsawed brick that fitted into no other place. He was mixed into the mortar, an ingredient in the slime and smutch of its rat-infested dockside hovels and verminous netherkens.

With these two opening lines Courtenay makes his position quite clear. In his view Ikey Solomon belongs to the world of rats and vermin. A theme which is repeated endlessly throughout the book so that even the dimmest reader cannot fail to get the message—think Ikey, think vermin!:

> Ikey Solomon was not a man to love, there was too much the natural cockroach about him . . . Ikey knew with intimacy this great rookery of St Giles and many others, and was as much at home in them as the rats scurrying ahead of him . . . Ikey was not repulsed by the stench or the rats. Rats were . . . an everyday occurrence in Ikey's life.

In keeping with the rodent theme, Ikey is further described as dirty and smelly, nocturnal and furtive:

> His evening meal over, Ikey picked his teeth with a long dirty fingernail . . . Ikey would be out and about after midnight, sniffing for business . . . he cared nothing for her opinion of his physical stature or the rank, ripe cheesy odour which came from his tiny body . . . Ikey's mode of travel through the rookeries was nocturnal and shadowy . . . a creature of the dark hours, [Ikey] felt most vulnerable when exposed to the brightness of sun-pierced light.

He is also "tiny . . . [and] diminutive", a "hideous little man", a "gormless lump", "scrawny" with "skinny white thighs", "puny, with narrow slopping shoulders and delicate arms", a "mangy bastard", "as thin as a rake and plagued by rheumatism", and, being rodent-like, has a "long nose . . . [and] large hairy ears".

Courtenay insists on making Ikey's personality as repulsive as his appearance. He is "greedy, se-

Courtenay has ignored the vast bulk of documented material, and instead invented a grotesque Jewish caricature that has nothing in common with the documented Ikey Solomon. It is hard to imagine any book this side of the Holocaust, in which Jews are depicted in such a derogatory manner.

cretive, a coward, and moreover he made no advances of a sexual nature during his pathetic attempt at courtship" . . . "exceedingly mean . . . could flatter a penny out of a pauper's hand" . . . "a coward, a cheat, a liar and, of course, a notorious thief" . . . [and] "a loathsome father". And, of course, being a Jewish caricature Ikey loves money:

> Greed was the only emotion that Ikey trusted in himself as well as in others . . . at the mention of money, there was no hesitation from Ikey . . . Ikey breathed a huge sigh of relief, he felt quite weak at the knees at the thought of losing money.

And so on, and so on, and so on.

Yet Ikey's appearance is well-documented. There are the two likenesses of him; a detailed physical description of him on a reward poster; statements from four people who describe his appearance under oath; and, best of all, a magnificent portrait of his son, John, in the Jewish Museum of Australia, Melbourne, and a witness who stated under oath that John "strongly resemble[d] his father". All these descriptions tally. And surprise, surprise, Ikey looked nothing at all like Courtenay's description of him.

Rather than being tiny, diminutive, and puny, his reward poster gives his height as "five feet nine inches" (175 cm) which, by the standard of the day, was tall, and tall with dark hair is how his contemporaries describe him: "Ikey Solomon was a tall man, stooped in walking—dark hair and eyes, thin long countenance—long nose rather hooked I know him well by sight" (John Hodsoll); "Ikey Solomon was a tall man, thin visage, dark hair and eyes, and a sharp hooked nose" (William Allensby); "he is a tall man, dark features and pale face, longish nose, stoops a little" (William Rust); "a tall, thin, dark man" (Ambrose Boyd).[8]

Ikey was not of a dirty or miserly appearance. The two drawings show him to be well-groomed and clean-shaven with short, well-brushed hair, neatly trimmed sideboards, and to be wearing a fashionable white cravat and tailored jacket with buttons. Nor am I aware of any information regarding Ikey's body odour. There is no evidence to suggest this.

It is also difficult to understand why Courtenay should insist on portraying Ikey as a coward. Ikey escaped from Newgate Gaol in broad daylight, and despite the alert that followed, still managed to flee out of England and reach New York. From New York he sailed to Hobart. As he had been charged with a number of capital offences, by making for a British penal colony he was, quite literally, risking his neck. Yet, unlike that great icon of gameness, Ned Kelly, Ikey achieved all this without guns, armour or supporting henchmen. Hardly the behaviour of a coward.

Having gained his freedom why did Ikey risk it by sailing to Hobart? According to Courtenay it was for reasons of greed and hate. Ikey and Hannah owned a safe that contained "a vast amount of paper money . . . gold . . . and several bags of precious stones worth a king's ransom". This safe, which was still in London, had a combination lock. Ikey knew half the combination and Hannah the other half. And it was in order to get Hannah's half of the combination that Ikey came to Hobart. Hannah, however, was having none of his: "You bastard! Ya want me fuckin' numbers to give to that goyim slut, don't ya? That fuckin' dog's breath was gunna be the one to knap the ding!"

The problem with Courtenay's scenario, and it is a major problem, is that no such safes existed in Ikey's day. Safes with combination locks did not come into existence till the early 1860s; that is, ten years after Ikey had died and more than thirty years after his arrival in Van Diemen's Land. Is it just a coincidence that Courtenay's Jewish characters are consumed with greed and hate while the fictitious gentile, Mary Abacus, gushes with charity and goodness; or does Courtenay really believe that Jews are incapable of love? For the real and well-documented

reason Ikey came to Hobart has nothing to do with greed or hate, but their opposites.

Two months after his arrival in the colony Ikey sent a letter to 'His Excellency', the lieutenant-governor of Van Diemen's Land, George Arthur, and in this letter he gives his reason for sailing to Hobart as:

> having read with deep concern from the English papers whilst in America of the unfortunate situation of [my] wife, Ann Solomon, now a Prisoner of the Crown, within this Colony, [I] immediately proceeded from America direct to this place solely from those natural causes, feelings and affections, unnecessary [I] trust here to explain to your Excellency.[9]

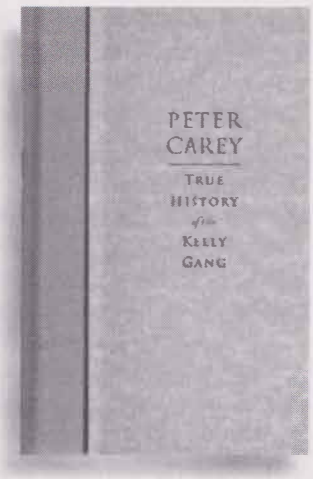
In a similar vein, Ambrose Boyd, the Hobart Police Office's Chief Clerk, stated under oath that Ikey had confided: "I am determined to brave all for the sake of my dear wife and children—I don't care what may happen".[10] And in 1830, when he was once again back in Newgate Gaol, Ikey wrote: "I have been blamed by several persons for adopting such a course but my reason for leaving America for Hobart Town was solely to gain the society of an affectionate wife".[11] Despite the many hardships he was subsequently to endure, he never gave any other reason.

There is not enough space in an article of this size to list all the inconsistencies that lie in *The Potato Factory*. Hopefully, however, these few examples are enough to suggest that Courtenay's claim of having "invented little about Ikey" and that "the historical details in *The Potato Factory* are immaculate" cannot, in any way, be sustained. They suggest that Courtenay has distorted and ignored the vast bulk of documented material on Ikey Solomon, and created a grotesque Jewish caricature that has nothing in common with the complex personality that is the documented Ikey Solomon.

1. All the references to *The Potato Factory* in this article are from the William Heinemann Australia (1995) edition.
2. Other gems include Courtenay's lovely use of the word 'nigger' as in "teach the nigger a lesson" (p.533), "he was to be pitted against a fifteen-year-old nigger mute" (p.658), and "nigger brat" (p.644). For further examples along these lines see pages 546, 660, 661. And while on the subject of language *The Potato Factory* contains some spectacular descriptions of prostitution—aka "the world's oldest profession" (p.523), "a bit o' love and cuddlin'" (p.523) and "sixpenny quick times" (p.556); plus an astonishing number of references to mammary glands—breasts, bosoms, titties etc.
3. Ikey's occupation changes quite considerably in *The Potato Factory*. To begin with he is described as a receiver: "Ikey Solomon was the worst kind of villain, though . . . he passed himself off as a small-time jeweller . . . In reality he was a fence, a most notorious receiver of stolen goods . . . and referred to . . . in awed and reverent tones as the Prince of Fences." Yet Ikey actually does very little receiving in *The Potato Factory* and by page 89 his occupation is described more fully as "fencin', fuckin' and forgery". While Courtenay devotes pages and pages to the latter two activities there is in reality very little evidence to support Courtenay's claim that Ikey was heavily involved in prostitution and/or forgery. Like most successful people Ikey concentrated on what he was good at, which in his case was the buying and selling of stolen property. At the time of his arrest in 1827 he was reputed to be worth thirty thousand pounds!
4. This is certainly Ikey's view for in 1830, when he was again in Newgate Gaol , he wrote: "If I had been guilty of any crime would I not have suffered even death rather than the consequences of my guilt should have devolved upon the head of an innocent, artless, and unoffending wife?—is it natural to suppose that I should ever for a moment suspect that my wife would have been made the victim of the prejudice which existed against me? Such an idea never occurred to me—but alas! It has happened." From Isaac Solomon's letter to the Secretary of State for the Home Department, 1830 (exact date not given). Cited in John J. Tobias, *Prince of Fences, The Life and Crimes of Ikey Solomons*, Vallentine, Mitchell, London, 1974, pp. 159–164.
5. CSO 22/68/1507, Archives Office of Tasmania (AOT).
6. Letter 1830, see endnote 4.
7. Moses Hebron, *The Life and Exploits of Ikey Solomons, Swindler, Forger, Fencer, and Brothel Keeper*; Edward Duncombe (London), undated, but probably written in 1828; Anon. *Adventures, Memoirs, Former Trial, Transportation & Escapes of the Notorious Fence and Receiver of Stolen Goods, Isaac Solomons, with the Apprehension, Trial and Subsequent Transportation of Mrs Solomons*. Joseph Knight (London), 1829; Anon, *The Life and Adventures of Isaac Solomons, the Notorious Receiver of Stolen Goods . . . etc.* The Universal Pamphleteer (London?), undated, but probably 1830; Camden Pelham, *The Chronicles of Crime or the New, Newgate Calendar*, Vol. II, Thomas Tegg (London), 1841. Arthur Griffiths, *The Chronicles of Newgate*, Chapman and Hall (London), 1884. Material held in Archives Office of Tasmania, Hobart: Ikey (Isaac) Solomon; CSO 1/430/9642, CSO 1/342/7861, CSO 1/820/17494, CSO 22/68/1507. Hannah Solomon; CSO 1/354/8078.
8. CSO 1/354/8078, AOT.
9. Dated 18 December 1828, CSO 1/354/8078, AOT.
10. Deposition of Ambrose Boyd, dated 10 November 1829, CSO 1/354/8078, AOT.
11. Letter 1830, see endnote 4.

Judith Sackville-O'Donnell's interest in Jewish convict history stems from the fact that her family has lived in Australia since the 1830s. Their original name was Solomon, hence her interest in Ikey Solomon. Her The First Fagin—the true story of Ikey Solomon *was published by Acland Press in 2002.*

literature | **LAURIE CLANCY**



SELECTIVE HISTORY OF THE KELLY GANG

Peter Carey's Ned Kelly

WHY NED KELLY? might be the first thought of someone picking up Peter Carey's novel.[1] Hasn't Kelly country been worn almost to death? Can yet another treatment manage to say something about it? And yet the pervasiveness and durability of the myth suggests it can't be solely the product of fortuitous social conditions. The myth of Kelly started early: the announcement of his death sentence prompted a petition for clemency which attracted no fewer than 32,000 signatures—just over 10 per cent of Victoria's then population of 300,000. There is no sign that it has abated yet, and Carey's novel is only one of several recent attempts to perpetuate it.

That it is an impressive one is beyond question. Carey has brought off a quite brilliant tour de force in capturing and then sustaining over nearly four hundred pages a language which is idiomatic, at times grimly realistic, at others lyrical and at others comic. It is a remarkable performance. There is nothing really like it in Australian literature, except perhaps Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms*, and for predecessors one turns more to American modes of idiomatic mastery such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Whatever its origins, the novel is extremely consistent in maintaining a readable, lively, convincing brand of vernacular language that is also deceptively artful. Carey manages to insinuate several motifs through Kelly's apparently ingenuous narrative. For instance, there are carefully constructed motifs of footwear and of cross-dressing, to name only those, woven into the narrative. Ned's language is highly imagistic. Although the vocabulary of the narrator is limited, and the punctuation usually eccentric, the range of effects is considerable and varied. Carey has succeeded thoroughly in his stated aim of giving access to the voices of those who are not often heard.

Ned left school very early and his education would have been extremely limited, but Carey's version of him shows an intense interest in reading and writing; at various stages he is shown as reading Shakespeare and the Bible, as well as *Lorna Doone*, the theme of which, not coincidentally, has striking similarities to his own story. On several occasions he attempts quite lengthy and sustained epistles of self-justification. One of the novel's later themes is the very modern one—resonating from the Gulf War through the incident of the *Tampa* to the invasion of Iraq—of the success of authorities in preventing undesirable information or viewpoints from reaching the audience for which they were intended.

The range of effects of Carey's prose is quite astonishing. There are images of intense pathos, like the one of Jem outside the jail in which his father is incarcerated: "At 1st we would shout out to him but never got any answer and finally we all give excepting Jem who runs his hands along the frost cold walls patting the prison like a dog". The unself-consciously comic use of the vernacular comes out in images such as that of "a man in a 3 pce. Suit doing great damage to a plate of eggs and bacon". Ned's language is highly sensuous and, not surprisingly, draws its images from the natural world around him. Sentenced to death, Uncle James is "as pitiful a creature as a plucked cockatoo".

There are also resiliently comic images of a broader kind: "And that were the great virtue of

Harry Power for he didn't give a tinker's fart if we seeded St John's Wort or tried to cross a bush rat with a wallaby." Sometimes the casual details are the most telling, as in that of Maggie "playing with a doll made from a thigh bone wrapped up in a bit of gingham cloth". One of Carey's most impressive achievements is how convincingly he sustains Ned's vernacular speech, only rarely lapsing into a slightly self-conscious literary mode, or putting words into Ned's mouth which sound uncomfortable. An exception is the rather sententious, "As the poor pay fealty to the bushranger thus the bushranger pays fealty to the poor." Fealty? It doesn't sound like a Kelly word.

Early in the novel the imagery seems to portray him (or Ned portrays himself) as a victim: "I were a rabbit in his snare but did not know it yet", and "I were a plump witchetty grub beneath bark not knowing that the kookaburra exists unable to imagine that fierce beak or the punishment in that wild and angry eye". Later, however, as he adopts the life of a bushranger, the images became ones of empowerment, even though Ned knows he is doomed.

FOR SOME YEARS now I have been puzzled by the remorseless insistence with which our contemporary writers have returned to Australia's past history to explore their concerns. Peter Carey in his last three novels, David Malouf almost all the time, Tom Keneally, Liam Davison, Kate Grenville, Roger McDonald—many of our leading novelists plunder the past over and over again in search of contemporary meanings. But as Andrew Dowling notes in his review of the novel in *Heat* the use of the past is a two-edged sword:

> Aesthetically, history offers interesting pegs on which an author can hang a story. But politically, historical fiction also tries to give an authoritative voice and a 'true history' to the victims, the downtrodden, the forgotten of the past. There is, therefore, a contradiction between using history to create fiction and using fiction to reveal the 'truth' about history.[2]

It is a contradiction this novel never quite resolves.

There is a second, related question. Why, when they write about the past do so many novelists use real historical figures? Malouf writes about Ovid (pretty safely given the amount of time that has passed). But why does John Stephenson write the *Optimist* specifically about Christopher Brennan rather than merely a distinguished Irish-Australian poet at the turn of the last century? Or Anne Brooksbank speculate on an affair between Mary Gilmour and Henry Lawson (whose relatives are still alive)? Or Barbara Ker Wilson imagine that two undocumented years in the life of Jane Austen were taken up with her visit to Australia? It's hard not to suspect that there's an element of titillation involved; a certain frisson in speculating about real identities and giving them lives they never had.

If you do use real people and real names, what kind of obligation do you have to historical truth? There is a sense of conscious historicity in the mode of Carey's novel. By that I mean he has constructed the novel with all the trappings of historical verisimilitude. The opening is a documented report of Kelly's death taken from a handwritten account in the Melbourne Public Library and the novel is full of apparently legitimate historical sources. Here, as elsewhere, the question raises itself of how far and when, if at all, Carey is citing historical documents verbatim and when he is inventing or imagining details.

The problems begin as early as the title. Carey's dropping of the definite article and the claim to generic completeness are no doubt ironic in part; he is mocking the notion that there can be one definitive 'truth' of the Kelly history. But it is also ambiguous, since it is followed by the narrator's fierce claim to his unseen daughter in the very first sentence of the novel: "this history is for you and will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false".

What kind of truth is it? We are told that the central figure in the passage—the schoolteacher Curnow who was ultimately responsible for the defeat of the Kelly gang at Glenrowan by escaping to warn the police of the impending ambush—also possesses thirteen parcels of Ned's own account of his life and this comprises the bulk of the novel—thirteen parcels, rather than chapters, written by the outlaw before the final siege in order to explain and defend his actions to his daughter. No such documents exist and the 'true' history of the title is an invented, imagined one.

Jane Rogers speaks in her review of Carey's "uncanny faithfulness to the facts" but then goes on to qualify this immediately by saying:

> The novelist's tricks of invention are limited to three. The first is the conceit that Kelly has, in the last two

years of his life, written an account of himself for his (unseen) daughter, and that this account has been preserved as "13 parcels of stained and dog-eared papers, everyone of them in Ned Kelly's distinctive hand", which form the novel itself. The second is the love affair with Mary Hearn, who bears him a daughter. The third is the voice Carey gives to Ned. Which is where the magic begins.

Ned's voice is the book and it is what makes the book wonderful. It is utterly convincing and continually surprising, creating new pleasures on every page. It is simple, direct, colloquial, humorous, respectfully prudish . . . and shot through with poetry.[3]

I would agree with the second paragraph but nevertheless I think it's worth going back to look at the first part of the quotation. Only three tricks of invention, perhaps, but they're pretty major ones. Kelly is given a girlfriend where all the evidence suggests that he was far too devoted to his mother to be interested in other women. And there are other reservations. We are told that all the parcels are in "Ned Kelly's distinctive hand", yet in Parcel 8 "Pages describing the shooting of Constable Fitzpatrick are much revised by a second hand reliably presumed to be that of Joe Byrne".

It is given to Joe to write the description of Ned's epic fight with Wild Wright, presumably because Ned can hardly trumpet his own virtues. A long speech is given to Mary concerning the custom of cross-dressing. The parcels are intermingled with newspaper accounts of the activities of Ned and the gang and these are sometimes overwritten by his mother's corrections. The schoolteacher Curnow was also very eager to go to work on them. And at the end Ned's narrative gives way to an omniscient voice that describes his ending, presumably because, as Mary would have pointed out, he could not comment on his own execution. There is a sense in which the parcels are less a discrete historical document guaranteed of authenticity than a palimpsest on which a number of others have already made etchings.

But even at the local level of factual interpretation there are questions to be asked. In a crucial event that takes place early in the novel Ned steals and butchers a heifer but the police refuse to believe he was responsible and take in his father. Kelly senior's dread of having to return to jail is such that it virtually destroys him and he dies not long afterwards, when the boy himself is only 12. In actual fact it was Kelly senior who took the beast but it suits Carey's narrative purposes to make it the son and reinforce the Oedipal element in Ned's relationships with his parents, a fact which Carey himself specifically mentions in an interview.

Carey has Ned shoot a policeman in the hand to defend his family, thus demonstrating not only his humanity but his prowess with a gun. Yet Carey admitted in an interview that historically it is not clear whether this was what happened or whether the policeman engaged in self-mutilation. Other elements are similarly clouded. The role of Curnow is changed considerably at the end. And then, what are we to make of the banshee? Or the rat catcher? Or the wraith-like boy who is such a magnificent horseman but who seems not of this planet? Or the phenomenon by which baby George's eyes change from the blue of his father, whom Ned detested, to brown? All of these seem to me to owe less to the myth of Ned Kelly than to the conventions of the genre of magic realism.

Perhaps the issue is not important. As Robert Edric points out in his review of the novel:

> We are not seriously expected to believe that this is a transcript of Kelly's own work; we are not so easily fooled by the archive source cited; we are not so swiftly seduced by the atrocious punctuation in a narrative otherwise so finely tuned, plotted and controlled.
>
> What Carey demands of us is what he has been demanding for twenty years: that we trust the narrator of the tale as much as the tale being told, and that we don't unduly concern ourselves as readers with the mode of its telling.[4]

On the face of it this seems fair enough. It is, after all, a 'performance', a brilliant tour de force by an author who has written a stunningly compelling and suspenseful narrative in highly imaginative and original prose. And Ned himself lends weight to this theory. Increasingly throughout the novel he sees himself to some extent as a performer or even as a playwright. Of the troopers Hare and Nicolson he says that though they "thought themselves famous as the capturers of Harry Power they never imagined they would be captives in a drama devised by me". And again, "We could look down from the Warby Ranges and see the plumes of dust rising off the plains and know the police was actors in a drama writ by me".

BUT THE PROBLEMS don't end there. Kelly is not, after all, an imagined figure like Oscar and Lucinda, or at least not wholly so; he has a historical reality. Any account of him is an historical interpretation to a certain extent, the problematic nature of truth notwithstanding. As the American reviews of the novel demonstrate, many readers will put the book down with the belief that they now know the truth about Ned Kelly—just as many American teenagers have grown up thinking that Oliver Stone's film *JFK* is the definitive account of Kennedy's assassination.

Carey himself recognises this and offers two defences or explanations. The first, to which I'll return later, is that the Jerilderie letter was a major factor in his deciding on the argot in which the novel could be written. The second is to call upon the precedent of William Faulkner. In an interview Carey said:

> Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* had an immense effect on me, and most of my novels bear the burn marks of this experience, those short chapters with their conflicting points of view, truth expressed by multiple perspectives.[5]

This is the modernist and postmodernist method of recognising the impossibility of achieving the kind of certainty that Victorian novelists took for granted. Offer a number of perspectives and allow the reader to sort them out or to eventually arrive at a truth that is both a composite and a selection of them. Faulkner pioneered this method in *As I Lay Dying* (and even more so in *The Sound and the Fury*).

But Carey's method is not like this. The corrections and additions to what is known of the facts are made not merely for dramatic convenience but to offer *a particular interpretation* of the Kelly myth; they serve not to offer a challenge to Ned's self-extenuating view of his own behaviour, but to endorse it. Joe Byrne describes the fight with Wild Wright in terms that extol Ned's courage and skill. Both Mary Hearn and Ned himself write their emendations on the newspaper reports in order to stress the bias of those reports against Ned. He did not have a great many drinks but only two. He has not been drinking, as the bank teller Lyving asserts: "He were stone cold sober of course he were acting the part". His threats to kill his hostages are not to be taken seriously, even if the hostages themselves were terrified: "I would never kill them but it were essential they obey".

In truth, the portrait of Ned is an almost totally idealistic one; the havoc he created, the novel argues, is entirely forced upon him. Carey even compares him, not to Jesse James, as several American reviewers did, but in the role he plays in the Australian psyche to Thomas Jefferson!

This assumption that Carey's almost unequivocal view of Kelly was correct was accepted almost entirely by American reviewers. One of them even criticised the naivety of some Australian readers:

> Carey's novel is a thoroughly researched portrait, but it's also a corrective to the popular conception—even among some Australians—of Kelly as a thug, thief, and murderer. The Ned Kelly of this account is nothing less than a folk hero and freedom fighter, a defiant exemplar of Irish-Australian cussedness in the face of colonial oppression.[6]

So now Australians are being told what to think about their own icons by American critics.

There doesn't seem much room for more qualified opinions. Only Janet Maslin has some reservations, noting without comment that: "Peter Ryan, the English-born police commissioner of New South Wales, has described Australia's enduring Kellymania as 'the black heart of nothingness that sits at the heart of the Australian character'."[7]

The novel's tendency to idealise Ned is increased by his larger than life qualities. He is physically impressive once he has grown to manhood ("He was very handsome, over six foot tall, built in proportion") and is attractive to women, even some of his captives like Mrs Scott. He is portrayed as a brilliant horseman yet the *Oxford Companion to Australian History* says that "He was only a fair bushman and horseman; he knew the ranges better than the police, that was all".[8] His prowess with a gun has already been mentioned. He can fell five trees in a day.

Finally, Carey loads the scales in his favour in one more way by the absoluteness with which he sets up his various dichotomies: Irish/English, selector/squatter, helpless poor/almost everyone in authority, including the police, magistrates, newspaper editorialists, judges, teachers and squatters. There is almost literally no-one on the power side of the equation who behaves decently, and quite a few even on Ned's side who help betray him.

The police trick him into jail and when they can't capture him indiscriminately arrest his family, friends

and acquaintances. There is a long list of brutal and predatory police in the novel—Sergeant O'Neil, Sergeant Whelan, Constable Alexander Fitzpatrick, Constable Hall, Constable Flood, Constable Farrell. Magistrates hand out heavy sentences without questioning the police evidence. Judge Barry is portrayed as a power-crazed sadist who horrifies even the victims of a man he sentences to death for burning down the Kelly house. He is like a creature out of a gothic novel: "When he come to the bench I never knew he would be my enemy for life I seen his wig and his bright red robes and he were a Cardinal to my eyes his skin all white and waxy as if he were a precious foreign object kept contained in cotton wool." Newspapers refuse to print Ned's statements—although against this, cartoonists have a field day lampooning the police. Squatters steal the selectors' land and animals and levy fines for their recovery of the latter.

At the same time, Ned is forced into an apprenticeship of bushranging by his mother and is betrayed by his relatives, the Lloyds, who accept an award for the arrest of Harry Power, then spread the word that it was Ned who was the traitor. Ned is surprisingly realistic and unsentimental in his assessment of motive, rejecting the Robin Hood tag in his recognition that people did not protect him out of love or sympathy for his plight but because he could give them money: "Harry were not captured because the traps suddenly learned his trails and hideouts he were arrested when he put a lower price on his freedom than the government were prepared to pay". His motives for his own activities are quite clear to himself: "I'm sure you know I have spilled human blood when there were no other choice at that time I were no more guilty than a soldier in a war".

The only area in which Ned is treated critically and shown as being curiously defective is in his understanding and treatment of women—and that too confirms the stereotype of the Irish perpetuated by Patrick White and other Australian writers. On the first page of the novel Ned tells his unseen daughter that: "your grandmother was like a snare laid out by God for Red Kelly. She were a Quinn and the police would never leave the Quinns alone." This is the first of several statements in the novel of woman as destructive lure. In truth, Ned's devotion to his mother, which is remarked upon several times by other characters in the novel, sometimes in sexual terms, is one of the forces that help to undermine him. Dan is the first to point to the nature of the relationship: "True said he your ma is your donah as everybody knows". Later, his mother's lover George King makes the same point that Ned's mother is his "girlfriend". So naive is Ned that he cannot understand how his mother can make so much money and become so well dressed from doing laundry; he does not realise that her activity with sheets is of a quite different kind.

Ned's devotion to his mother remains intense, despite the fact that she betrays him to Harry Power and later that she believes him capable of being a traitor to the bushranger. He describes it in an oddly moving image: "it were only as I held her that I knew how deep I loved her we was grown together like 2 branches of an old wisteria". There is still that curious tractability in her, however, as she does King's bidding, much as she did Frost's. When Ellen finally reveals that she had paid Harry to take Ned on we are told that "The son felt himself a mighty fool he'd been bought and sold like carrion". But Ned's extraordinary devotion to his mother survives even this. At the end of the novel he is still dreaming of freeing her from jail and chooses to stay with her rather than accompany Mary overseas.

Another aspect of his sexuality is his extreme puritanism; his Catholic upbringing is by no means without influence on him. He has a horror of homosexuality and of transvestism. There is also his detestation of opium smoking and, for the most part, his teetotalism, though he is drinking towards the end of the novel. He reports foul words but in euphemistic terms, perhaps with his intended young audience in mind: "It were eff this and ess that and she would blow their adjectival brains out". With this device, and especially his use of 'adjectival', Carey recalls Joseph Furphy's practice in *Such Is Life*. Later, like contemporary newspapers, he will indicate an obscenity by printing only the first and last letters. He is of his time in his detestation of Aboriginal and Chinese people.

There is also a naivety in Ned which causes him a great deal of trouble. He believes Fitzpatrick when he tells him Dan will not be jailed if he gives him up. Of course he is mistaken. Later he surrenders his manuscript to the printer's wife who inevitably turns it over to the police, as Joe Byrne had predicted. And in Jerilderie he similarly trusts Curnow against Byrne's advice. But even Ned's naivety is turned

into a kind of superior quality. After he saves the Shelton boy from drowning, he remarks that "perhaps it would be better had I know the true cruel nature of the world but I would not give up my ignorance even if I could". It is a form of self-defence he makes several times, arguing (perhaps rightly) that his naivety is more generous than Joe Byrne's cynicism.

CAREY SAYS THAT the Jerilderie letter was a major factor in his deciding on the argot in which the novel could be written and adds to it the speech of the people he knew in his early days in Bacchus Marsh. But if we turn to the famous letter, Kelly's most extended attempt at both self-extenuation and expression of his vision of the future, we find a very different outlaw to the almost sanitised one Carey has presented. In particular, what Carey omits is the immoderateness of his response to provocation, the sense, however understandable, of his being goaded beyond endurance, maddened by injustice. It emerges in the crude vituperation of his language, nothing like the almost poetical figure we find in the novel: "And my mother not to be pitied also who has no alternative only to put up with the brutal and cowardly conduct of a parcel of big ugly fat-necked wombat headed big bellied magpie legged narrow hipped splay footed sons of Irish bailiffs or english landlords which is better known as Officers of Justice of Victorian Police." Or in speaking of those who would assist the police he writes in the Letter: "By the light that shines pegged to an ant-bed, with their bellies opened their fat taken out rendered and poured down their throat boiling hot will be cool to what pleasure I will give some of them."

For all its idiomatic brilliance the language of the novel does not attempt to capture this aspect of his nature. Even at his most extreme, Carey's Kelly is calmer, more rational. At the same time, Carey depoliticises him to a certain extent, not in the hatred he displays towards the injustice inflicted by the ruling classes but in his ignoring until near the end of the novel the larger ambitions the Letter hints at—the possibility of a general uprising, even the hope that Australia might become a republic. Only right near the end, as the people of the district hear of his child and come to celebrate with him, does Ned begin to consider the possibility of a rebellion. He starts to gather together an army of the dispossessed, with Eureka (which has been mentioned several times) in mind: "We wasnt men with pikes no more and would not repeat the tragedies of Vinegar hill or the Eureka Stockade".

All this is not to dismiss the novel. But it is to point to the fact that Carey's use of historical fact is not only subjective and selective but it is also highly partisan. The changes he has made to historical fact mostly lie in one direction—a perpetuation of the comfortable and undisturbing myth of Kelly as a much put upon victim who rose up against his oppressors and fought for the rights of little people and against the misuses of authority everywhere. It is the version American reviewers accepted uncritically and which many Australians will continue to pay homage to, at the expense of an historical Ned Kelly who was a far more complex and ambiguous figure.

1. Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, UQP, Brisbane, 2000. All quotations from the novel are taken from this edition.
2. Andrew Dowling, 'Truth and History', *Heat*, New Series 1, pp.249–254.
3. Jane Rogers, review in *The Spectator*, 13 January 2001.
4. Robert Edric, 'Remaking Ned', *Guardian*, 6 January 2001.
5. Robert McCrum, 'Reawakening Ned', *Observer*, 7 January 2001.
6. Anthony Quinn, 'Robin Hood of the Outback', *New York Times Review*, 7 January 2001.
7. Janet Maslin, 'A Wild Criminal in a Wilder Australia', *New York Times*, 4 January 2001.
8. Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, OUP, Melbourne, 1998, p.362.

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fiction | **MARIAN DEVITT**

THE CROW TREE

MAL MURRAY did not want to get out of bed. Something felt wrong. The air crackled with disquiet. Mal was always alert to tensions in the community. He propped himself against the pillows and looked out at the stubborn hiptus weeds that grew along his back fence. The morning mist was just lifting, the trails of vapour dissolving between the trees. There was a tight band of pressure around his head and when he pulled himself up higher in the bed his heart beat quickly.

Margaret? Mal called, his voice thin and strained, *I'm not going to make it again today. I've got another headache. I think I've got a temperature as well.* Margaret emerged from the bathroom in her nurse's uniform. She felt his forehead with the back of her hand.

You are a bit hot, she conceded. Mal's hair stood up in a damp, wispy cockscomb and his cheeks sagged, as though all the elasticity in his pallid skin had drained away in the night.

Can you give the school a ring for me? Mal felt comforted by the thought it was Friday. Nothing much apart from Sport and Assembly happened on Fridays. Margaret rang the school and reappeared in the doorway. *When are you going to have that blood test? You might have something contagious... or fatal.* She was mocking him, he knew.

Stop hassling me. I'm too sick. Mal clutched the sheet across his chest and turned his head in distress from side to side on the damp pillow. Margaret rolled her eyes.

You've got the day off. That's what you wanted isn't it?

Mal had already missed five days of school in the last two weeks and Margaret was becoming impatient with his refusal to have a blood test. There were only so many certificates she could write without the Principal accusing her of pandering to her husband's malingering.

Mal kicked the sheet off his sweaty body with a weak pummelling of his legs. In some ways it was convenient that Margaret was the community nurse, but she was not a sympathetic woman. She frequently chastised Mal for his unhealthy habits, although overindulging was all he could do lately to maintain his sanity. He had just finished the last of his smuggled bottles of vodka and the meagre supply of dope he brought back from their last visit to town was almost finished. No matter how hard he tried, he always seemed to go through his sanity supplies within three weeks of being back. Then there was the period of getting over not having anything to blur the reality of where they were, and the eternity of the rest of the semester to endure, peppered, of course, with Margaret's lectures about the consequences of overindulgence.

He heard the rattle of the back screen door and counted to ten, anticipating Margaret's morning routine of collecting the Clinic towels from the line. He heard the crunch of gravel around the side of the bungalow and counted the sharp little jabs into the morning air as the pegs landed in the peg basket. The click of the gate and the Clinic truck coughing into gear confirmed her departure.

Mal rolled onto his back and tried to pinpoint exactly what it was that unsettled him so about the

morning, but there was nothing tangible he could name. He decided to get up and made his way to the kitchen where he extracted the coffee pot from the clamour of the sink and set about preparing the morning brew and a joint.

It was stupid, he knew, to feel the way he did, but he couldn't shake the conviction that something bad was going to happen. He'd felt the tension building on those days he was at work in the sulky stares of the children, in their refusal to work and their intense and sudden bouts of conflict that he didn't understand. He'd felt it as he walked home for lunch, the August wind spinning the dust from the potholes and whirling it down the street before him. He felt it in the quietness of the cool nights and the chilly, morning mists. The feeling of tension and dread was everywhere since they'd come back from holidays, but today was infinitely worse.

The community people hated August. Like him, they hated the cold nights and the morning mists. Most of the children didn't arrive at the school until the morning chill was gone. It was only the children from the ramshackle camp at the edge of the township who ever ventured to school early, when they did decide to come. They were the children of the last families to be given a house and they came, he was sure, only because the school was warmer than their windy camps. Old people always died in August and babies were often sick with chest infections. Bad things happened in the darkness and all across the settlement the people left the lights on in their bathrooms and laundries, unwilling to risk the terrors of the dark, unpredictable night.

The people believed the debil-debils were evil spirits and it was considered a bad thing to be caught up in the whirling dust. The longer Mal lived in the community the more he believed in these things. Margaret would hoot with laughter if she knew the full extent of his superstitions. For Margaret everything was cause and effect. She never conceded the possibility of spirits invading her practical world. Margaret always said close contact with death was enough to cure anyone of such foolishness. There was nothing left of a person, she claimed, sixty seconds after the last breath. By the time the body began to turn it was just a miserable relic of flesh to be disposed of as quickly as possible. She hated the funerals that went on and on for weeks, until everyone was satisfied the spirit was laid to rest.

As Mal drained the final cup of coffee from the pot, the school bus sped past, late as usual, to collect the outstation children. The fine red dust stirred up by the truck filtered through the louvres and hung suspended in a shaft of morning sunlight before it fell across everything in the room. There was no point trying to keep the place free of it.

Mal lay on the couch and closed his eyes. Silver points of light danced in the red space behind his eyelids. His heart beat an erratic tattoo, an acrid taste flooded his mouth. If he was perfectly honest, all he really wanted to do was leave, but Margaret insisted they stay until the interstate mortgage was paid off. Unless he could talk her out of it, that meant another three years. He could see himself going slowly mad.

His daydream of a house by the sea was suddenly shattered by the hard, penetrating cry of a crow. The cry of another crow joined the first, then another and another. Mal sat up and looked out the window. A tall acacia tree opposite the house was becoming colonised by crows. As he watched, more and more birds landed, shuffling along the branches like mourners squeezing into the pews of a crowded church. In moments the tree was blackened, the air ringing with their strident cries, the crows fixated on something on the road.

Mal's hands and feet felt icy. The pit of his stomach fluttered. He unlocked the front screen door and edged out onto the verandah. By now, he estimated, there were at least a hundred crows in the tree. They could peck him to death if they had a mind to do it. One at a time the huge birds dropped down to the road, cried out and then flapped back up into the tree. Mal reached in behind the screen door, took a raincoat from a hook on the wall and draped it over his head and shoulders. Sweat gathered under the plastic hood and ran down the back of his neck as he edged towards the cause of the commotion. When he reached the fence he could see a dead crow on the road, one huge wing splayed away from its body, its head twisted in the opposite direction.

The crows were squabbling now for space. Those that had roosted on the upper branches grudgingly

dropped to the ground to make way for the new arrivals. The birds were spreading across the road. Mal moved back to the protection of the verandah and for a moment considered hosing the crows away, but finally retreated inside, defeated by the eerie menace he read into the spectacle.

He watched the crows from the safety of the couch throughout the morning, fascinated but chilled by the collective intelligence of the flock. Now that the initial grief was over, the crows sat huddled and muted above the corpse, occasionally shuffling along the branch to make room for another arrival or departure.

By lunchtime they seemed to have finished their mourning. When the last crow flew away he went out and lifted the corpse off the road with a shovel and threw it into the bush, hoping this was the worst the day had to bring.

THEY HAD hardly begun lunch when their old disagreement about the end of year holidays surfaced.

Margaret glared. *We agreed on Penang.*

Mal shifted uncomfortably. *Yes I know but . . . I honestly can't cope with more . . . cultural difference. I need something normal. What's wrong with a few weeks in town?*

You promised. You said this year we'll definitely go somewhere different. Margaret tapped the salt shaker hard against the table.

The taut silence was punctuated by the mournful cry of a crow. In the hope of changing the topic Mal was about to launch into the story of the crow tree when the sound of distant screaming carried across the open reserve behind the bungalow. It seemed to be coming closer. Mal hurried to the bedroom window. The moment he had been waiting for was upon them, the tension finally ruptured.

A young woman ran and stumbled along the walking track by the back fence, crying out at the top of her voice as she headed for her camp.

Keep your head down Marg, Mal ordered, a sudden surge of assurance coursing through his veins as he left the bungalow by the back door. He waited in the carport, listening to the chorus of voices that joined the young woman at Yama's camp.

Margaret wrenched open a week old newspaper, knowing she had lost the advantage in the holiday argument. Mal heard her through the kitchen window, *Can't even have lunch in peace. What's happening now for God's sake?*

I don't know. But it's not good. Just stay inside. I'm going to check it out.

Mal edged across the yard and peered through the broken slats of the fence. He could hear more commotion from Yama's camp and screaming from the centre of town. Suddenly Yama appeared on the track, naked except for a red naga wrapped around his loins. Mal threw himself down behind the mower shed. The ground trembled as Yama ran past. Under his left arm he carried a bundle of shovel nosed spears, his right arm balancing his flight over logs and abandoned pieces of furniture and old tin drums.

Mal scrambled to his feet, stunned by Yama's vigour and intensity, a vigour Mal knew he would never achieve, even though he was thirty years younger. Yama's wives and his dusty band of children followed. The youngest wife stopped at the gate and thrust her baby into the arms of the eldest girl, motioning the children back towards the camp before she hurried on to the centre of town. The children clustered outside Mal's gate, anxious and uncertain. A small boy clambered to the top of the fence for a better view.

What's happening? Where's he going? The children looked at Mal mutely. They were too young to speak much English.

Fighting, the oldest girl inclined her lips towards the centre of the community.

Mal heard the distinctive sound of the Clinic truck starting up. He ran towards the front gate. A parting gesture, that might have been a wave, was all the acknowledgement Margaret gave him. Mal ran back through his yard, out the back gate and down the track until he came to a group of women clustered in the yard of a derelict house a safe distance from the trouble. None of them spoke much English but somehow he gathered there was a problem with money. Someone had been speared.

That mob always fighting, an old lady proclaimed. She shook her head, *Fighting. Jealousing. No good eh?*

The Clinic truck was parked at the base of the office stairs, the back door open, the truck angled to take on a patient. How had Margaret known?

The old lady cautioned, *Your wife in there. Maybe big trouble now.*

A young girl beside him giggled in excitement or nervousness and Mal turned and ran back to the house to collect their truck. All he could think of was getting Margaret out of there.

MAL PARKED as close as he dared to the back door of the Council Office and ran across the open space to the door in a hunched stoop. The stiff door handle finally opened and he slipped through into a dinghy corridor outside the book-keeper's office. The book-keeper's desk was piled high with papers, the screen saver on the computer shifting silently through a whirl of psychedelic patterns. He inched down the corridor towards the muted voices in the Reception area.

He could see Margaret kneeling on the floor beside the injured man and as his eyes adjusted to the dimness he made out an empty syringe and a broken phial on the floor. Two men held on to the shaft of a spear that protruded from the man's leg. Margaret was extracting the blade. The man cried out as the blade pulled through.

Margaret held the deep gash together, instructing the men to hold the injured man steady while she wound a dressing under and around his leg. The wound was bleeding profusely and the floor and her lap were dark with blood. Margaret asked for more light and as the men moved aside Mal could see her face shining in the dimness. She was calm and assured, more enlivened than Mal had seen her for months. He realised in that moment that she never looked like that when she was around him anymore. He fled back down the corridor and out into the glaring afternoon sun to retch helplessly into the scrub.

As Mal heaved and spat he heard his truck door being wrenched open and turned to see an old woman clambering into the front seat. She was a big woman, her hair and face covered in pink clay, her shoulders scarred with thick cicatrices. As he rushed to get her out of the truck the woman reached into her dilly bag and drew out a clutch of woven armbands trimmed with white and orange feather down. She thrust the objects at him and shouted and pointed to the road out of town.

Mal knew he would not get her out of the truck. The armbands were ceremonial objects. Several of his students were at their initiation ceremony and the armbands, he knew, were critical for their preparation.

Before he could think what to do, three more old women appeared from the cover of the derelict building and clambered into the back of the truck. The suspension sagged and Mal realised he was facing his last chance to help Margaret before he became swept away on the urgent demands of the old women. By their frantic gestures he realised they were frightened of what might happen next. More people were gathering and there were angry shouts coming from the front of the building. Even more reason to get Margaret to safety. As the last woman struggled into the tray, Mal headed for the back door of the building again, a wail of protest rising behind him. But when he reached the room where the speared man had been, all he found was a pool of blood.

He ran out through the offices to the front verandah. Four men were lifting the injured man into the Clinic truck under Margaret's supervision. Mal called out, suddenly desperate for Margaret to know he was there to help, although he knew he could not ask her to leave her patient.

As Margaret lifted herself into the cabin of the truck he called, *Margaret! Wait for me!*

Margaret turned, puzzled, *Go home Mal. I'll come by the house if I need you. Everything's under control.*

As Margaret drove away he felt the warm spread of shame at her dismissal but the men gathered around the front of the office were too concerned with practicalities to notice his discomfort. There was the matter of informing the Police to consider and what immediate reaction to that there might be in the community. To postpone the call until the man was airlifted to hospital gave them time to consider the ramifications. If the man lived, this was just another episode in an ongoing feud to be settled. But undoubtedly, if he died, there would be trouble for everyone.

THE WEIGHT OF the women stabilised the truck along the deeply corrugated road. The track was worse than he remembered, and what Mal also

couldn't remember in the blur of last week's headaches was whether or not he had filled the truck with diesel. He was worried they would run out of fuel before they reached the outstation. They drove in silence, the old ladies not understanding his broken attempts to speak to them.

The outstation camp came into view unexpectedly.

Mal parked. The women clambered out of the truck and hurried away to join their sisters. Suddenly abandoned, Mal was not sure what to do, or who to sit with. A group of men presided under a bough shelter, painting the torsos of the young boys lying on the ground with the emblems of their clan. The boys were almost unrecognisable under their coatings of white clay and ochre. The women presented the armbands and the men slipped them onto the slender arms of the boys. A man in a bough shelter to the left of the painting shelter called out to Mal and he hurried towards the welcoming group, relieved to be wanted.

Word of the spearing had somehow already spread to the outstation and as more trucks arrived, the event was updated and embellished. The men shook their heads and muttered among themselves, questioning Mal again and again about what he'd seen. Mal told the men Margaret insisted he bring the old ladies to the ceremony, rather then stay to help her. The men conferred their thanks. The absence of the old women would surely have disrupted the course of events.

The dancing gained momentum, the sun set and the moon rose, the sun bloody and molten, the moon white and icy. The sunset filtered through shades of pink and mauve and pale blue, an evening breeze blew up, keeping everyone cool. The singing continued above the quiet murmuring and laughter. To Mal, at that moment, it was as though none of the events of the afternoon could possibly have happened.

Yama arrived just after nightfall, still wearing his naga. He took his place beside the men painting the boys, assuming his duties with an air of victory. The night came down and the fires burned. The men sang and the women danced. Mal realised he was very hungry. He had not really eaten all day and his head was throbbing with the pulse of the clap sticks. When the ceremony fell into a lull he made his way towards the truck.

He was more then ten kilometres from the outstation when the truck lurched and stopped cold on the track, another twenty kilometres at least from home. The strain of the day was starting to take its effect. He had no water or food and the night was now cold. He lay sideways on the front seat and began to sob.

After hours defending himself against mosquitoes, the lights of a truck dipped and bobbed through the trees towards him, the outline of the passengers in the tray back etched against the moonlit sky. Mal pushed his truck off the track and climbed into the tray back with the women. His spine bashed against a metal ridge all the way into town. He cramped his knees tightly under his chin so that he did not make physical contact with the woman opposite him and tried to think of other things to take his mind off the growing bruise.

IT WAS ALMOST midnight when they reached home. The house was in darkness except for the dim light of Margaret's bedside lamp at the rear of the bungalow.

And where have you been?

Don't start. I had to take some old ladies out to the ceremony. The truck ran out of fuel on the way back.

Marvellous how you're always around when I need you!

You ordered me home!

I could have done with some help afterwards. Anyway . . . when will you learn to stay out of my business? I wouldn't dream of interfering with your job.

I wasn't interfering. I was terrified something terrible was going to happen. It's been building up for days. Couldn't you feel it?

Something terrible is always happening here. I don't need saving. This is my job.

And what am I supposed to do? Just stand there?

That's exactly what you have to do. Mind your own business.

All right then darling. Have your fuckin' career. And your fuckin' community. You can count me right out!

It was a point they had reached many times before, a brink that neither could quite fall over, aloneness being worse than their present misery. They

lay back to back, avoiding touching, and listened to the mournful howl of the camp dogs as they faced again the possibility of ending it, and all that ending it would mean, and all it would entail.

In the morning Mal woke early and quietly left the bed. Margaret was sleeping heavily. They had woken just before dawn to the piercing call of a koel. A strange, almost violent coupling had mended their rift for the time being, as it usually did, then they had fallen back to sleep.

Mal let himself out the back door and considered the wreckage of his garden, resolving to do something about it, given they would probably stay. The only thing that would change Margaret's mind about leaving was a child and he was not ready for that. The inevitable discussion for and against a child was something they always traded off after scenes like this.

He never wanted to have children with Margaret, although he pretended that he did. *When the time's right*, he always said. *When we're set up. When we've got enough money to renovate. We should wait until I've got Long Service Leave. Then I can help with it.* He was good at turning her financial mantras back on to her, his only way of undermining the urgency for something *she* wanted. If the truth be known, the thought of producing a child like Margaret, so confident and efficient and emotionally cold, terrified him. He would never survive two of them.

The back gate was sagging open. He lifted the creaking slats of wood and iron as quietly as he could and swung the makeshift catch closed. He walked around the misty yard, remembering a time in their first year when he was optimistic enough to want to grow vegetables. He found a stunted pawpaw. He could see Margaret through the louvres, her body heavy on the bed, one arm trailing along the floor.

Her bloodstained uniform lay on the laundry floor. He made up a bucket of cold water and soap powder and pushed the uniform into it, the foam frothing into a rusty pink.

He went inside and made himself a pot of coffee and while he waited for it to percolate dabbed his itching mosquito bites with calamine lotion and stared out at the acacia tree. When he finished the coffee he dragged his pile of dusty books from under the lounge and quietly let himself out the front door. They always needed space after an argument, enough time to pretend it hadn't happened.

Mal walked out onto the road. A putrid smell assaulted him. He walked towards the crow tree and kicked around in the undergrowth until he found the corpse. A retinue of ants carried feathers and flesh away from the body to their nest. One eye was already extracted, leaving a hollow space. One creature's death, Mal considered, gave others life. The interminable cycle of it all.

Three crows landed in the tree above him, silent and protective.

He began the walk towards the school but with each step felt his slim sense of purpose evaporating. It would be weeks before the boys returned from the ceremony, so attendance would be almost negligible. Perhaps the other group from the edge of town would turn up today. They usually did when the other clans were away. The only problem was their literacy skills were so poor he would have to think of something special for them. It was hard to feel enthusiastic. Nothing ever worked with them. The minute the other boys returned, they would go again and his efforts would be useless.

The morning mist was heavier than usual for August. The month was moving on. The lost days of headaches had made him lose track of time, but still he felt the alarming speed with which his life was passing in this place. A speed that oddly enough ran parallel to the interminable slowness of the days.

There was still mist up ahead. He could just make out the camp dogs lying on the road like greasy rags and further on the ghostly outline of a group of children, waiting at the gate. It was, as he'd anticipated, the children from the ragged camp on the edge of town.

They too had lost track of the days. He suddenly remembered. It was Saturday and his first task, now that everything was back to normal, was to send the children away.

WASHED AWAY

1. My full name is Robert Djamuri Wilson but I am known as Robbie. I was born on 12 December 1989 and I am currently 14 years old. I live at 23 Pandanus Street, Burragong, in the State of Queensland.
2. I live at home with my older sister and my two brothers and my cousin. I am a student at Burragong School and am in Year 10 next year.
3. On the afternoon of December 12, 2003 I was with two of my friends from school, Jim Lewis and Les Walker. That was the last day of school so we were on Christmas holidays from then on. There wasn't much school work that day and Mrs Simpson, our teacher, let us out of the classroom early, it was after lunchtime so about 2pm I guess.
4. Jim and Les and me all went down to Fisherman's Creek for a swim because it was really hot, it's the only place to swim at that time of year cause of the stingers in the sea off the beach. The northerly winds had been blowing hot for weeks and everyone goes a little crazy then in the build up to the wet season. Because there was no rain yet all the kids had been hanging out at the Creek a lot, there are rocks to climb up on and jump off into where the pool is deep. There were some other kids there that day and we mucked around with them for most of the afternoon.
5. We talked a little bit about Les leaving because he was my best friend and his family were going to be leaving Burragong on the Saturday, the next day, in their car. They had packed it up already, I'd seen Bobby's mum outside their house putting some stuff in the car after school the day before and they were going to drive down south to his aunty's place. Down south Les would have to go to school or get a job which is what he wanted to do, he didn't like school much. Maybe he would get a job at the abattoir like his uncle down there or as an apprentice mechanic or something because he really liked cars.
6. Les was real sad to be leaving Burragong and to be leaving his mates. Me and him had talked about it ever since he'd known a few months ago when his dad had told him after that last meeting with the lawyers. That was the native title lawyers who live in the city to the north. They come down every few weeks and there are big meetings in the community hall that the whole town goes to, except us kids who are at school, but all the parents go and meet with the lawyers and they talk about the native title claim that the Yanyarr people have made over this country.
7. After swimming, it started to get dark, and most of the other kids were going home for tea. This was about 5.30pm. Jim said he had to get home cause his granny was up from down south for Christmas and he said goodbye to Les.
8. Les had some money that his mum had given

him and we went to the shop and Les went in and bought some smokes and some hot chips and cans of coke and went down to the beach. Les got away with buying smokes cause he looked a lot older than he was.

9. At the beach some guys had been fishing and caught a huge snapper. We walked down to them along the beach to where they were sitting near some palm trees and looked at the fish, it was real big, a real beauty snapper, a nice pink colour and fat, they were all laughing and mucking around, real happy and talking about the big feed they were all gunna have when they got it home to their families. This was really good but I think it made Les pretty sad cause he would miss this kind of stuff at Burragong.

10. We walked further down the beach, near the rocks at the end past the school and lit a fire. We sat around the fire and finished eating the chips. After a while we saw some other kids we knew and we talked to them for a while and they came and sat around the fire too, it was pretty dark by then. That was Pete Minya and his brother Eddie and Tiny Mason.

11. Tiny Mason had got a full cask of wine in his backpack and he put some of that into our empty Coke cans and we drank some and swapped him for some of our smokes. We built up the fire real big, talking about the big fish that the young men had caught and other stuff and I guess I got a little bit drunk.

12. Then Les got talking about how he was leaving Burragong and he started to have a fight with Eddie Minya saying the murris were to blame for making his family leave. Eddie's dad is a Yanyarr man and they are the Traditional Owners for this land. Eddie and Les started talking real loud and yelling and Les was saying it wasn't fair. Les's dad came here thirty years ago from down south, he was moved to Burragong when the Mission he was in with his family was shut down. Les said some government men came and put his dad and all of them on two buses and brought them up to Burragong, they didn't want to come. My sister says that is what whitefellas call 'historical people', that is what I am, a historical person, I am not a Traditional Owner of Burragong, my people do not speak for this place. We 'historical' people, it means we have only been here since white man came, since white history.

13. Eddie Minya was yelling and saying Les and his people gotta get out, gotta make room for the TOs who are getting their land back after all these years and people like Les and me gotta go back to where we come from to make room for this country's real people, the Yanyarr. He talked about Eddie Mabo who had fought hard for TOs' rights and he won and now justice is going to be done, he said. He said he had a big family, all Yanyarr and they were everywhere—up north and out west and down south—and they would all be coming back to Burragong to live, that people had to make room for TOs.

14. Les was yelling now too and said that his dad had said they had nowhere to go, his dad had said to him what the lawyer had said at the meeting in the community hall last month, that historical people got no rights. That historical people like them Yorta Yorta in Victoria had got told by the High Court that they had been washed away. High Court had said they been washed away so that they couldn't go back to their land, he said. Historical people means your traditions been washed away by the tide of history, your country been washed away, that you lost your connection to your land. Connection was all that white people worried about, if you didn't have it, you got no land. This was true for me too I was thinking as I am a historical person too. Les said we belong nowhere, whitefellas say we from nowhere, he said. But I grew up here, he said, this is my home, this is where I'm from now.

15. Everyone was standing up around the fire now except Tiny Mason and his cask of wine and I could see that Les was almost crying. Pete Minya

was standing in front of Eddie now and telling him to stuff it and I was standing in front of Les trying to make sure he didn't get too agro cause he was like that sometimes, he was a good fighter and could beat most of the other kids at school, even some of the older kids.

16. Les picked up a handful of sand and threw it into the fire and sat down. Eddie backed off a bit now and it calmed down and then Eddie walked over and grabbed the cask of wine from out of Tiny Mason's hand and put some more wine in Les's coke can and passed it to him and no-one talked for awhile. Les drank more wine, he was drinking it quickly. Tiny Mason didn't fight with Eddie about taking his wine and giving it to Les because he knew it was good to share it now after the fight.

17. I remember looking at the flames of the fire for a while, I don't know how long, could've been ages, looking at the flames moving around and the sparks coming up high into the black sky from the dry wood. I remember listening to the small waves against the shore, I reckon I was pretty drunk. I was thinking that Burragong was the best place on earth to live and that I wouldn't want to leave either. I hoped that we wouldn't have to leave our house like Les had to.

18. After ages Eddie said he was sorry that Les and his family had nowhere to go and that something should be done to help out his people, that the government should do something to help them out, that it was not fair that historical people who were brought to Burragong by the government were now being made to leave again. But this has always been Yanyarr land see, his people were the only ones who could speak for this country, only the Yanyarr knew how to look after it properly, Yanyarr knew the stories and the places and the names, he said.

19. Les was drinking a lot of wine but not saying anything. I was feeling pretty sick and the fire was dancing in a blurry way now. I was worried that I was going to be sick, I really wanted to get home and get to my bedroom and not be seen by my sister, specially if I been drinking. Tiny Mason laughed and said he thought I was gunna spew. I got up and started walking back down the beach, I couldn't walk very straight but I made it down the beach, I could hear Tiny Mason laughing. I got down the street to my place. My sister was watching TV when I came in and she saw me and I felt even sicker and ran for the toilet and was sick. She helped me and was angry at me but put me to bed.

20. It was hot and light when I remember next and my sister was sitting on the other bed opposite mine and looking at me. I had the taste of being sick in my mouth. I remembered what had happened at night and she was looking at me real sad. I thought at first she was sad cause I had gotten drunk and it reminded her of dad and all the trouble before but then I knew something else was wrong too. That's when she told me that Les had drowned and some kids had found him at Fisherman's Creek this morning. I knew he had done it, I knew he had done it himself, he was a historical person like me and he had nowhere to go. No-one would have done it to him, he was too strong, he was the strongest in school and not the Minya boys or Tiny Mason or anyone would have gone near him for fighting. He had done it himself, he was washed away just like the High Court said.

Signed: .....
Robert Djamuri Wilson

Date: .....

Witness: .....

Name of Witness:.....

M.G. Patterson lives in Queensland. This story won the Abe Amaterstein short story competition, 2004, sponsored by the New International Bookshop, the Trades Hall and Literary Institute and Overland.

fiction | **SIMON GROTH**

HEAVENS

NO-ONE CAME for me, to arrest me or take me away. I followed the same path as always, only this time I didn't run. For the first time, I strolled through the streets of Woolloongabba like I owned them.

I leaned back against the outside wall of the Cathedral of St Nicholas and laughed up into the sky. Mama's warnings seemed so far away now, like she was talking to some other person.

Every day I read Mama the newspaper. She tried to learn to read English once, but not very hard. She spoke it a little, but preferred Russian.

"*Ya govoryu bez obinyakov!*"

I speak my mind, is what she would say. She might have meant she could never say the things she wanted to say in English, but more likely she was afraid of what might happen if everyone in this country could understand her.

Mama would never have read a newspaper in Russian even if she could've found one, so I would read to her, and for Mama what I didn't read was just as important as what I did. There was much bad news and Russians, or Soviets, were in a lot of it. Mama did not want to hear such things.

"*Ya otvernulas' ot nikh*, Kolya." I have turned my back on them, she once told me. When I asked her why, she pretended not to hear me.

What I could see of the sky was clear and blue. It seemed to go on forever, although I now knew that there was something out past the blue. I slipped down the wall and lay flat on the ground, still staring up at the sky.

I used to follow Mama's example and I tried not to read anything about those Soviets either. It was mostly boring stuff anyway in places that sound so far away like Berlin or Havana. I'd heard of these places, but I wouldn't have been able to find them on the coloured map at school. Aside from the knowledge that they were watching Mama and me, I didn't care less what the Soviets were up to.

But then I read about this man called Yuri Gagarin. He went past the sky and into space, almost to the moon and he came back to tell about it. He was the most amazing man I had ever heard about. And he was a Soviet.

For so long I avoided any mention of Gagarin, or the *Vostok 1* or the space race between Presidents Kennedy and Khrushchev, but when it finally came out, it was Mama who started it.

She saw a diagram of the *Vostok 1* in orbit and asked me about it. It all came out of my mouth in a flood. This Russian, this Soviet, was the first man in space. He was brave and talented and a hero. More than that, he was ***my*** hero.

Mama was so upset she locked her door and hid under the bed, all the time telling me to be quiet, be quiet!

"*Molchi! Molchi!* Get out! They are monitoring us! Get out in the open! Go to the church!"

Why did Yuri Gagarin have to be a Soviet?

A cloud drifted across the sky and I drifted under it. I could fly up into space. I could climb aboard the *Vostok 1*.

Lying back on the ground I pictured the capsule forming around me. Behind me were the gigantic rocket boosters. Ground crew scurried far below me. I felt the special suit resting on my skin and my helmet tight on my head.

I AM READY for anything. I wait at the launch pad at Tyuratum, seatbelt secure over my chest and lap. Ahead is the crisp morning's wide blue. A few light wispy clouds dotted here and there. Beyond that the black night sky: a million stars and planets—heavenly bodies suspended in nothing at all. The magic takes my breath away. But I have a job to do. And I have something to leave behind.

I am confident in my ground crew and the scientists working to get me here. I was chosen from the best test pilots in the USSR to become the first cosmonaut, and yet there is no piloting to do in this vehicle; everything is automated. I have trained many hours for the experience of weightlessness and for the possibility that problems may occur. Everything in my life has led me to this moment, this one beautiful moment. Ahead of me is something I cannot know yet, but very soon I will meet it head on. Seven minutes past nine. The five rockets are firing. Can you hear them?

Wish me luck.

"HEY, ARE you alright?"

When I opened my eyes her face was right over mine. She smoked a cigarette and smiled very broadly. She was about my age with long red hair, straight at the top, but falling in loose ringlets around her neck and shoulders. Her skin seemed smooth and creamy, but also thin, fragile. Without the cigarette she could have been one of Mama's ornaments, but with smoke rising from her mouth and red embers in her hand she was dangerous. I forgot all about Mama and my rocket ship and Yuri Gagarin and stood watching the smoke cling to her cheeks and curl through her hair.

I wondered what it would feel like to touch her skin.

She raised her eyebrows, waiting.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing?"

I was laying flat on the path with my legs up in the air like I was in a chair. My hands were raised in front of me to control the steering of my craft. But the craft had vanished, the rockets behind were now nothing but plain old Brisbane earth.

"I was waiting for lift-off."

"I think you're gonna be waiting a while!"

I could say nothing. I rolled onto my side. She wore ordinary rubber thongs that showed off her tiny white feet. She seemed so clean; she made me feel big and sweaty.

"So were you flying into space or what?"

I stood up; my knees were covered in dry red dust. I was quite a bit taller than her, at least six inches, and somewhat wider.

"I was waiting to make sure there were not people behind me."

"Behind you?"

"Following me."

"Was anyone following?"

"No."

She screwed her face up and said nothing for a bit.

"Who would be following you?" she said at last.

I didn't know exactly why the Soviets were after us. Mama often told me they would get to her through me and that I should be on my guard all the time. I knew that it had something to do with when we arrived in Australia when I was six. At first we lived in Canberra: Mama, me and my father, but I don't remember much about it. My first clear memory is of Papa's funeral in Sydney. I had just turned seven.

I answered the girl with something I had heard Mama say many times.

"There are dangers everywhere."

"Dangers? Geez, you gotta be kidding!"

And for that moment, watching her vibrant face through cigarette smoke, I believed her. She spoke again before I could respond.

"You don't know yet, do you?"

"Know what?"

"That we're all dead!" Her eyes sparkled and she giggled.

I didn't know what to say. I scratched my neck and stood in front of her and swallowed.

"So you've been into space," she said.

"Huh?"

"Space. What's it like?"

It was the way she asked me, almost naïve. Her question was sincere and I wondered what she must have been thinking. Was she serious? Was she really

asking me about space after catching me lying on the ground with my legs up in the air?

She was smiling; I don't think she stopped smiling the whole time. Maybe she was asking because she figured anyone stupid enough to pretend to be Yuri Gagarin must know a thing or two about space.

I thought of the news reports and the details on how the Russians, the people who made me, managed to send a man outside of the earth. I remembered Mama yelling at me from under the bed that if they can send a man into space they can be everywhere. I thought about how it felt to shoot into orbit in my daydreams. And I gave this girl as honest an answer as I could.

"Being in space is the most wondrous experience. When you are trained to be a cosmonaut, they teach you about weightlessness by diving in water, but it is nothing like that. Imagine the water not being there and you just begin to float up from where you sit or stand. You can swim, or dive or float, but you are floating in nothing, you are flying."

She closed her eyes as I spoke and rolled her head around like she was listening to music. My stomach jittered with excitement. Clouds passed before the sun and I watched their shadows caress her high forehead and cheeks.

"Yeah, I thought that's what it was like." She paused to ash her cigarette and I wondered why she said *was*, like in the past. "Do you know when something is happening that is meant to be?" she continued.

"You mean like fate?"

"Yeah, kind of. Like when you hear a song on the radio and it's so beautiful? You just know that the song was written for you and you were supposed to hear it at exactly that moment. When the radio talks directly to you."

"I don't know. I always thought fate can bring bad things and good things, but always for a reason."

"I haven't seen you around at school. Are you in grade eight?"

"Grade seven."

"He's a year younger, but twice as big. I've got a good feeling about this. It's like we were supposed to find each other." She held out a hand in greeting. "My name's Carol Austin, what's yours?"

The words were on my lips—Nikolai Chekhov, but call me Kolya—but something stopped me. It was the way she asked me about space, like she really believed I had been there. At least she was far less surprised than I was at my answer.

"Yuri Aleksandrovich Gagarin."

Perhaps Carol Austin never read the papers.

In any case the journey had begun and I was shooting into orbit.

THE SOUND is incredible. I am quite used to sitting in a noisy cockpit, but it is different this time, perhaps only because I know where I'm going.

The Earth is reluctant to let me out of its grip and I sink into the seat. This is not new, I have been through five Gs many times before in training.

The sky is turning, I can see. It is a little like dusk, only there is no sunset and no moon rising. Slowly the blue sky becomes darker. Clouds left far behind and ahead the faint flicker of what might be a star.

More noise as the rocket behind me runs out of fuel and flips away to burn up in the atmosphere.

"Separation from carrier rocket completed."

And now I am there. I am in space, where no man has been before. I loosen my seatbelt and my body drifts into the cabin of the Vostok 1. *I test the food and water samples the scientists have given me and I marvel at my situation.*

I imagined that the view would seem not much different to the night sky, but it is more beautiful than I could ever have imagined. The stars I have seen so often from firm ground seem so much brighter, so much clearer and intense.

And below me I see my home, the place I came from.

I speak again into the radio: "The sky looks very, very dark and the Earth is bluish."

I am flying over the Atlantic Ocean and I think of my beautiful wife Valentina and our daughters Elena and Gala. Gala is only one month old. And I think of Mama. Because of the secret nature of my preparation, not one of them knows I am many miles above, looking down from the heavens. And I wonder how I will tell them about this.

THE MATCH GLOWED in her cupped hands. She

watched it intently; as though this was the first time she had seen it. The acrid match smoke tickled my nose. She lifted her hands to the cigarette dangling from her mouth and lit it.

Instead of shaking it, she blew the match out. She pursed her lips towards me, blowing cool air over my face. The intense smells of match and tobacco smoke with her breath made me feel momentarily overwhelmed.

"Want one?" She held the packet out with one sticking out from the rest, like an advertisement.

I nodded mute and she lit the second fag by kissing the ends together.

"Where did you get them? The cigarettes."

She grinned. "Pinched 'em off my brother. He's got tons, never notices 'em gone."

We smoked for a moment, or rather she smoked and I sucked on the cigarette and blew my smoke straight back out again, trying desperately not to choke.

"Do you live with your mother?" she said.

"Um . . . yes." It seemed a stupid question.

"What about your dad?"

We had just moved to a flat in Sydney that sat at the top of a million stairs when Papa was taken. I remember boxes everywhere as tall as me; boxes we never unpacked. Papa simply disappeared one night. I woke up in the morning and he was gone. We couldn't give him a proper Orthodox funeral because it would draw attention to us. Papa wasn't there anyway. We had to bury an empty coffin.

"He's gone."

I didn't want to say any more and Carol Austin did not ask anything more about it.

"Did you always want to go into space?"

"Always," I smiled. This was more comfortable for Yuri Gagarin. "When I was younger I read stories by Jules Verne and books about airmen. I still like to lie in the grass and watch the night sky, but I have little time to do so now with my training."

"What are you training for?"

I stopped for a moment. I had to think about my answer. I was getting confused whether I was answering as myself or as Yuri Gagarin. What would he say?

"I think it will not be long before we will walk on the moon and then land on Mars. One day we will travel between planets like we do between cities today."

"That'd be amazing."

"It won't be far." I leaned back. A gentle breeze picked up, rustling the tree above us. "One day we will travel to heaven and back."

When Carol Austin giggled, as she did now, she threw her head back and her hair flicked across her eyes.

"What?" I said defensively.

"How can we travel to a place we're already at?"

"What do you mean?"

"How can we travel to heaven when we're already there?"

I started to laugh with her. I thought she must love living here to think of it as heaven. But as we laughed I watched her face, looked into her eyes. While her face laughed her eyes were steely hard and serious.

"You think this is heaven?" I asked eventually.

"I'll tell you what I know, Yuri. And I want you to think about it, don't get too weird on me. There are some things I found about this place we're in and it's really hard for a lot of people to accept. But I swear to God, Yuri, this is totally the truth. We were put on Earth and anyone can be taken away at any time. There is an afterlife and I've found out that this is it. I am dead, or at least I have died on Earth. Everyone I meet is also dead, even if they don't know it yet. You're dead, Yuri."

I rubbed my forehead with the tips of my fingers. She thinks this is heaven, I thought. She is mad.

"But I'm still alive."

"Do you remember the exact moment when your rocket changed from being on Earth to being in space?"

"Umm . . ." sometimes I wanted to answer as Gagarin, sometimes as myself. I felt as though I had to change my clothes with every change in our discussion. "It doesn't work like that, moving between Earth and space. It happens very gradually."

"As far as you know, you went into space and came back a hero. What I'm telling you is that you've come back to a different place from the one you left. Isn't space travel dangerous?"

"There are many safety precautions and many years of research and training." In my mind I was thinking: She's crazy! I am not even Yuri Gagarin!

"But is it still dangerous?"

"Of course!"

"The passing from one world to another has already happened. It's just that you didn't notice! Most people don't!"

I stood up and paced between the tree and the wall of the church.

"Hey, I want you to turn around."

"What?"

"Turn around, go on. Turn. I won't do anything horrible to you, just turn. Now see the tree there in front of you?"

"Yes."

"That's a Moreton Bay Fig. Now I want you to look at the tree, look hard at the trunk. This might help you to understand."

The tree was as tall as the church beside it and the branches arched almost completely overhead. The roots splayed on the ground at least as far as the branches above them, weaving in and out of the ground and over each other like a fairground ride. On Sundays I often saw little kids jumping over them—How many can you jump? My eyes followed the roots up towards the trunk, which was like a thick rope made up of those same frayed strands of roots. The trunk folded in on itself and twisted like the smoke from her cigarette or from the back of a rocket ship.

"What am I looking at?"

"Just look, you'll see."

I frowned, becoming frustrated with this conversation that made no sense. She may have been pretty, but she was strange. Still, I stared at the trunk and wondered how I could leave without being rude.

Then I saw it.

Knotted and gnarled, there was a face in the trunk. She was right, it was not obvious at first, but unmistakeable. There, the thin straight nose and the large full lips. And there the thick knotted eyebrows, the small eyes watching back at me. I could almost make out an ear on the left side and there was the suggestion of a chin under those fat lips. Not an old face exactly, but not young.

"Ah, you see it!" She had moved to my right side, watching my face.

"Yes, I see."

"You know He's different for everybody. How does He look to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Happy? Sad?"

I stared at the face for a little longer.

"It looks . . . annoyed."

Her smile was replaced by a quizzical look, but only for a second.

"Well, we'll have to do something about that, won't we?"

"What does it look like to you?"

She leaned in close to me, to my ear. She smelled like dry soap fresh from the box. When she whispered in my ear my heart began knocking so hard on my chest I wondered if it would burst through.

"You know no-one's ever asked me that. He's never been happier," she said.

And she kissed my cheek.

My knees buckled under me and I fell to the ground between two roots.

"Are you okay? Here, come and sit up here on the tree."

My face was hot with shame and I sat on a tree root resting my chin on my hands.

"A face in the tree doesn't prove anything," I said.

"I thought that too, until I noticed that bad things never happen here."

"What?"

"Think about it, Yuri. All the really bad stuff that you read in the news or whatever. It always seems to happen somewhere else. Not here."

In the back of my mind the names of places I knew nothing about rolled around: Berlin, Washington, Havana. All that big fighting does seem to happen somewhere else, but bad news happens everywhere. My father is still gone.

"Bad things still happen to me."

"But I bet the worst of it is behind you, before you arrived here."

When Papa disappeared, we were in Sydney. Since we arrived in Brisbane, nothing more had

happened and we'd been here more than five years. I walked to the cathedral today. No-one followed me.

Almost like it was planned I heard the ring of a tram bell and the soft fuzz of the sparking pole. Spots of sunlight scanned my feet through the tree like searchlights. I watched clouds drift from the south towards town. They threw dark blobs of shape on the ground that crept from the road to the wall of the church.

The shapes sharpened to reveal the shadow of a man. No, two men, approaching us from Vulture Street. I remember thinking they looked compact and tough. I could tell that even from their shadows before I met them in the flesh.

Yuri Gagarin was in orbit for 108 minutes before he came crashing back to earth. He wanted to stay longer, but 108 minutes was all that was necessary.

ALREADY MY CRAFT has begun its descent. It is too soon, I tell myself. I brace myself by taking a breath and closing my eyes for one second. Like any flight, it is more difficult to land the Vostok *than to get off the ground, and this flight is more difficult than most.*

The retro rockets fire, slowing me down. Though I had not noticed they were tense, I feel my shoulders relax. I understand the source of my relief. The retro rockets did not always fire on command during testing.

Nothing has been left to chance. Control of the Vostok *is out of my hands and with the scientists at home. I trust them with my life. The craft must re-enter the atmosphere at the right angle or it will burn up like a meteor. I remain seated, pilot as passenger. The force of 10 Gs pushes me back into the chair forcing me to sink into it until I feel I will almost become part of it. Everything shakes and a tremendous roar fills my head. Outside the capsule I can see flames lick the edges of the heat shield as I am buffeted through layer after layer of thickening atmosphere.*

I wonder if the heat shield will hold up.

CAROL AUSTIN was the first girl I kissed full on the lips. Even though it was a very, very short exchange, I thought her lips were the softest things mine had ever touched. I felt like I could conquer the world, like I could leap over the Storey Bridge and still have the energy to cycle home.

"I quite like you, Yuri."

I wished I had never told her my name was Yuri. From the corner of my eye I watched the shadows drawing closer. I started breathing heavily and I felt lead in my belly rising to my throat. The shadows dropped off the side of the church and landed on the ground before us.

"Carol!"

They were around five feet tall, shorter than me, but very broad and stocky. One look was enough to see the family resemblance.

"Carol! What's going on?"

Carol smiled and waved at the pair. "Hi!"

"Carol, where have you been? Dad was gonna call the cops! And who is this idiot?"

"This is Yuri."

I smiled weakly.

One of them muttered under his breath, "Oh great, this one's a fucking red!"

The other took Carol's hand and led her away around the corner of the church. "Carol, come around here for a minute. I wanna show you something."

"Back in a sec!" Carol winked at me.

When they were out of sight, the man I assumed was Carol's brother, the one who called me a red, marched towards me and lifted me clean off the ground by my collar.

"Listen here, you fucking little Romeo. My fucking sister is not well, not right in the head. Comprenday? She's sick and the last thing she needs is for fucking little Commies like you playing her for all she's worth! If you so much as think about her again," at this he lowered his voice to a gravelly wet whisper and raised my ear to his mouth, "I'll fucking kill you."

A warm flow trickled down my leg.

He released me and I fell hard, my back across a tree root. I saw him draw his foot back for a kick and it was all I could do to stand and start moving my legs.

By the time he knew I was gone, I was already on Vulture Street.

Now I was running through the streets of Woolloongabba, just like old times. I wondered how

Mama would react when I told her I had wet my pants because the brother of a girl I kissed wanted to kill me. Here at last was a real enemy, an obvious threat. Now I had shouts and shaking fists behind me instead of spies, shadows and cameras.

I was scared, terrified, but there was something else. The wind against my face was cool and fresh. The cars I dodged in and out of were shiny, like they'd come straight from the yard.

I think I was relieved.

Up until now, I knew nothing but being afraid all the time. I jumped at the slightest sound. Someone banging bottles against our corrugated iron fence was enough to send Mama hiding in a cupboard and me guarding our door with a slingshot. We did nothing outside school and work and we could trust no-one but each other.

We had escaped hell to arrive in heaven, but we had never allowed ourselves to see the pleasures. I wondered whether Mama would ever let go of her past.

Maybe the Soviets got whatever they wanted out of Papa. Maybe they had forgotten about his wife and son.

Maybe a Soviet was not something to be frightened of at all.

THE PARACHUTES eject. A gentle landing and I open the hatch. If everything is right, the field should be in Takhtarova. Immediately, instinctively I look up at the sky which is as blue and as crisp as it was when I launched one hour and forty-eight minutes ago.

The greeting party will not be far away. There will be celebrations. Nikita Khrushchev will know by now. For me I know there will be innumerable tests and investigations. And beyond that?

Suddenly I am filled with a sense of the enormity of what I have just done. My legs feel weak and I am scared for the first time since embarking on this project.

I am glad that soon I will see my family.

When I circle the craft to check for damage I hear grass rustling from behind. Expecting to see someone I know, I am surprised to find a babushka in her scarf and apron. Her eyes are wide and mouth set in stony seriousness.

She inspects first the Vostok 1, *then me in my suit.*

"Have you come from outer space?"

"Yes, would you believe it? I certainly have!"

At this she draws her hand to her mouth and takes a step backwards. I smile at her peasant naïvety.

"Do not be alarmed, I am a Soviet."

"MAMA, WHY did we leave Russia and come here?"

"*Zachem eti voprosy, Babochka*?"—Why these questions?

Babochka! I hated Mama calling me 'Little Butterfly' and she knew it. I squeezed my eyes shut to stop myself from entering the wrong argument.

"Why did we come to Australia?"

Mama stiffened, "Your Papa worked in the Embassy. There was trouble there and Australia asked Papa if he would like to stay."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Enough!" she stormed into the kitchen and filled the sink with soapy water, even though the lunch dishes were already done.

"Was Papa a spy?"

Mama drew her still-wet hand to her forehead and closed her eyes tightly. She was breathing very heavily. Eventually she kneeled down beside me and whispered into my ear, "Stop it! Stop it! You will get us both killed! They have microphones and they are waiting for any chance to catch us!"

"But it's been such a long time, Mama!"

Mama left the sink and sat at the kitchen table. I followed and sat beside her. All the time I wondered if she would cry. If she cried I did not know what I would do. I had never seen her in tears. When she finally looked up at me I knew I was worried over nothing. Her eyes were as dry as the grass in our back yard.

Mama leaned forward again to whisper. "You are so innocent, Kolya. They can wait as long as we can and they never tire. One day I will tell you the whole story, but it is better if you do not know what happened right now."

Outside I nodded. But for the first time in my life I did not believe her. I didn't care if Mama thought I could understand or not. All my life I had been running from make-believe, a fantasy, a bogeyman.

Maybe, just maybe, Carol Austin had it right.

There at the kitchen table I made a decision.

Even if it meant trading one fantasy for another, I would rather live in Carol Austin's heaven, even with her brothers in it, than Mama's hell.

"What do I do until then, Mama?"

"You will drink some *chai* and read me stories." And she placed a cup and saucer in my hands, like she had been hiding them under her skirt folds all this time.

I watched the steam rising from the tea for a moment and turned to our old copy of *The Cossacks* with the cover that had torn away many years before.

And I read to Mama, speaking Tolstoy's parts in many voices, while she drank tea and grew drowsy under her crocheted blanket in her favourite armchair, always smiling at her only son.

Mama kept her guard up. She stayed up at night watching the street from the kitchen window long after I'd given up covering it with a slingshot. She left our home only for work, her head bent, watching the footpaths from under a black scarf.

Sometimes I wondered if she wanted the Soviets to find us, if she suspected she had made a mistake escaping to a hot brown country with a language and culture she didn't want to understand.

But I wouldn't follow her nightmares. Not any more.

Campbell Street BBQ

Even before 9.00 am,
while rain drapes itself,
limply, over office blocks,
roasted ducks hang
like clusters of muscatels
and a stainless steel tray
steams with just boiled
viscera.
The shop is in darkness
except for a shrine
with small sacrifices
glowing blood red.
One can only guess
what's happening
out back.
Poultry and pork
drip grease which slowly hardens
like the city's main arteries
clogging with cars.

MARK MAHEMOFF

Abundance

Moving through the city's discontinuity,
past spot lit displays of kebabs and pizza slices,
he asks me if I want it warmed
and tests the crust with a greasy hand.
It's the tragedy of one man
behind a filthy counter
bitter at his lack of customers
but smiling to attract them from the footpath.
It's the juxtapositions,
crime and opulence,
a figure at the bus stop
waiting for deliverance.
Convenience stores glowing
with gratuitous abundance,
panting to gratify whims
for a price.
It's the whole churning box and dice
with ambivalence the glue
holding everything in place.

MARK MAHEMOFF

fiction | **GEORGINA LUCK**

MIKEY'S STANZA UP THE ROCK

MIKEY FREEZES HALFWAY up the rock. It's been happening on different climbs for three weeks now, only this time there's nothing to catch him if he falls.

Before each climb he contemplates the rock face, discovering an elegant route detailed in the crevices. "Occam's Razor," he likes to say to his mate, Crushed, who calls him a pretentious wanker. "The simplest route is the best." He harnesses up and starts climbing, stopping occasionally to wedge small pieces of protection into the cracks as though he is laying a treasure hunt. He climbs smoothly. Then halfway up he freezes and eventually falls, swinging on the rope like a pendulum as his protection catches him. I ask him why it's happening, what started it. He doesn't know. "Maybe someone's put a curse on me," he says. "Can't think who, though."

He's been having dreams about this particular climb. It sits behind the more prominent climbs, hidden by *Professor Hopkins and the Five Hungarians* and the more literary *Prometheus Pumped* and *Stoned as Sisyphus*. He has the privilege of naming it if he's the first to make it to the top. All the local climbs are photographed and described in the official magazine, *Gripped Off Me Scone*, which Mikey started one night after a cask of red. The other climbers have dismissed this climb as impossible. But Mikey has hiked past it several times and he's convinced there's a route in there somewhere. Crushed says he's just obsessed with conquering virgin routes, but Mikey confesses to me there's another reason.

"It's the only climb on the peninsula which hasn't been named—I just don't want those trendy idiots to get their hands on it," he says. He's referring to the sports climbers who attach permanent metal bolts to rock faces, to use as handholds and footholds. It gives them a chance to attempt otherwise impossible rocks. Traditional climbers like Mikey hate them. "Next they'll be building elevators up the rocks, for Christ's sake. It's such a beautiful area—it'd be great if it could just be preserved the way it is." I tell him he's sounding like a regular old hippie and he laughs and tells me I'm growing up to be a regular little smart-arse.

His mates are down the bottom, watching. Stretched scratches his beard, wondering if he should harness up and climb after him, even though Mikey has said he doesn't want any help. Crushed crosses his arms and frowns, psyching himself into football coach mode. Laura stares at the rock, as if she's trying to remember something and the answer is in the crevices.

ONE NIGHT WHILE Mikey is still living at home he hears me crying and comes into my bedroom. I tell him I'm quitting my job at McDonald's after the first day. I made coffee without putting the coffee in, let three people go without paying and splashed hot oil from the fries on the manager's arm. I'm too embarrassed to go back. Mum and Dad said it's okay and Mum's going to ring them in the morning.

"No she's not," he says. "You're going back."

I tell him I can't. "It's not like it's a career."

"You're fucking well going back," he says softly. He's never sworn at me before and I stop crying from sheer surprise. My bedside lamp lights his face from underneath and casts shadows under his eyes,

like smudged mascara. "If you start walking away from things it'll become a habit and each time you'll feel yourself getting weaker. You're going in there tomorrow—it's easier than you think."

I go back, and he's right. A year later he's playing piano in the lounge room and breaks down crying. He's playing Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* and he just stops playing and hangs his head. I've never seen him cry before and I feel as though I'm seeing something I have no right to see. I ask him what's wrong.

"I just want a hug," he says. "Isn't that pathetic?" I put my arms around him awkwardly. He smiles and says he sometimes lies awake shaking with fear, and doesn't even know what he's afraid of.

WHAT ARE YOU, a piece of lichen?! Crushed yells up the rock. *Move your left hand and get a move on!*

Mikey just grunts expletives through clenched teeth. A seagull swoops in and starts pecking at the energy bar in Mikey's pocket. The gulls around here are vicious. Apparently a gull once bit an American tourist on the lip as she was putting a hot chip in her mouth. The gull keeps pecking and the others know Mikey's fingers must be getting tired. Crushed changes tactics.

"Come on mate, you're doing well, really well, you're more than halfway up, just move your left hand and you'll be fine."

But Crushed is one of those ruthlessly honest people who can never hide what they're thinking. His gruff voice makes me think of peppercorns being cracked in a mortar and pestle. As Stretched tells me his version of the story I can imagine the clear frustration in Crushed's voice, magnified by fear. And I see it when they all come home. "It could happen to anyone," Crushed mutters, and doesn't mention it again. But he's having trouble looking Mikey in the eye and when they ask him to stay for a beer he declines.

MIKEY MOVES OUT of home and builds a climbing wall in his new garage. He uses wood wrapped in sandpaper for the handholds and footholds and bolts them to hanging boards. It's small, but there's enough room for two or three climbers. I tell him he could start up a little corporate training business—lunchtime sessions for executives to strengthen their fingers and practice difficult stretches before deciding if they're ready for the real thing. Mikey grins and says if he ever gets that desperate I have to take him out the back and shoot him.

His mates Stretched and Crushed come over to try the wall. They're both marine biologists with a passion for Kafka. Crushed is short and nuggety and his face is full of strong lines from years spent in the sun. When he laughs his neck disappears into his shoulders, making him look—or so Mikey says—like a crushed beer-can. Stretched is tall and ethereal. They're both wearing cotton lycra tights covered in spider-web patterns, made by one of the female rock-climbers. "The material's perfect for rock-climbing," they say when anyone asks, a touch defensively. "It's strong but it doesn't restrict your movement."

They start climbing. Crushed brings his knees close to his hands, making him look more like his nickname. Stretched straightens his legs slowly then reaches his hands out wide. Mikey laughs. "Ever since someone told him he looks like Jesus he just can't help himself," he says. They keep climbing and Mikey asks them what they think of the new girl, Laura.

"Definitely fuckable," Crushed says.

Stretched laughs. "We couldn't have someone who Crushed doesn't want to have sex with."

"Hey, I didn't say I want to have sex with her, I just said that if I had to I could."

"That makes sense!"

This new girl is coming out for her first hike. Three days and two nights with the boys. I don't know this girl but I envy her confidence.

"Well I think she's beautiful," Stretched says dreamily. "Not model-beautiful, but unusual beautiful. She's got the most amazing eyes. Like she reads Zen paradoxes and understands them."

"I meant," Mikey says, "do you think she's a good climber?"

"Oh," they both say.

"IT'S FUNNY HOW you can think totally irrationally," Stretched says. "I should have gone up after him as soon as he got stuck, but I thought it was more important not to embarrass him. But do you know what's even worse—when he yelled at me I

actually got frightened! He yelled at me to stay the fuck where I was and I froze, too. It was like I was a little kid being yelled at by a schoolteacher. Mikey was the one who could have died any minute and here I was, ready to wet my pants." He shakes his head in disgust. "I didn't realise I was so hopeless in a crisis."

Everything is going well before Mikey's solo climb. Laura has, to the delight of Crushed and Stretched, just started calling Mikey "Pogostick". She's referring to the way Mikey bounces enthusiastically as he walks, as though he's accompanied by his own anthem. Someone pointed it out to Mikey years ago and when he remembers he walks steady and flat until he forgets and the bouncing returns. Mikey retorts by challenging her to climb the next rock solo.

Laura laughs. "Come on, let's call it a day."

But Mikey's hooked on the idea of a solo climb, without any equipment. He thinks it might be just what he needs to break the curse. Crushed says he's trying to impress Laura. Mikey says if he wanted to do that he'd just take off his shirt. And he can try the new climb, kill two birds with one stone, as it were. "And when Mikey starts using clichés," Stretched says, "you know there's no stopping him."

Mikey yells and Stretched tries to appeal to the technical expert in him. "All right, there's a small finger jamb about a metre away from your left finger, and a small foothold for your right foot, if you just traverse out . . ." But Mikey doesn't move and Stretched feels as you do when you're giving a really bad public speech and you're left listening with a certain wonder to the sound of your own voice. "Whenever someone panics it's always your brother who talks them through it," Stretched tells me, allowing himself a small smile. "The problem was, of course, that we needed Mikey down the bottom."

Stretched unfreezes and goes behind a tree to harness up, cursing himself for not doing it sooner. Crushed goes to help him. Laura steps up to the rock. "Hey Mikey," she yells, her voice conversational, "I bet you know *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, don't you?"

I START READING *The Beauty Myth* in Year 11, when Mikey is in his first year at uni. He looks at the cover and snorts. He reads a few lines of the back cover then throws it on the table. He looks at me like a child who's been punished and doesn't understand his crime. "What *are* these books?" he almost shouts. "What are they doing?! What are they *trying* to do?"

I challenge him to read it from cover to cover and he accepts. He takes it into the bath and stays there for hours. The next morning he puts it beside my breakfast plate and cups it in his hands, as though it's a small animal.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I know I should look out for you but I just don't think about things like that. *We* don't think about things like that. It's not . . . part of our world. But don't forget . . ." He presses his fingers to his temples, as though he's trying to force the correct words from his brain. "Don't forget, men do things like this to other men. I mean, I know it's different, but we're not one coherent, happy group. Men exclude *men*, too."

The next day I hear him on the phone to Crushed. "Mate, you have to read it," he is saying. "It will *totally* change the way you see women."

A few weeks later he announces he's not going back to university. Dad tells him he should stick with it, but Mikey says it's not what he thought it would be.

"It's just not me," he says. "I'm just not an Engineer."

"Well what *are* you then?" Mum asks innocently.

"Yeah. Exactly." The back door slams behind him and he doesn't come home for three days. When he does he sits the public service exam. He gets excellent marks but he still has to start at the bottom, filing and processing mail. He discovers the bricks in the building he works in are large and irregular and make excellent holds. At lunchtime his boss finds him outside, climbing the walls.

CRUSHED ASKS LAURA if she's totally lost the plot but she just keeps talking: "Go on, I bet you do. In fact, I bet that's what got you interested in adventures in the first place. You probably read the poem and imagined yourself in the middle of Antarctica, quoting *The ice was all around* bit to the penguins. I know I did. So how does that stanza go?"

Mikey grunts more expletives.

"Come on Mikey, I've always wanted to see

someone up a rock reciting poetry. Make it a real performance piece—Crushed and Stretched can do some interpretive movement down this end. Go on."

And Mikey's body seems to relax as he catches on to what Laura is doing. She's standing to the left of him, so he only has to turn his head slightly downwards to look at her. He takes a deep breath and expels it noisily. *"The ice was here, the ice was there / The ice was all around / It cracked and growled and roared and howled / Like noises in a swound"* he quotes slowly. He looks at his fingers as if seeing them for the first time. He looks above him, seems to realise it's ludicrous to continue going up, then slowly climbs back down the rock.

When Laura tells me her version, I ask her how she knew it would work. "I read somewhere that when people panic it's not so much that they forget to breathe, it's more that they tend to focus too much on breathing and start to hyperventilate. They need something to take their mind off it. And Mikey seems to respond to challenges, but I just thought he needed a non-stressful one," she says. She's wearing the same clothes as the boys, with the exception of a pink bandana around her hair, which looks unpretentious and feminine. "You know, if you asked a literary professor to quote Coleridge and he couldn't he'd get stressed, because he'd feel shown up. Everyone likes to be able to quote poetry, but someone like Mikey wouldn't mind if he couldn't." She starts laughing. "I'm not really making sense, am I? But you see what I mean? And I guess when you quote poetry it makes you breathe regularly."

I ask her how she knew Mikey knew the poem.

"He named one of his first climbs *The Albatross*. I read about it in *Gripped Off Me Scone*." She laughs at the look on my face. "See—some people really do read it for the articles."

I GO OVER to Mikey's house a few weeks later. He's packing a backpack. He says he's going to have one more try at the rock. He tells me he needs to climb it while he's at the peak of his fitness and before the bolts brigade gets to it. He sprained his ankle coming down the rock, and I point out that with his injury he's not really at the peak of his fitness, but he ignores me. I then try saying it doesn't really matter if the sports climbers get to it first, but he looks up at me with a grim smile. "It does to me," he says.

He stuffs a pair of socks into his backpack. "But do you know what is interesting—when I came down it was different to the way I went up. I mean, I came down a different way. And it was much simpler, much more elegant. So there could be a perfect route in there, after all."

It's the first time he's talked about what happened on the rock. I ask him if the others are going with him and he tells me Stretched and Crushed are interstate for work.

"What about Laura?"

"She's concentrating on cycling for a few weeks, to build up her thigh muscles before she comes out climbing again. I tell you what, she's either the wisest person I've ever met or the most annoying."

I tell him wise people *are* annoying, and he says yeah, and some people are just plain annoying. When I press him to tell me who's going with him he says nobody. I start to ask if he's being wise himself, and he turns to me, angrily.

"Get off my back, okay! I can't exactly have somebody following me around quoting poetry every time I can't do something, can I?"

He gives me a push and apologises for getting angry. He asks me to pass him his sleeping bag. As I do a small book falls out of it onto the floor. Mikey picks it up. "Did you put this here?" he asks. It's a pocket version of Coleridge's poems. He stares at it.

"So is this encouragement or a slap in the face?"

I tell him it will give him something to think about on the long lonely hike. He picks up his backpack, which looks suspiciously light. I say he has to promise me he's going to use protection and he says I sound like an O-week leader. I persist and he rolls his eyes.

"Of course I'll use protection," he says, looking at his watch. "I might be a fool but I'm not suicidal."

He's borrowing Stretched's car, so he has to walk a few blocks to get to his mate's house. He says goodbye and I watch him walking down the road, treading lightly on his injured foot, suppressing his bounce.

Buried water

I.

I walk this land of spinifex
and twisted scrub that hugs the earth,
a print with toes that skirt around
middens black lapped red by soil.
I walk to walk forever, listening
to secrets hid like Lasseter's reef,
the wind burdens my tracks,
sticks lie bleached as bones.
This land of buried water
I pass,
to forget
to remember.

II.

Faced with a land of unknown boundaries
the new arrivals didn't dally;
stones were pried from the earth
forming stacks toward the sky,
Flinders' masons were making prisons
for themselves to occupy.

It may have seemed like freedom
those first nights housed by stars,
and ringed by guards who fighting sleep
pointed their guns to the unknown.
Lounging by the first walls of stone
hands bloodied from the start.

III.

They travelled westward
on bow headed horses
and gun slung camel
searching for an inland sea,
Listening for the cries
Of white birds.

But the pelicans had left long ago,
boots crunched and eyes bled
under the glare of the salt pan.

IV.

With the cattle came the word.
Amongst the blue ranges
the mob were set free
and god's children were
rounded up from the wilderness.

V.

Red dunes still move
secretly on night winds.
We turn our backs
to hide their advance
over things that grow.

In this discovered land
of unknown possibilities
we have learnt to endure
the thirst of buried water.

LUKE ALEXEYEFF

The Esso Building

Black as a natural disaster
Susan Norrie might paint,
yet smooth, as though the artist
changed her mind, took an instrument and scraped,
this is sleek,
keeps the public
out, on sunny Southbank.

Fourteen stories of
Thou Shalt Not
can't stop me from imagining the atrium
of tropical species, fountains,
replascape sweating
the offices
oozing shopping in air-conditioning,
and somewhere close to an island another tanker
wrenched
by Atlantic power, splits
to spill its guts.

You can smooth it out boys,
so much.

AMANDA WILSON

Smart City

On the net
corporate monuments sprout
without rain, glass shoots
like a miracle,
the real unbuilt on the virtual screen's
complete.

Be elite, click
lifestyle
purchasing details,
waterside precinct ticket.

With this image,
you don't need to visit
the place is a bombsite.

AMANDA WILSON

With Burning Lips

Out beyond the break the dark surfers bob and drift
with the swell, peering into the distance as if the next set
will bring the one wave worth waiting for.
I walk beside you on the sand, telling you about Kate,
why I don't want to marry her, trying to find the courage
to end it. Not wishing to hurt her that badly,
but knowing I can't put it off any longer. Is there anything
as valuable as a friend who will lay your feelings
out before you, like the line marking off the wet and dry sand?
It's possible to find an equation for the pattern the tide makes
and each tiny undulation is both predetermined
and unpredictable. The chaos of nature. Wind howls
around us, smoke rises from the coke smelter,
a container ship inches across the horizon.
You smile reassuringly and suggest fish and chips.
How lucky I am to know you. My aunt the nun.
Full of talk, unless you're in front of the TV, your gaze
fixed on the screen with all the inevitability of high tide.
'It's good catechetical material,' you explain and launch
into an inspired reading of the dullest Hollywood vehicle,
delivering the gospel according to the Sunday night movie.

*

A few years earlier, driving through a *barrio* in Lima,
I turn to the Columbian priest I'm staying with and ask,
"What's that man carrying on his back?" Glimpsed
through the window, a sheet of thatching on his shoulders,
tilted at the sky. "It's his house," Tom Ryan replies.
The rubbish piled in the street, then burnt each night.
Raw sewage flowing down the dirt road as a man
carries his house up to the land invasion on the summit.
So rocky and barren it could be Golgotha. On Christmas Eve
the church is thrown into darkness. Not *Sendero Luminoso*
blowing up another power station, but a star and a candle
gliding down from the choir loft, gliding on fishing twine
until the star rests above the stable on the altar.
A boy's glorious soprano floats after the flame, soaring.
Frat atat tat, frat atat tat. Masked men from the *campo*
follow the star, streamers trailing out from their costumes,
boots thudding against the concrete floor. Dance of the Three
Wise Men. Then Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus, bawling.
The liturgy continues, but Jesus will not stop howling,
so Joseph takes the baby from Mary, lifts up his gown
and raises the boy's head to the nipple. The first Joseph
to breastfeed in public—a miracle of casting.

Later that night, I lose Tom, visiting house after house,
kissing cheeks, sipping hot chocolate, dancing with Vivian,
an American aid worker. When Tom finally finds me
he is furious, frantic for my safety, ranting about "that woman",
convinced she is a CIA informer, and much worse,
intent on luring priests away from their vocation.
Christmas Day in the Chapter House, I eat a Peruvian salad,
orange *habaneros* flaming in my throat, spot fires raging
in my mouth, radiant heat singeing my lips. The walls move
and I soar above the table in ecstasy. Like the first time
I made love. Ever since I've been trying to recapture
the intensity, a chilli freak longing for sweat behind my ears,
endorphins buzzing, that amber sun inside my head.

Lurigancho prison. Fed-up with the overcrowded conditions,
waiting years for trials while drug dealers buy freedom
in a week, a group of prisoners take three nuns
and a social worker hostage. After a day of negotiating,
the prisoners leave the grounds in an ambulance.
At the gates they're fired on from all sides. "We were shooting
at the tyres," the police say, but they're either very bad shots
or liars. Eight prisoners and one nun die. They drag the dead
and the half-dead by their ankles and pile them up.
Shirts and trousers soaked, blood congealing
around noses, blood dripping off feet. One man's groin
over another man's mouth. The asexual postures of the dead.
The gruesome wounds of terracotta Christs, lashed high
on their crosses in countless Latin American churches. Joan Sawyer,
the nun, hit by four bullets, one through the back of her neck.
We carry her coffin up Avenida Tupac Amaru, the cemetery
a good three hours march through the hot, stinking streets.
A huge procession of people chanting, "*Basta ya! Vida sí, muerte no!*"

*

I sit by your bed in St Vincent's hospital. Your skin yellow,
your eyes closed. If I'm lucky you will wake and speak to me.
You have given others ways of reading their lives, walking
with them as they stumble towards understanding.

According to the Enneagram, your redeemed totem
is an Irish setter, her coat sleek with warmth. I wonder
what film you would use to explain death.
"Cancer's a terrible thing," you say, rolling your chin
awkwardly on the pillow. I would like to comfort
you, talk, but I can only sit. Your name like a flame
on my tongue. Sister Marguerite McIntyre.

Sometimes we choose our companions,
mentors, lovers—and sometimes we are picked up
and carried, turned over and over and dumped
in the sand. I like to remember that day, not
the antiseptic odour of hospital corridors.
The squawking of the bossy gull as he tries to hog
all the chips. The brilliant glow of my headlights
as I see you hesitate, look back at me and smile.

ANDY KISSANE

Guadalupe

They call my bus the Marco Polo, but it is going nowhere.
Stranded ninety miles north of Mexico City;
surrounded by the liberated sierras of Subcommandante Marcos.
A feathered serpent of tail lights snaking in the darkness.

So, *buenas noches*, my love.
Forgive me, *por favor*; do not forget me.

I am waiting upon Our Lady of Guadalupe. A glorietta in balaclava
—toting a guerrilla's bouquet—she blockades the highway
while I, some kind of pilgrim,
cannot find the words to pray.

JOEL DEANE

from *Farm poems*

Is there no way
back to that place
where the sun burns
deep inside you
dirt swallows you
and distance keeps going?
where light slashes the wheat
and sheep drop dead
or wander the desert
howling for shade?

that place you will never reach
where a house
wobbles in the heat
its one window
facing away
from the rest of the world

dad saws at the roast
his voice cuts the bone
dam's dry
mum bangs down a glass
sinking teeth into towns
Quambatook
Manangatang
Patchewollock
that pour out like gravy
dust in her mouth
wheat on her lips
prices are falling

as if calling you
to follow the lines of sheep tracks
beginning and ending nowhere
her voice coming through
a hot wind
gone in an instant

PAULA GREEN

consummate

american psychology flirts with my wallet
hi have a nice day
trance me trap me I'm yours for the taking
and by the way,
let's fake a little intimacy
I can be so inadequate
in certain lighting,
what can I do for you?
PRETENSIONS PAY
sell me this sell me that sell me
subject me to property
let this plastic heat
disconnect me
and authorise my transaction
enhance me just
let me pay let me pay
let me . . .

please

LOUISE MOLLOY

alternative

a gathering of choosers
no choice but to be free
tries to find a loophole
that cuts the chain but keeps the lead

'it's a collar
not a manacle,
the chaffing's nearly stopped!'
'the fence ain't barbed,
it's heritage,
the smartest on the block'

the group discusses strategy
dilemmas to be teased
where reality and reason
usurp harassed integrity

'the discipline,
it helps us think,
to think outside the square'
'one foot in and
one foot out,
no further or beware'

believer in the corner
a dilettante and fraud
finds a pleasing basis
to sign his name but trash his word

'constitutions
provide freedom,
to run the place sincere'
'democracy
is boring work,
the people interfere'

the meeting closes business
the men go home to live
singing their new anthem
'viva bourgeois alternative!!'

TERRY EYSSENS

Always Bush Logic

It always rains,
after the black cockatoos
have screeched past,
heavily marking the air
with big black wings,
next day, next week or
even next year.

And country death
always comes in threes
sadly, inevitably,
next day, next week or
next year—
and if there are four,
the last is obviously
first of the next trio.

And here in September
it always rains,
though in some years,
you get it early
in August, and,
sometimes if it's late,
September rains
come pissing down
in October.

WALTER VIVIAN

Lying in State

Who lies foremost,
in the nation's forums,
in the legislature,
on the airwaves
and, also, sadly,
in the graveyard
of honest reputation?

WALTER VIVIAN

Vivat Spellcheck

by Lofo

How computer softwear can make you're writing as foldless as that of the most extinguished professor

'Car full,' he billowed, 'that dog has a viscous tamper!'

A bumbled bee sampling the neck tar of a tropical flour.

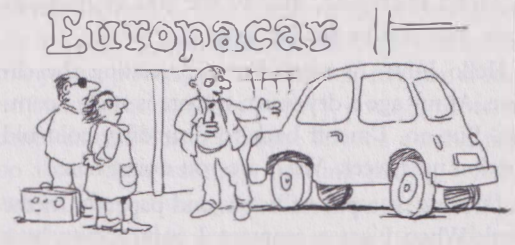
Calibrating the Age of Aquarium.

The hole perish giving tanks to the crater.

Soldering often means paying the ultimate orifice.

Making wicks and other hare pieces for Hollywood stairs.

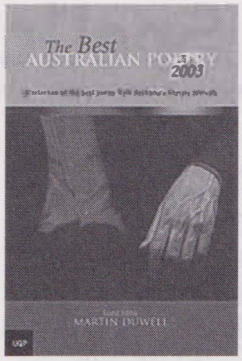
'My quarry is knot with you,' consisted the stoned mason.

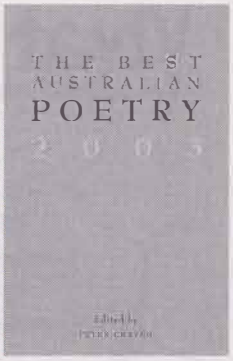


Special rats apply for weak ends.

Our Grand Mother is always compliant about too much violins on television.

Buying an engorgement ring on higher purchase.





THE BEST POETRY: A DIALOGUE

THE CHARACTERS:

John Leonard (JL): poetry editor of *Overland* (Not to be confused with John Leonard the anthologist.) Everyman (E): after a theatrical debut in the late fifteenth century, Everyman was associated with the literary world in England for several centuries. In the early twentieth century London publishers Dent asked him to edit their Everyman's Library.

THE WORKS DISCUSSED:

Martin Duwell (ed): *The Best Australian Poetry 2003* (UQP, $20)

Peter Craven (ed): *The Best Australian Poems 2003* (Black Inc. $29.95)

SCENE: The Coffee Shop in the National Library, Canberra

JL: Hello Everyman, nice to see you in Australia again. Will you be staying long?

E: Hello John. As usual I'm appreciating the climate. At my age a dry warm climate is such a comfort. But no, I'm off back to dear dirty cold old London next week. What are you doing here?

JL: [Waving at a pile of books and papers] Oh the usual. When I get a moment I come down here and pick over whatever amuses me.

E: What's this here? [picks up a book] *The Best Australian Poetry 2003*. Really, I'm surprised!

JL: Oh, ignore that 'The Best', it's like 'Super' with washing powder, just something the publishers feel will help the book sell.

E: And what are the poems like?

JL: Well, apart from the ones published in *Quadrant* . . .

E: What's *Quadrant*?

JL: It's a journal dedicated to proving various quixotic hypotheses. For example, for a long time it's been trying to prove that there were no massacres of Aboriginal people in Australia during the colonisation process.

E: None at all?

JL: None whatsoever.

E: In England we have a group of people called the British Israelites . . .

JL: That's about the level, though the British Israelites at least have nobler motives. But anyway, I was just about to say that apart from those *The Best* is pretty middle-of-the-road . . . reprints the poems that the editor considers the best from various Australian literary journals from the past year.

E: And what do they tell you about the state of poetry in Australia?

JL: Well they don't surprise me; looking at these I recognise the sorts of poetry that we get submitted to *Overland* . . . Tell me, you've been around a long time, what would you say are the characteristics of successful poetry written in English?

E: Oh, that's put me on the spot; how to generalise about poetry all the way from my good friend Skelton to . . . Let's see: straightforward and only complex when necessary, passionate, poetry where the syntax is active, where the poem is an argument, not just a rhetorical set-piece, where you feel that the poet is actively engaged in thinking, where there's some sort of drama . . . Does that help?

JL: Oh yes, thank you.

E: And is any of the poetry in this anthology like that?

JL: Not much. If that is your definition of poetry and what you look for, you'll have poor pickings

here. What we do get here are many leisurely descriptive poems . . .

E: Ah, I know that you're very severe on descriptive poetry.

JL: I just feel descriptive poetry is all very well, but most poets who write it seem to think that their descriptions are sufficient in themselves. I find these poems rather dull and I'm waiting for the point of the poem to emerge, but it never seems to. Reading poetry like this is like looking at people's holiday snaps: obviously they mean something to the authors, but it's difficult to see how the authors can expect anyone else to be interested. I mean, everybody has feelings and emotions, and everybody's feelings and emotions are terribly important to themselves, the difficulty is writing them into a poem so that they become important to anyone else. And another thing is that a great deal of this poetry is concerned with the natural world, but all these poems seem strangely detached from the natural world, like watching TV programs about nature rather than experiencing it. Where did I underline that line? Ah yes, here. Alex Skovron, in one poem, describes birds as 'flowing'. Now I've seen an awful lot of birds in my time, probably many more than Alex (I'm a very keen bird-watcher), and I have to say I've never seen one flowing.

E: So you think most of these poems are bad?

JL: No. I just think they're typical, which means not very good. Here are some bad poems. [Pulls out another volume from the pile.]

E: *The Best Australian Poems 2003*, hum, a rather thick volume. What's the difference between this one and the one you showed me just then?

JL: This one is assembled by Peter Craven, from poems that have been published, or which he has solicited from the poets. None of the poems has appeared yet in collections. There are a lot of names in common between the two volumes (and one poem), but in general the poets in Peter Craven's anthology are older and more established.

E: And what does that mean?

JL: Well, if you look at the Duwell anthology the poems are on average two pages long, in Craven's three or even four. These poems are even more leisurely and literary, to my mind much more diluted than the poems in the first volume. And they have far more pretensions—there's so much literary and cultural capital in this volume, it's the literary analogue of the baby boomers' fortune in superannuation, but like that sum of money the literary capital here is completely inert, it doesn't do anything. And there's the same sort of revelling in the descriptive, and the same sort of detachment from nature in natural descriptions, only on a more expansive scale. Here's another of my underlinings: Robert Adamson has a series of poems in this book about birds (which, by the way, don't tell us very much about either birds or us), and in the poem about the Ruff helpfully tells us: "Ruff's a word from the sixteenth century".

E: Very helpful. So you wouldn't say that any of the poems in this volume is any good?

JL: No look, of course you can go through this book, and the other one, and of course you can find poems and poets that are better than others. For example John Kinsella is a poet we often publish in *Overland* and his poetry in these volumes is like a breath of fresh air. And, you know, you can see that certain poets are better than the others: Dorothy Porter, MTC Cronin, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Peter Minter, Bruce Dawe . . . On the other hand there are some truly abysmal moments. Alan Wearne has a poem in Craven's anthology headed: 'The speaker is a Uniting Church minister ordained in middle age whose lover teaches at a girl's [sic] school'.

E: Why the Uniting Church?

JL: Why indeed? But really with this volume, it's the overall impression that appals: these poems generally are so very dull, there are not many satires, not many love poems, no nonsense poetry (or at least no intentional nonsense poetry), no arguments, no contestation. I can't imagine anyone getting fired up about these volumes; thinking back to when I was an angry and angst-ridden teenager these sorts of volumes used to depress me even further—there's no way I would ever have read one—and now I'm middle-aged they depress me just as much. You know, particularly in the Craven volume, there's an enormous emphasis on culture, heritage and history and many historical allusions and poems about events in history generally and in Australian history, but they are all allusions to *accepted* interpretations—they mean just what they usually mean. And in both volumes you have to look very hard for the word 'if'. Everything is just so. And—I could go on and on—I don't want to be picky, but why in 500 pages

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of contemporary Australian poetry are there only three or four references to Indigenous Australia, and rather trivial ones at that? I mean, I live in Canberra, but I think these poems show a sheltered outlook.

E: Was it you who was telling me about the two schools of Australian poetry, you know, the American influence? Is that still working?

JL: I think there was a general idea of two schools of Australian poetry from the 1970s onwards, the more conservative looking back to English poetry, emphasising European Australia's traditional rural heritage, and a more cosmopolitan, outward-looking poetry that borrowed from American models. The American influence came to Australia in the sixties and seventies along with invert corn syrup and hydrogenated vegetable oils. What is startling, and very well demonstrated by the Craven anthology in particular, is that any good effect the American influence had seems entirely to have dissipated, and writers who were once placed in those two opposing schools, Les Murray and John Tranter, for example, seem to be writing much the same sort of poetry these days. A relaxed sort of poetry, the sort of poetry our Prime Minister would be wanting us to read, how concerned he is that we are all comfortable. Real Horatian stuff: you know it doesn't matter whether it's Maecenas or the Australia Council you want to impress, the result is pretty much the same: 'life is short, the life of the senses is precious and valuable, toady to the rich on all possible occasions . . .'

E: [Leafing through] But I say, here's an amusing satire on George W. Bush . . .

JL: Yes, by Jennifer Maiden, which is fine. But you have to think that George W will be gone in five years; it's very convenient to think that all the bad in the world can be laid at the feet of bogey men, but you have to ask why it is that you have these rogue presidents like George W, Reagan and Nixon, and you have more presentable ones like Carter and Clinton, but Corporate America carries on behaving exactly the same whoever is in charge---even an Al Gore presidency wouldn't have been very different. And that's my beef with these poems: no analysis. I don't expect poetry to look like policy documents or political theory, but after it has finished dealing with eternal human verities (which by the way not many of the poems in these volumes seem to do: they stick to the contemporary verities pretty much), you'd like to have a little bit of thought about contemporary events . . . especially in volumes which purport to show the best in Australian poetry.

E: And that's the sort of poetry you print in *Overland*?

JL: Yes, we try to print poetry that gives some thought to the world we live in. I like to think that we publish poetry by young poets who haven't yet been corrupted by the allure of official literature, or older poets who haven't ever been corrupted. A great deal of the poetry that is in these two volumes is just so damn self-satisfied, it's a great relief to know that in forty or fifty years time they will look so comical.

E: Ha, ha, I know exactly what you mean, you mean those volumes you see in second-hand bookshops like *The Best Poems of 1966* or *The Best Poems of 1933*. Firstly with these they're always in very good condition (never having been read much), secondly you've never heard of the editors, thirdly the poems are awful and the poets forgotten, and, with hindsight, not even representative! Will you be trying to publish your own anthology?

JL: Not me. One of the problems that these anthologies reveal is that, if anything, there is overpublication of poetry.

E: What do you mean?

JL: Whenever people say to me that poetry is in danger I always tell them that poetry isn't in the slightest danger; a thousand years hence people will still be composing poetry. Then I get all paradoxical and annoying and tell them that it's prose that's in danger, but they don't understand. And the reason why little poetry is sold nowadays is quite sim-

ple: people can easily see through it. They continue to buy bad prose because you can still do things with bad prose, but poetry is too close to real thought, and people know they're not getting the genuine article. And of course these two anthologies will do nothing to help sales of poetry (if that's what you think is important).

E: I think we're thinking along the same lines. Do you believe that we are nearing a point where a profound shift in our way of thinking is happening?

JL: I do; well either that or the pressure of events and change will cause a profound shift (it's often not easy to see which caused what). But the fact the poetry in these volumes simply fails to address any of the real issues that face us—the ravening global corporate culture, the approaching end of the Carbon Age (who knows what will happen when the cheap oil runs out?, though you can make good guesses), massive environmental disruption through climate change—is symptomatic. In a generation or two we, or our children, will be living in a world profoundly different from ours, and, compared to the present, probably a world that will be extremely unpleasant, and all these establishment poets can do is write their nice cosy little hymns to complacency. And all the while there is huge discontent and anger, but it never finds an outlet, mainly I guess because people are smart enough to realise that most of the alternatives put forward are part of the same problem. They can see that what we are given—politics, art, literature, productions of any kind—are just not very good. They can see that a society in which people are defined by what they consume, rather than what they do, is one that can't, ultimately, be very satisfying . . .

E: Or last long.

JL: Well now that we've had this conversation, you'll have to tell me about the state of poetry in Britain, though I suspect we may already have covered it. Let's go and get a drink, and you must tell me that story about Shakespeare again. What did you say he said about your play?

[Exeunt]

What We Actually See: new poetry

KERRY LEVES

Richard Hillman: *Jabiluka Honey* (Bookends Books, $16.50)

A journey into the Australian tropical wetlands and deserts; into "shaven-headed distance" where "tabletop stumps open palms/ leave silver coins in afternoon sun". It's moody and impressionistic, yet edges its floating lyrics with political and social commitment. The on-hold Jabiluka and the 'operational' Ranger uranium mines, held by Energy Resources Australia (Rio Tinto Ltd is its major shareholder), sit in Kakadu National Park. The struggle of the Mirrar people, to gain jurisdiction over their traditional lands in the place, spans thirty years. The poet is a visitor, accompanied by family but also alone. Questioning laws and maps, his poems write themselves into a language of desire, for belonging not ownership. He is a motorist, "trapped in the process of catching up"; there are "snaking clay-red trails and a blue/ hand tearing a hole in a sky unmade for our eyes". Estrangement, "making strange", is a function of the implied poet's English, which must try to evoke "ideas/ speaking out of tongue", along with water and dust, heat and sweat, floodplain and jungle. The land becomes "something/ we dig into with parrot eyes from/ dry bush steeples", while we "share space with the absurdly sun-split word, 'coo-ee'/ the torn shifting vowel, a splinter of conscience . . ." The poem 'My Country, Sometimes' is very good on the self-consciousness in protest actions; its setting is a rally where human contact gets frozen by propaganda, as in Baudrillard's "universe of persuasion". Other poems can be melancholy or bitter on these processes: "politicians & clergy singing/ empty songs of lounge-room sorrow/ in cinemas of common despair". More reasons for bitterness, perhaps: on 26 March this year, the Mirrar website reported the Ranger mine had shut down after 150,000 litres of water contaminated with uranium, to five times the Australian drinking water standard, spilled into the landscape. Two days earlier, mine workers at Ranger were exposed to uranium-contaminated water, at 400 times the drinking water standard. It's alleged there have been over 115 "leaks, spills and operat-

ing breaches at ERA's uranium operations in Kakadu". Richard Hillman's poems present the land as "the gift grafted to these gossip-thin/ stems of life, these/ status swollen lines/ as simple as ancestry/ or treachery".

| Liat Kirby: *Curving my eyes to almonds* (Papyrus Press, $16.45)

Lyricism that questions its own premises—what are the cultural (or discursive) foundations of its "I"?—and could be read equally as feminist and as conservative, even curatorial, traditional Jewish places and behaviours. The poetry asserts and demonstrates its affinities with music and with dance, with a body creating movement in space, historical time implicit in its lines: "to dance on stones/ with bare feet . . ./ to find the pulse of a word/ is to touch centuries." The spare and rhythmic writing conjures a past, a now, a future, using words—simple enough in their denotative meanings—that can startle in this context of restless sifting. A poem about Jerusalem's Wailing Wall offers "Cracks and crevices,/ cleft for human form/ as paper, scrap and crumpled,/ speaks to G-d", and a subtext of inquiry—who petitions? Identity, in the eponymous poem, is based on "words" that "form the shape/ of forgetting", and is as labile as a candle flame. The poems also invoke traditions other than the Jewish: "I walk the circumference of Buddha—/ monks chanting/ mountains encircling/ a single butterfly glides velvet through the air,/ nearly within reach."

| Jan Owen: *Timedancing* (fip, $16.95)

It's extremely creative—sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures are laid on, at a cracking pace. The opening travel poems (set in Malaysia, in night street-markets, daytime buses, by rivers and temples, in twilit back-alleys and on heat-struck hotel afternoons) are a *made* word-music using half-rhymes, assonance and dissonance to create an embodied voice. This 'voice' concerns itself also with a conceptual framework, invoking Dante, Escher, Fibonacci, Michelangelo et al, by small, closely-worked figures of speech. The implied poet can thus be read as a Cartesian *cogito*, operating at the shimmering boundaries of The Other. It's very normative, though skilfully done. There are also some powerful translations of Baudelaire (including 'Poison'), which echo nineteenth-century prosody, but use English rather than French metrics. These can seem to amplify the originals. They clarify Baudelaire as a maker of poetic objects rather than a raver (which can be an unfortunate effect of prose translations in Baudelaire's case). Only sometimes Owen's chosen register pins down tones and meanings that might be better left ambivalent, or moody rather than exact. This occasional sense of the over-explicit may have to do with the differences between English and French, about which the poet/translator writes, quite compellingly, in 'Translations' (*Southerly*, 63:1, 2003). *Timedancing* addresses a copious quantity of artifacts, from Japanese prints to contemporary sculptures, and poets as diverse as Kevin Hart and Ania Walwicz; but at times Owen's text appears to stage its own show of rhetorical seams: "Should you concentrate on the rail/ timetable concept of art/ or the Freudian call to prayer?"

| Rebecca Edwards: *Holiday Coast Medusa* (fip, $16.95)

In the androcentric Greek myth, Medusa was the only mortal among the three gorgons, so terrible-looking that the sight of her turned viewers to stone. All the same, she slept with sea-god Poseidon in Athene's temple, and for this lapse, Athene arranged to have her decapitated by Perseus. Rebecca Edwards updates this story and places it under the sign of doubt—"How can I sing to you, Medusa, when you never were?/ It's written, here, look, classicists, world authorities, say so:/ you are only the mask." What, Edwards's text seems to ask, might this story be masking? *Holiday Coast Medusa* recasts it as a journey down the Queensland coast, with the far-from-terrible-looking Steph ("She finds her dress by touch, at the bottom of her bag,/ a long pink sheath for her silver body/ a miracle of nylon and stars") in the Medusa role, and Poseidon (boss of "Poseidon's Casino") a letching opportunist and power-tripper. The men in this tale don't have a lot going for them—disco hopefuls with see-through seduction routines (though some have "elegant hips"); underworld bigwigs; a hit-man—but the villain here is also narrative itself, which hooks the reader into expecting a violent end. The suspense pays off, but the foregrounding of reader participation—we construct a story from evocative text, decorative woodcuts (the poet's own), and silent white space—invokes the not-so-soft-voice-of-the-serpent. Some readers may find the most poignant aspect to be the linking of an at-times interventionist narrator, with the war-loving Athene of ancient and contemporary myth ("adviser to

Odysseus, Cortez and Bush"), and a Brisbane sculptor with a built-in chill factor, Thene, who uses Steph as a model but withholds empathy. Edwards's line is leaner than in her previous collection *Scar Country*, and the playing-out of the ritual, among bars, hotel rooms, squats and low-rent 'arty' digs, from Rockhampton to the banks of the Brisbane River, is nuanced, full of traces of a recognisable, even a communal life, though one in which relations between the sexes are bloody and war-like.

| Stephen Edgar: *Lost in the Foreground* (Duffy & Snellgrove, $22)

Jacques Derrida might not be tickled to 'discover', on page 8 of this text, an originary maker: "His mouth's cargo of spittle and red ochre/ On the array/ Of his five fingers, clear, indelible . . ./ The maker's hand becoming what it made." However, the formal 'making' of Edgar's texts is often elegant and intricate; the vocal patterns can be sonorous; the welding of burnished images and tonally modulated metrics can hold, seduce, persuade a reader. The poems 'Unattended' and 'The Book of the Dead' are stunning instances, making magic that extends beyond the rather privileged stockade of their vocabulary and manner. But the brilliance of this book's first third proves hard to sustain. The poetry is quite insistently 'about' its own form, and is committed to rhyming. Alas for a reader: as the clench of rhyme tightens, the content thins out, nowhere more blatantly than in 'Arcadia', eleven elegiac stanzas in memory of Gwen Harwood. Here a six-beat metre is stepped into short line-phrases; the effect is to chop a relentless rhyme-scheme into staccato bursts, rat-tat-tatting the reader into a near sense-free zone. The shorter the lines, the worse it gets. The poem 'Observations of an Attendant' (longer lines, the rhymes less in-your-face) might have been more suitably dedicated to Harwood, as it's remindful of her spare and searching irony. Elsewhere some Kafkaesque soliloquies on contemporary life have got menace, and at moments a good, nasty, comic rhymer—like a surprise twenty-first-century descendant of Hilaire Belloc—breaks out: "A brick wall halts/ A pram's/ Attempt at the land speed record, with somersaults." Perverse, maybe, but lively, precise and non-elegiac.

| Ashlley Morgan-Shae: *Love Trash* (fip, $16.95)

Non-stop excitement, that lasts long past the 'I've read it' moment. As the 'I' of the poems moves from party to auction sale to op shop to bed, and from lover to lover, the topic is 'revealed'—a bit like the way a seventies dance floor mirror-ball appears both sphere and edgy mosaic—as *writing*. The city of these poems ("You must come away to Melbourne/ City of moral tales/ Listen to the tattle of the street") is also a contest of writings: on a tram, is "Fare Evasion" a "Crime" or a "Cruisy Caper"? Might an on-the-outer boyfriend win a second chance by signing his keep-the-door-open gift card with (only) "a rat by any other name"? In *Love Trash*'s city the "marginalised" don't so much "write back" to a hidden but recognisable (read, after Audre Lorde, "thin, white, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, financially secure") "centre", as reinvent "the centre" by rewriting the apparent traces of its code. This "(re)inventing" is fragmentary and momentary, but also continual. Important to *Love Trash*'s self-scripting palimpsest, then, are clothes: op-shopped decades out of the historical spaces where, once, they mirrored 'fashion', clothes are reinscribed here as vocab-and-syntax of pleasure, e.g. a turquoise silk coat "trimmed with crystal beads glowing like a coral-reef"; and as a discourse of social identity that equally mimics and shatters the peremptory demand of the (post)modern economy: *change!* The extravagant (yet thrifty) journey of the poems doubles itself—the "street flash" surface (which conserves what is pleasurable) mirrors another, "the west" (suburbs, "not a pretty village") where "No-one remarks on new bruises/ 'Cause everyone has their own". Oral wordings may be formulaic—"my friendlyboy says, 'I love you' and I tell him it's his dick/ talking"—but writing puts wider possibilities in play. Ashlley Morgan-Shae turns on a powerhouse text.

| Aileen Kelly: *City and Stranger* (fip, $16.95)

Working in areas of lyricism and feeling that are, in fact, extremely difficult to 'work', is why the delicacy and understated gravity of poems such as 'A new and accvrat mappe', 'The discipline of Noh', 'Valediction: forbidding mourning', and 'Winter journey', are worth noticing. But the genre has its traps, such as set-pieces that wear thin (e.g. 'Aftershock'), overwriting ("no one hears/ a fricative cosmos scraping the huddled Earth"), and attitudinising ("bunch up your muscles/ carry your own godburden/ through the clanging wide-eyed streets"). The poem 'After Drysdale', which refers

to the famous painting *Woman in a landscape*, reproduced on the cover, develops a solidly worked, thoughtful statement about poverty and women and work and horizons. But the insistent formality and assiduous structuring of these poems' lyrical 'I' may become oppressive for a reader.

Xuan Duong: *Smiles on Your River* (Integration, $15)

Great, merciless fun at the expense of our boxed-in, 'safety-first', endlessly mediated way of life. Xuan Duong—whose style rearranges itself with each new book—offers a freewheeling discourse that appropriates many divergent varieties of English, including governmental, educational and journalistic, into a playful writing with a subject, and very subjective, 'I', that stings away like a hornet. The fluent text never bores; its fragmentary quality also keeps faith, with twenty-first-century living and dying, with a postmodern dilution of outmoded hierarchical forms, 'big significance', and coercive verbiage.

Louise Wakeling: *medium security* (Gininderra Press, $20)

It's been worth the wait. Louise Wakeling may have been underrated, or at least under-noticed as a poet, for two reasons. Firstly, there hasn't been a collection of her poems since *small rebellions* (1984); secondly, her writing is sufficiently unusual, even original, to give genre taxonomies the slip. Her implied poet shows affinity for defiant spirits: a teenager catching his first wave, or an adventurer such as Freya Stark (1893–1993), the British-born explorer and writer. In the 1930s the multi-lingual Stark travelled alone into the Middle East, from Persia to Yemen, gained local respect, discovered lost cities, and set up an anti-Nazi intelligence system along the journey. Wakeling's poem 'Freya Stark' pays incisive tribute to this brilliant, intrepid woman. It does so with refreshing laconism and with no pretentious over-simplifications. It's characteristic of Wakeling's poetry to behave this way. Another piece, 'the comet of a season' (about Halley's comet), takes on themes (time and history, nature and technology) that would stretch any poet. But here there's no straining after significance, no portentousness; the tone is assured enough to mix strong and intense symbolic images with colloquial commentary. Wakeling's poems build their own dense contexts; this makes them difficult to quote. A trope which serves a particular poem can lose consequence when read in isolation. In Wakeling's text, most phrases, right down to individual words, are to-the-point; apposite. The poem 'an exercise in imagination' sets its protagonists—two urbanites seeking a rural alternative, and a realtor with visionary plans—among their imaginings of a future, for the part-cleared ground the realtor's four-wheel drive is traversing. And the not-identical dreams of this trio of course involve other (absent) people's views of what might be. Meanwhile the land's inhabitants (a death adder, funnel-web spiders, a black snake) and topographic features (a large tree stump) evoke resistance. The whole thing is funny, and poignant, and works obliquely, suggesting a lot in a relatively small space. A longer poem sequence, 'a measure of control', conjures a behind-bars world of petty and more serious crims, and boundaries less stable than walls and razor wire. (Wakeling has taught in the gaol system.) There are, by contrast, exhilarating poems about parenting, about holding tight and letting go; and a subtle one about a night swim, a crocodile, and the unjust consequences. Louise Wakeling has created a poetic language that is lucid, sensuous and charged with meaning; yet her way is to leave the writing open to interpretation. Moral and political positions can be inferred, but the poems are open-ended; they don't box a reader in.

Graeme Hetherington: *A Tasmanian Paradise Lost* (Walleah, $15)

Using language as corrugated, gritty and jagged as a rusty sheet of galvanised iron, the Tasmanian poet forges a long memoir poem. The anecdotes are hammered together into four- and five-line frameworks; what seems like drumbeat rhythm turns out to be flexible enough, at times, to showcase a laconic humorous tone. The content is violent, sexual, knockabout in both the figurative and the literal senses. The gnarled syntax, the chunky abrasive images and the invective work together to evoke a communal life and a language—almost an idiolect—that a reader who grew up poor (or poor-aspiring-to-a-bit-of-gentility) in the 1940s, fifties, or even the early sixties, might recognise, with some sense of shock. It's got its own uncompromising integrity.

Nicolette Stasko: *The Weight of Irises* (Black Pepper, $20)

The quietness—product of tonal control, a deliberate use of reticence and silence—belies a fiery emotional intensity (read the poem-sequences 'Days' and 'The Sea Horse') and a formidable commit-

ment to purpose. That purpose might be read as an exploration of subjectivity that omits autobiography, puts memoir on hold. The self of 'Some Windows' begins with what is visible from the window of a hotel room—various people, doing various things, separated in space, contemporaneous in time—but writes these observations as a meditation on the subject—the subjectivity—that defines itself through the visual/ verbal constructions. "Some windows/ in all the time we watched/ never showed/ a single sign of movement/ and might in fact/ have lately been/ abandoned by the dead/ their pure white/ blinds drawn down/ blank indescribable". This reflexiveness makes a counterpoint to another, less overt theme, which the book's title hints at: subjectivity can't 'know' (or 'show') itself, except through interaction with others, who also constitute subjects, and thus mortal lives. The struggle—and this is an agonistic text, its spare lines constituting an impeccably ironised surface—becomes that of keeping faith with what is, while acknowledging its delimited witness. My exposition may sound like the Heisenberg Principle revisited, but the poetry is fine, imagistic, subtle and searching. And it gives weight to things—not only irises "withdrawing/ all the blue/ from the world", but, by the shoreline of a beach, "two eels baking/ their living flesh drying into leather straps". Immediately after these lines it is noted, unpretentiously, that "we could have worn [them] for belts": what "is" (dying) is contiguous with everything else that "is" (living and/or dying). The poem-sequence 'Dwelling in the Shape of Things', is a meditation on paintings by Cézanne, the post-impressionist artist whose contribution is usually discussed in structural terms. 'Dwelling' inscribes each of its chosen paintings with the undernotated subjectivity of a viewer, thus breaking out of the art-history and aesthetic frameworks around the concept of 'Cézanne'. The sequence keeps faith in its own way with the painter's concerns: ". . . whatever may be our temperament, or our power in the presence of nature, we have to render what we actually see, forgetting everything that happened before our time", Cézanne wrote. Stasko's poem replies contrariwise to the implicit (self)idealising of the artist, while empathising with his project: "we would like to go there/ . . . to be dissolved in a delicate geometry/ all things becoming equal".

Kerry Leves is a NSW poet and critic.

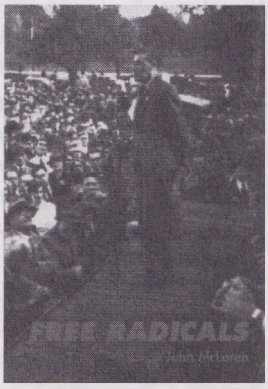
A Privileged Window into Extraordinary Lives

PAUL STRANGIO

John McLaren: *Free Radicals* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, $39.95)

This book was a labour of love: it tells, mostly in the best of ways. A friend and collaborator of his subjects, John McLaren has written a wonderfully rich and human account of the intersecting lives of the postwar radicals and intellectuals, Stephen Murray-Smith, Ian Turner and Ken Gott. Chronologically measured, theirs were lives cut short—born within fewer than twelve months of one another in 1922–23 none survived his biblical allotment of three score and ten years. Yet McLaren leaves the reader in no doubt that these were lives fully and passionately lived.

They were also political lives. The three men's most critical intersection was their joining of the Communist Party in the 1940s. They arrived at that point separately. Gott committed first. A working-class lad who made it to Melbourne High, his radical politics 'grew out of' his early life experiences.



Turner, a rebellious spirit, was recruited while an army conscript. Murray-Smith, distrustful of authority and by instinct a humanist rather than ideologue, succumbed last. On being demobbed from the AIF, he took time to find his political bearings, first joining the Liberal Party, then the ALP, before Turner persuaded him to throw in his lot with the communists. Identification with the CPA solidified in the hothouse environment of Melbourne University at the end of the Second World War—all three prominent in campus political, intellectual and social life. The party remained a focal point of these engagements, providing them with a sense of ideological mission, comradeship, even romance. That alignment was completed

upon their departure from the university; each chose to subordinate his life to the communist cause, becoming servants of the Party in Australia and overseas, evangelists for the coming socialist revolution and utterly convinced of the Soviet Union's destiny as a force for peace and liberation.

McLaren deals with the trio's interlude of uncritical dogmatism, including the apologias for Stalinism, with admirable dispassion; he neither exculpates nor is judgemental. But later, when exploring the process of disillusionment and departure from the party following the leaking of Khrushchev's secret denunciation of Stalin and the 1956 invasion of Hungary, he pauses the narrative to wonder why they and others remained so long in the communist thrall: "how could so many people invest their hopes in a Soviet Union where, at least as far back as the Show Trials of 1936, it was clear that the revolution was devouring its own . . . how could otherwise imaginative, sceptical, intelligent people submit their thoughts and actions absolutely to the dictates of the inflexible bureaucracy of the CPA?" These questions are left hanging.

The book is also a tale of going on, following their rebellion: of "reclaiming their freedom", and of renewed "hope of making a just society and a peaceful world" in other spheres and through other means. McLaren is particularly persuasive in showing that the commitment to the party was not easily sloughed off. Those who departed struggled "to define themselves . . . the party had provided an extended family, emotional and intellectual certainty and the feelings of playing a significant role in society". Reinvention also entailed building careers retarded by the years of sacrifice to the party.

Gott seems to have made the transition most smoothly, forging a new life as an international journalist. Moving on proved more problematic for Murray-Smith and Turner—their meandering paths and prodigious activities suggesting a search not readily fulfilled. One of Murray-Smith's incarnations was, of course, as the foundation editor and guiding spirit of *Overland*. Having repelled attempts by party loyalists to wrest control of the journal during the late 1950s, he opened its agenda to interrogate and nourish the radical nationalist tradition. An authority on the history of technical education in Australia, Murray-Smith lectured at Melbourne University, while his other passions extended to a fascination with the human and natural history of Bass Strait.

Like Murray-Smith, Turner found his way into academia, contributing important studies of the history of the early twentieth-century labour movement, before his writings branched into popular culture and Australian Rules football. Turner also remained the most overtly political of the three. One of those from the 'Old Left' to find invigoration in the Vietnam-War-inspired student radicalism, McLaren portrays him as never quite recovering from the disillusionment of the 1950s. Whereas Murray-Smith, noble of cast, and anchored by his forty-year marriage to Nita, came in later life to believe that a good society had to be prefigured in individual acts of humanity, Turner found no equivalent contentment, personal or political. Indeed, this 'tortured' quality is what makes him by far the most compelling presence in the second half of the book. He emerges as variously Promethean and charismatic, depressive, vulnerable and erratic. His relationships were disastrous—he left a trail of disappointment: mother, wives and children. On the surface insensitive to that carnage, he was also given to bouts of eviscerating introspection on his flaws. Some of the book's gems are Turner's self-flagellating letters to Murray-Smith and his friend's affectionate, yet unsentimental, counsels in reply.

Absorbing though it is, the domination of Turner, and to a lesser degree Murray-Smith, in the book's second half is a problem in a group biography. Gott is all but eclipsed. Equally, McLaren has not always been able to resist the biographer's compulsion for excessive detail. Some of the digressions not only add scant value, but contribute to the sense that he occasionally loses narrative control. Nor does the relentless sub-heading help; instead, it creates an uncomfortable ride for the reader, akin to being a passenger in a car in which the driver has a weakness for excessive and jerky gear shifts.

These, however, are minor irritations. Originally conceived as a tribute to his friendship with the subjects, McLaren has achieved this and much more besides. He allows us a privileged window into three extraordinary lives and convincingly recreates the intellectual and political milieu in which they moved. At the book's end we have come to share his gratitude for those lives and their friendship.

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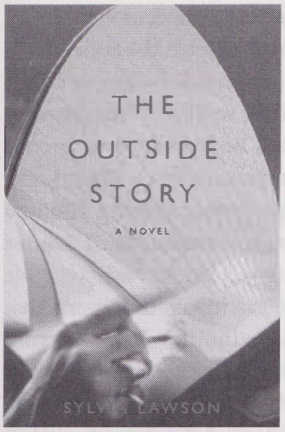


That 'lost and might have been' Building

MARTIN THOMAS

Sylvia Lawson: *The Outside Story* (Hardie Grant Books, $24.95)

The Sydney Opera House is a consummate symbol of Australia's treatment of an alien, even one who just happened to create a national symbol. Although he knew Sydney only through photographs, Joern Utzon explored the relationship between site and structure with such thoroughness, integrity and imaginative flair that he produced an architectural icon. There are many morals in the Opera House story, but one of them is the vitality that can come with a foreigner's perspective; the possibilities it brings for change and renewal.

Utzon was received as a charming and gentle genius when he finally arrived in Sydney to oversee construction. But in a story that echoes the stymieing of Walter Burley Griffin's vision for Canberra, his methodology of collaboration and on-site experimentation—essential to the development of that extraordinary design—proved insufferable to conservative politicians and some bureaucrats in the New South Wales Department of Public Works. After the election of Robert Askin's government in 1965, an ever-growing dispute between architect and client prompted a letter from Utzon in which he told the minister for Public Works he had been "forced . . . to leave the job". This was gladly interpreted as a resignation and in circumstances truly scandalous, Utzon left Australia in 1966, never to return.

That Sylvia Lawson's book about Utzon's unfulfilled vision for the building's interior has taken years to find a publisher is itself a minor scandal—a sign of the times. Admittedly, its structure is radically unconventional and it fails to tantalise in ways that we expect of novels, especially in terms of psychology and drama. This said, however, *The Outside Story* is in every sense a book of ideas; a book that playfully and yet seriously considers some very big issues: the ways in which politics and historical change are played out in ordinary lives, and how they affect the formation of communities. Unlike many novels, it is a book that has plenty to say.

I came to it with strong impressions of Lawson's *The Archibald Paradox* (1983), a groundbreaking study of the early *Bulletin* which considered ideas of authorship through J.F. Archibald's role as editor. I found myself reading *The Outside Story* more as an innovative essay than a novel, partly because Lawson's familiar, scholarly voice rings strongly through the text, and partly because the theme of authorship again emerges. This time it is an author whose 'text' is compromised and vulgarised. This is symbolised by the inside of the building, which was designed entirely by the three Australian architects appointed by the government to complete the job.

Prudently, Lawson has not attempted to directly recreate the saga with Utzon et al as characters (an artistic and legal minefield!). Rather, it is a story set mainly in the 1980s, told from the points of view of two women, one in Sydney, the other in Brisbane, who are researching the building's history. Employing a highly unusual second-person address (the researchers are effectively writing to each other), the novel undergoes an unannounced though almost seismic shift somewhere around the middle when the Sydney woman's narration halts and the Brisbane woman takes up the story. With fragments of their writing about the Opera House embroidered into the narrative, the authorial voice assumes many registers. Formally, this is one of the most interesting aspects of the novel, though its success is uneven. To my mind, the second half, which brings a completeness to the dialogue between the speakers, is more meaningful and compelling.

The considerable amount of primary research that has gone into this book (made explicit by several pages of bibliography), raises the question of why Lawson did not attempt the cultural history she was well-equipped to write and which still screams out to be done while various protagonists are still alive. One reason, I suspect, is that Lawson, in the spirit of the building, could only find satisfaction if her work were a project of literary experimentation. Another crucial reason is her uninhibited

conviction—passionately shared by both narrators—that the non-Utzon interior is a disaster of titanic proportion: a "[f]uckun fake teak radiogram!" in the colourful words of Fergus, a minor character. Whereas a scholarly history would have had to deal more even-handedly with the complex set of factors which caused the dumping of Utzon's inside plans, here the unbuilt interior becomes an Aladdin's Cave, a seductive and almost utopian symbol of a dimly possible but radically different world.

Whether or not one shares the extreme sentiments of the two researchers and their creator, I suspect most people would agree that the auditoria are incommensurate with the wonderfully expressive exterior. Working with the same elements, the architect emulated—though with a human stamp—the simplicity and harmony of a mollusc's shell. Utzon's intention, outside and in, was to make "a 'living thing' manufactured from simple mass-produced elements in a limited range of materials".[1]

Recent analysis of Utzon's archive has dismissed as propagandist twaddle the still-circulating story that the architect was a dithering dreamer who had no idea how to fill the eccentric spaces created by his lovely roof line, let alone resolve the formidable acoustic challenges they presented. It is now established that Utzon would have worked with plywood, moulding and shaping it as he had done with concrete on the outside, thereby creating sculpted ceilings that would be strongly coloured like a Chinese temple, facilitating the transmission of sound throughout the space.

This is the dream that carries a story about that "lost and might have been building", a structure which, "in its grand erotics . . . will go on living in a thousand imaginations". In grappling with the question of Australia's capacity—and failure—to accommodate difference in the public culture, it is a tale germane to our unpleasant times.

1. James Semple Kerr, *Sydney Opera House: A Revised Plan for the Conservation of the Sydney Opera House and its Site*, Sydney Opera House Trust, 2003 [Third Edition], p. 37.

Martin Thomas is a postdoctoral fellow in History at the University of Sydney. He is the author of The Artificial Horizon *(MUP) which won this year's Gleebooks Prize in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards.*

Recuperative Offering

HELEN THOMSON

Ken Stewart & Shirley Walker (eds): *Unemployed at Last! Essays on Australian Literature to 2002, for Julian Croft* (Centre for Australian Studies, UNE, $29.95)

Paul Adams & Christopher Lee (eds): *Frank Hardy and the Literature of Commitment* (Vulgar Press, $39.95)

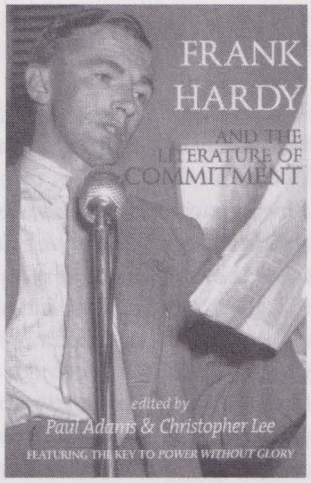
The *festschrift* is a fairly rare phenomenon in Australia, and often suffers from a lack of quality control as friends and colleagues contribute to honour a retiring academic. The aptly titled *Unemployed at Last!*, with its reminder of Joseph Furphy's beginning to *Such Is Life*, is a high-quality record of Julian Croft's career at UNE, and provides something like a history of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, which Croft helped found in 1978. Almost all its thirteen contributors are or were ASAL members, five of them past Presidents, and their essays range over the many areas of scholarly and creative production in Croft's career; the collection's title itself a nice tribute to his pioneering work on Furphy. Julian Croft's own account of his life at the beginning gives a sense of the person and character this volume celebrates: accomplished but modest and self-effacing.

Because his academic career exactly spanned the flowering of ASAL as a national association that fostered conferences, publications and networking, the often hard-fought entrance of Australian literature into the academic canon and English departments, there is a sense of stocktaking here as well. ASAL's influence seems to have waned as that of cultural studies has grown, and Australian literature is no longer a prominent part of literary curricula. Yet a collection such as this reminds us of the important recuperative scholarship that has underpinned the rhetoric of nationalism over the past three decades. It has also made possible the study of Australian literature in universities all over the world.

The fact that there is a strongly humanist leaning throughout the essays, with discussions about the importance of writing itself as affirming the aesthetic aspect of culture, is justified by Julian Croft's standing as a poet as well as an academic. Yet the

ASAL flavour is and always has been political, a left-leaning stance that had its origins in the original oppositional position of Australian-literature devotees in universities. ASAL came to terms with members' eventual entrance into the professoriate with some difficulty, but to its credit also absorbed the challenges of feminist theory and postmodernism.

Francis Devlin-Glass's contribution is exemplary in its postcolonial comparison of Irish cultural struggle in the nineteenth century with the contemporary colonising of cyberspace by the Yanyuwa people. In both cases extinguishment of language constituted the major violence done to their culture. Robert Dingley demonstrates Anthony Trollope's deconstruction of the colonial (squatter) project, while J.S. Ryan's discussion of Rolf Boldrewood reminds us of the miners who were nation-builders. Jenny Strauss's nicely argued essay posits Mary Gilmore's 'faith' in terms of writing, a theme also touched upon in Anthony Hassall's analysis of Thea Astley's *Drylands* and Dennis Haskell's discussion of the transformations of art in David Malouf's *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. There is some excellent feminist analysis by Shirley Walker, on intertexuality, and from Ken Stewart on Walker and Jill Ker Conway's autobiographies.



FRANK HARDY and the Literature of Commitment is in part another ASAL project, Christopher Lee being its immediate past President, and convenor of the 2000 conference that gave rise to it (celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Power Without Glory*). Paul Adams published his biography of Hardy, *The Stranger from Melbourne. Frank Hardy—A Literary Biography, 1944–1975* in 1999. The eighteen contributors together create a dense, intertextual work that includes, for example, John Frow's 1982 New Left, poststructuralist reading of *Power Without Glory*, 'Who Shot Frank Hardy? Intertextuality and Textual Politics', and Hardy's posthumously published rebuttal of its postmodernism, 'Frank Hardy's Last Blast in Defence of Truth'. Paul Adams also takes Hardy's part against Frow's formalist analysis in an essay that insists on the restoration of the historical context, and the importance of the Australian 'yarn' as an influence in *Power Without Glory*. In fact it seems there is hardly a stone left unturned by the end of the volume, which includes Dave Nadel's 'Key to *Power Without Glory*'.

Adams's introduction provides a concise summary of the complex history of Hardy's writings and his contested relationship within the academic establishment. The following chapter, a transcript of Tony Morphett's 1967 ABC Spectrum interview with Hardy, with its inclusion of the writer's own voice, is nicely book-ended by Hardy's posthumous 'Last Blast' at the end of the volume. Much literary and political history is rehearsed in essays such as Allan Gardiner's and John McLaren's, the latter including a history of *Overland*'s cultural and nationalist debates centred on Hardy's novel. The thorny issue of Socialist Realism and its literary and political efficacy is revisited, the most sophisticated of which is David Carter's discussion of the communist novelist in postwar Australia.

This debate makes sense of the inclusion of discussions of Jean Devanny's *Sugar Heaven* and Dorothy Hewett's *Bobbin Up* by Carole Ferrier, and Delys Bird's incisive analysis of Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardo* and *Brumby Innes*, along with Cath Ellis's charting of the failures of Prichard's less successful, evangelically political social realist novels, in a discussion of her Goldfields trilogy, and Paul Genoni's comparison of Hardy with Ruth Park.

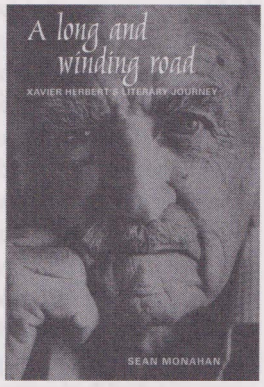
The political battles initiated most obviously by *Power Without Glory*, but including the full range of Hardy's writing, are recorded, mostly for the defence, by essays such as Peter Williams's, with its refutation of Jack Beasley's *Red Letter Days: Notes From Inside An Era*, notably described by Stephen Murray-Smith in a review of the book as "a 'search and destroy' mission against Hardy which is without parallel in Australian literary annals".

This volume is a celebratory, recuperative offering that should send many a reader back to Hardy's writing for some personal reassessment.

Helen Thomson is an Honorary Senior Research Associate at Monash University, and theatre critic for the Age.

Anatomy of a Political Novelist

LAURIE HERGENHAN



Sean Monahan: *A Long and Winding Road: Xavier Herbert's Literary Journey* (UWA Press, $38.95)

This book is important as a challenge for those who can't stand Herbert the man nor his books but more especially for readers interested in them and in the political novel in Australia.

The book is readable, engaged and engaging. Its genesis is personal. The author migrated to Australia some thirty years ago, devoted himself to understanding the country through its literature, finding his main satisfaction, indeed revelation, especially in *Poor Fellow My Country*.

Novels have been defined as fiction with something wrong with it. For some, *Poor Fellow* may amply fulfil this definition of a genre in which distinguished works survive their flaws. When Herbert's much-trumpeted 'magnum opus' appeared, critics—reviewers and 'literary' people—were ready to put it down as a door-stopper which sold but nobody read. But how true is this? I have met many readers outside 'literary' circles (Randolph Stow was a persuasive exception to the detractors) who relished it as a major narrative of political controversy, surpassing *Capricornia*. Now Monahan, bowled over by *Poor Fellow*, comes along to affirm its outstanding quality and to follow 'the winding road'—of apparent hit-or-miss efforts—of Herbert's career: "This was obsession . . . a book I could not put down . . . I loved its size . . . So full so complex . . ." (This sense of finding the book especially illuminating of a whole culture is one I have met among other migrants.) "To an outsider it was like straying through the looking glass."

Monahan's enthusiasm, not uncritical, lends buoyancy and insight. He found it easier to understand why Herbert wrote bad books than to understand why he wrote good ones. Monahan's task and triumph is to see beyond the obvious flaws: Herbert's overweening egotism, his disdain of all advice, his fallibility of taste—all of which retarded his work—to his outstanding achievement in two novels.

In a daring move, Monahan sees Herbert as an unacknowledged experimenter, not a strained, calculating one, but departing from tradition as an "inner necessity". Herbert could be a "natural" innovator. This useful distinction Monahan adapts from Gore Vidal and Saul Bellow. Monahan then draws upon Frye's *Anatomy*. Recognising the novel as a hybrid form, Frye proposed a division into four genres: confession, romance and 'novel' (of the Jane Austen type) and the less recognised one of anatomy, as seen in *Les Miserables*, *Moby Dick*, and nearer home in *Such Is Life*, distinguished by "didacticism, its lengthy intellectual discussions, its willingness to digress from the narrative in order to explain ideas, and its connection with satire and the comedy of humours". Monahan draws sensitively on these ideas, rather than applying them like a tape measure, to recuperate *Poor Fellow*, misunderstood because readers have expected a conventional realist novel.

Monahan's discussion of *Capricornia* is the best so far. He explodes Vincent Buckley's metaphysical interpretation of it as a cosmic conspiracy, seeing the novel as concentrating on socio-political Australia, the master theme of Herbert's two main novels. Monahan's focus is on its structure as effective not 'sprawling' and on its mood as basically optimistic.

But it is with *Poor Fellow* that Monahan shines, reconciling this reader more, if not completely, to its elements of confession and anatomy: the emphasis on expository comment (as in elaboration of Aborigines' beliefs), didacticism, even characters' diatribes. Monahan argues that the preaching Jeremy embodies an underlying irony, but one unrecognised consciously by the author because it expresses his own deep contradiction and one embedded in the Australian psyche: Jeremy, like Herbert, is himself tainted by the colonial attitudes he rails against, his anger and frustration are the result of his complicity. How far a reader, used to flawed narrators whose limitations are subtly intimated, can accept this, may vary. But it is a challenging view.

Monahan convinces me on another point. I used to think that *Poor Fellow* looked back too much to views of the national, though as I see now, not pejoratively nationalistic, views of the 1930s. Monahan argues that though the externals of Australian society

have changed the picture of the period covered by the novel, the 1940s and 1950s embodied qualities remaining central today. Who, having lived through the eras from Whitlam, deposed when the novel was just finished, to Howard, can really disagree? The fights over a republic, over social justice for the Aborigines, over conservation, over exploitation of the land—Herbert's preoccupations—are still riddled with contradictions awaiting resolution.

Monahan argues that Jeremy expresses for Herbert "the bleak reality", but through the Aborigine, Prindy, "the dream". Prindy is a "romance" figure symbolising the dream of a "new Australia".

Readers may disagree but will have to take Monahan's book seriously. I find it generally persuasive though with inevitable reservations, as with the relating of the author to his work, always a chancy business. From a lengthy association with Herbert I know it is not true that he was "of very average intelligence", though he could be stupid and boring. Nor is it true, as a general proposition or in his individual case that his monstrous egotism prevented him from understanding people and hence drawing rounded characters. True to his literary belief in the 'larger than life' picture he chose not to.

Monahan's book is a reminder that a study of the political novel in Australia needs to be written. We have good studies of Herbert (now), Devanny and Hardy. We need studies of Prichard, Hewett and others, but we urgently need the larger picture where these and others all figure.

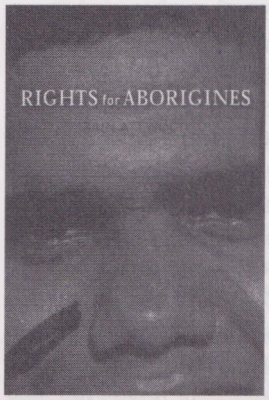
Laurie Hergenhan, Honorary Research Fellow, University of Queensland, is co-editor, with Frances De Groen, of Xavier Herbert: Letters *(UQP).*

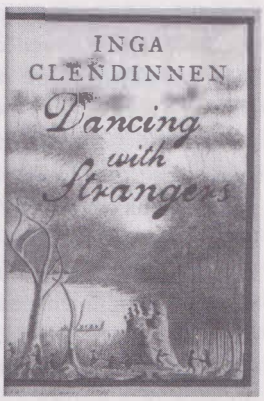
Honest View of the Past

NAOMI PARRY

Inga Clendinnen: *Dancing with Strangers* (Text Publishing, $45)

Bain Attwood: *Rights for Aborigines* (Allen & Unwin, $39.95)





It is no easy task to fit such disparate and complex books into a slim review. Their subject category is 'Aborigines, Australian' but they cover widely different areas. *Dancing With Strangers* concentrates on the first encounters between Sydney's Aboriginal people and Governor Arthur Phillip's First Fleet. Clendinnen combs this 'moment' for clues as to why relations between black and white soured so destructively. She is a gifted historian who honed her ethnographic approach with the Spanish colonisation of the Mayan Indians and holocaust history. She is abundantly qualified to consider racism, colonisation and genocide. However Australian history is, for her, a fresh field, so Clendinnen presents herself as a non-expert guide. Attwood is also a gifted historian. *Rights for Aborigines* is very much in his area of political history. Where Clendinnen uses a micro approach, Attwood spans two centuries and most of mainland Australia as he teases out the strands of activism by and on behalf of Aboriginal people. Where Clendinnen glides above academic debates, Attwood revels in them. While Clendinnen's book has an appealing watercolour on the jacket and eye-friendly typesetting, Attwood's looks modern, academic and serious. Yet Clendinnen's purpose is anything but frivolous, and herein lies the similarity between the books. Both take an unflinchingly honest, non-PC view of the past, in order to prepare the way for reconciliation in the future.

There is nothing very new about Clendinnen's thesis, which is that Aborigines and Europeans danced together in a brief optimistic moment of 'animated imagination' under the peaceful governorship of Phillip. Before Phillip left, familiarity had bred contempt on both sides, leaving a legacy of cynicism and destruction. The idea goes back to W.E.H. Stanner in the 1970s, and has been considered by Geoffrey Blainey and Anne McGrath, among other notables. Neither is Clendinnen's approach

of cultivating double vision, by using (well-known) British sources to retrieve clues to the actions of Aboriginal people exactly new. Consequently, I wondered if the book would be style over substance. I should not have underestimated Clendinnen, for this is a timely meditation on many things: on cross-cultural contact, on the historians' craft, and on misunderstanding. It is filled with puzzlement and wonder. I particularly enjoyed the way Clendinnen introduces the colonial 'informants', such as Captain Watkin Tench and Lieutenant Ralph Dawes, with portraits that convey the historian's joy of getting to know someone long gone. Throughout, Clendinnen applies her mind and her heart in a manner all too rare in historical writing. She eschews the notion that historians can be objective (hurrah!) but nevertheless tries to see an event from all possible angles. In the process, she solves some persistent riddles. An example is why the Aborigines speared gentle Phillip, and why he forgave them, yet answered a gamekeeper's spearing with a punitive force of (inept) redcoats. Clendinnen sees both events as ritual theatre rather than intended harm. Despite Clendinnen's sympathetic heart, she does not romanticise Aboriginal culture, but, as she does in *Reading the Holocaust*, gazes squarely at things people would rather not see, such as the spectacular brutality of Aboriginal men towards their women. Yet, in contradistinction to some contemporary writers, Clendinnen does not see this violence as representative of the inadequacies of Aboriginal society, so much as a depressing aspect of the flamboyance of a warrior culture. She points out that the floggings, stocks and hangings of European society repulsed the Aborigines. The two sides were truly "goggling across a cultural chasm".

It is a compelling and important book, though not without problems. For all Phillip's gentleness, he was the leader of an invading force. In honouring the best in both sides, Clendinnen disregards the violence intrinsic in the arrival of the Europeans at Sydney Cove. Ultimately, these brief years do not explain the whole history of bad relations in this country. Each new colony in this wide brown land offered a chance for fresh relationships that was not taken. Nevertheless, this book offers some clues as to the sorts of 'delicate accommodations' which are necessary for a 'durable tolerance', or, for want of a better word, reconciliation.

Attwood's book is also important though problematic. He traces the development of the notion of Aboriginal rights, as distinct from civil and citizenship rights: the right to be considered a separate people with specific claims arising from ownership of the land. It is an excellent study, which makes an important contribution to scholarship about protest and protest movements. This contribution is not so much in the originality of the idea, for as Attwood acknowledges, others have walked that path before him, but in the narrative cohesion of Attwood's survey. He dissects a series of campaigns by and on behalf of Aborigines, studying campaign strategies and politics and tracing the growth in the articulation of Aboriginality. It is a book that strips away any smugness white people may feel that whisperings in 'our' hearts helped Aboriginal people. Attwood concludes that white campaigners were generally incapable of conceiving of Aboriginal rights as they viewed Aborigines through the prism of their own historicism. Whites who were paternalistic and disinclined to allow Aboriginal people to set their own agendas controlled many of the most effective organisations of the 1950s and 1960s. For the most part, that is true, but sometimes Attwood questions white motivations too harshly. For instance, the anthropologist Donald Thompson (of Arnhem Land) suffers a pop-psychological analysis that portrays his passionate advocacy in terms of a muddling of his own thwarted dreams with those of the Aborigines. There are no white heroes in this book.

Contrariness is a feature of much of Attwood's writing, but valid here given his revisionist goals, although he sometimes works too hard to differentiate his own work from landmark studies like Heather Goodall's *Invasion to Embassy*. Despite Attwood's rigour, the book contains some inexcusable clangers. For instance, Attwood states that the 1860s Coranderrk uprising was the first example of sustained Indigenous protest in Australia, thus wiping away a variegated history of resistance. Attwood also tells us that Harry Penrith (Burnum Burnum) did not grow up in an 'Aboriginal world', despite suffering the exquisitely Aboriginal torment of his childhood in Bomaderry Children's Home and Kinchela Boys' Home. Here Attwood sounds like the campaigners he criticises for overlooking the Aboriginality of people living in settled Australia. Irritatingly, this 'representative' study completely omits mention of Tasmania. Surely the self-identification of the Tasmanian 'half-castes' as Aborigines—which

was evident in the 1920s—is a perfect example of the growth of a sense of Aboriginal rights?

It is still a fine study, and although carrying a tough message it has a positive goal: that of considering the past honestly, so that we might move forward with clarity and truth. This goal, intrinsic to reconciliation, is laudable. It cannot be good to get too relaxed and comfortable about the past. With scholars like Clendinnen and Attwood at work it seems unlikely that will happen.

Naomi Parry studied history at the University of Tasmania. She is currently a PhD student in History at the University of NSW, working with Tasmanian and NSW primary sources.

Whitefella Dreaming and the Spirit of Place

CAM WALKER

W.M. Adams & M. Mulligan, (eds): *Decolonising Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era* (Earthscan, 2003, $22)

In a time when mainstream conservation continues to fade into forgetfulness about its social roots and loses sight of solidarity, politics and struggle, in favour of engagement with corporates, this series of essays is more than timely. The very fact it uses the word 'colonialism' is a good start, but it goes deeper than this, and roams over some wide and sometimes controversial landscapes.

A key question addressed in this book is where modern conservation ideas came from. Unlike many overviews of the environment movement (which tend to defer to US luminaries such as John Muir or Aldo Leopold), *Decolonising Nature* considers the influence of the early field naturalists, a wonderfully British late-Victorian phenomenon. But it also places the movement's history in a deeper political context, noting that because 'conservation' as we know it was formed during the later days of the British Empire, this left an indelible imprint on its evolution. It was not until the upheavals of the 1960s and seventies that a new, more political and socially engaged environmentalism became dominant, if only briefly.

William Adams notes that the role of Empire (and its underlying rationalist and scientistic approach to resource management) has fuelled polarised understandings of the world (for instance, the idea of superior/inferior species). This in turn fuels a human/nature dualism, and leads us to unhelpful understandings of nature, in which 'wilderness' becomes 'pure' and 'uncontaminated'. A colonisation of nature has been built up through various frameworks: physically through invasion and the creation of neo-Europes, and intellectually through Eurocentrism, which justifies the subjugation of the 'other' (both First Nations' peoples and landscapes).

Marcia Langton considers the role of Indigenous people in conservation, drawing some of her older work into a sharp contemporary focus; especially around the impacts of the global market on the Indigenous world. She notes that "Western conservationists are increasingly aware of the dilemmas for Indigenous peoples; and yet, considerations of equity and justice remain peripheral in the delivery of . . . conservation programs and resources". Control over intellectual property rights and access to resources have always been pivotal issues for indigenous communities. So as greens grapple to deal with these issues, or simply ignore them, new forms of colonisation have come into play alongside the 'decolonisation' process.

The Australian environment movement has been fairly insular, and tends to look to Northern America for ideas. So it is refreshing to read about conservation in South Africa and Scotland, and the reality of Southern or majority world environmentalism. In the case of South Africa, key questions hover around how to balance the pressing needs of a "previously disenfranchised, now politically powerful, majority of black people", and environmental protection. In practical terms this means finding the nebulous balance between the protection of wild places in conservation reserves and attempts to achieve 'sustainable' resource use. A good look is also taken at the question of land claims in national parks. While in many places these parks were created through dispossession of indigenous peoples, in South Africa they are now being "targeted for land restitu-

tion objectives". Beyond conventional academic approaches, one chapter looks at what this conflict is like in the real world, in the Kruger and other parks in South Africa.

Decolonising Nature notes that the contemporary environment movement is in a state of flux. It is not yet clear whether it will "facilitate the decolonisation of nature" or whether conventional biodiversity conservation will continue to prevail, thereby maintaining and re-enforcing colonialism and the ongoing displacement of indigenous peoples from their lands.

There is also the question of Aboriginality and of how non-Indigenous Australians should relate to land and Indigenous cultures. It doesn't offer a single solution, rather giving outlines of various approaches, starting with Peter Read and his theory of 'belonging' and finishing with the suggestion that as humanity, country and consciousness have coevolved in Australia, all three are "inseparable, and have been throughout human history". The authors say that love of place is a better tool to engender action than the use of fear, and that developing a place-responsive culture is (in Val Plumwood's words) a revolutionary process. It requires changing institutions and practices that are barriers to understanding and protecting place.

External forces, such as capitalist globalisation, also impact on environments and ideas of environmentalism. Penny Figgis outlines some of the responses and the new tools which become available (including international treaties and increased recognition of indigenous rights), and the gaps created by the retreat of government, as market mechanisms and other forms of privatisation become "major features of future conservation".

I enjoyed the unusual combination of an attention to spirit of place and recognition of the need to embrace social justice, that forms a basis of this book. Martin Mulligan notes that the environment movement is going through a period of critical self-examination and that the call for a 'whitefella dreaming' makes sense in this context: there will be limits to how successful 'rational' appeals for nature conservation can be. The book ends with a series of suggestions for environmentalists, from the need to build dialogue with indigenous communities and internationalise our work, to the need to shift from preservationist ideologies to new forms of ethical engagement with the land.

For anyone concerned with the future of the green movement, or its impacts on indigenous self-determination, this book offers thoughtful, learned and imaginative suggestions and perspectives.

Cam Walker is the campaign coordinator at Friends of the Earth in Melbourne.

Asylum-seeking and Perilous Journeys

MERRILL FINDLAY

Morris Gleitzman: *Boy Overboard* (Puffin Group, $14.95)

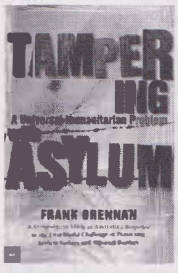
Tom Keneally: *The Tyrant's Novel* (Doubleday, $35)

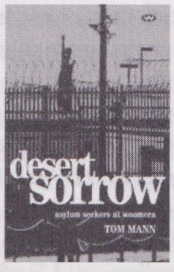
Janet Austin (ed): *From Nothing to Zero: Letters from refugees in Australia's Detention Centres* (Lonely Planet Publications, $22)

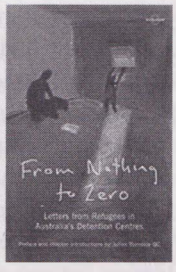
Tom Mann: *Desert Sorrow: Asylum Seekers at Woomera* (Wakefield Press, $24.95)

Frank Brennan: *Tampering with Asylum: a Universal Humanitarian Problem* (UQP, $29.95)

James Jupp: *From White Australia to Woomera: the Story of Australian Immigration*, second edition (CUP, $29.95)







There I was among the bean bags and picture books in my local library fighting back tears like a 10-year-old as I read about Jamal and his young Hazara mates playing Manchester United versus Newcastle in Morris Gleitzman's *Boy Overboard*. Amy Jericho, a 20-something primary-school teacher from Murtoa, in Victoria's Wimmera District, had told me about this 'kiddylit' at an event hosted by Horsham Rural

Australians for Refugees, for a group of asylum seekers with whom I'd criss-crossed rural Victoria in June. Her students were "bored with refugees and poor people", she complained, so she's reading *Boy Overboard* aloud to them each day. And they love it, she said: "Especially the bits about camel poop!"

You have to *really* be a 10-year-old to appreciate the camel poop, and I'm not into soccer either, but there was Bibi, Jamal's little sister, racing across the desert to grab the ball to kick the perfect goal. Bibi was the best soccer player in the village, but she had to practice in secret. The kids also shared another secret: their mother was running a clandestine school for girls, and if the Taliban ever found out . . .

The Taliban *did* find out, of course, and the family had to flee. By the time that Jamal and Bibi had been separated from their parents, and their little wooden boat had been attacked by pirates somewhere between Indonesia and Australia, I was sobbing, and it wasn't just because of the emotional power of Gleitzman's narrative. I kept seeing the Hazara kids I'd been travelling around rural Victoria with kicking soccer balls down country streets: kids who'd survived their own journeys in overcrowded wooden boats, followed by long months, if not years, in one or more of Australia's desert gulags.

Jamal and Bibi didn't reach Australia. They were rescued by the Australian navy and taken to a security installation on some tropical island. As a young seaman explained to them, "There's an election in Australia" and "[t]he Australian government thought they'd get more votes by keeping you out."

Yes, we all remember *that* election, and the lies with which it was won. Dozens of Australian writers have since felt compelled to correct the lies, document the suffering our government's policies have caused, and/or humanise the people Howard, Ruddock, Reith et al. so opportunistically demonised during their 2001 campaign. By now an extensive literature is emerging across all genres.

Tom Keneally's rapidly-completed contribution, *The Tyrant's Novel*, is of the humanising variety, and owes a great deal to a long essay by the author of *Black Hawk Down*, Mark Bowden, published in the May 2002 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, as Keneally himself acknowledges. Bowden's carefully researched cover story, 'Tales of the Tyrant', profiles the then Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, and refers specifically to his own prolific ghost-writer-assisted *oeuvre*, which includes two fables published "anonymously", and "a third, as-yet-untitled work of fiction". Enter Keneally's fictional writer who, having been stripped of everything he holds dear, is offered a Faustian commission he can't refuse, by a tyrant very much like the subject of Bowden's essay.

This tyrant professes a romantic belief in the power of literature to effect change in the world, and what writer wouldn't like to believe this? The event he seeks to influence is a G7 Summit at which sanctions against his country are to be discussed. The launch of the novel is to coincide with the meeting of the leaders of the world's most powerful states, and the writer has one month in which to complete the manuscript. His reward will be a palace of his own, a golden cage in which he will be kept as the tyrant's pampered pet. Instead, he chooses freedom, only to end up on the other side of the world, in an institution very much like Villawood Detention Centre, where he meets the visitor to whom he tells this tale.

The writer asks that he be known simply as Alan Sheriff: "It's the name of a man you'd meet on the street," he explains. Keneally gives Anglo names to all his characters in his tyrant's world, and while I admire his reasons for doing this, I wonder now if I'd have found the device less irritating had Iraq not been so recently invaded and occupied in the personal space of my own television screen, making me as familiar with Arabic names as I am with George, John and Tony. But these Anglo-named TV 'tyrants' didn't wait for Tom's fiction to be released and, unfortunately, timing is everything in publishing.

While Gleitzman and Keneally have created fictional worlds to explore the very real reasons people flee their homelands, Tom Mann's *Desert Sorrow* and Lonely Planet's *From Nothing to Zero: Letters from Refugees in Australia's Detention Centres*, take us into a shamefully real world that I wish only ever existed in fiction: a world in which "Our morning starts with fear, the day is spent in limbo and evening ends with defeat", as 'Wasim', one of the contributors to *From Nothing to Zero*, writes.

Publisher Simon Westcott describes *From Nothing to Zero* as a "narrative tapestry". Its threads, the extracts from letters written by people behind the razor wire, have been woven into themed chapters covering different aspects of the writers' lives before and after they fled their homelands. The chapters are prefaced with contextual essays by human rights lawyer Julian Burnside QC, who with artist

Kate Durham initiated the letter-writing campaign from which this collection emerged.

The letters present a haunting account of the human costs of indefinite mandatory detention. Anyone who has read them can no longer plead ignorance, but why haven't they caused a popular uprising yet? Why is it taking so long?

Some of the asylum seekers whose correspondence is included in this collection may have learned their English from Tom Mann, the author of *Desert Sorrow*, in the compounds of the Woomera Immigration, Reception and Processing Centre. Mann, an agricultural scientist, doesn't explain why he chose to work for Australasian Correctional Management, the company which ran the Woomera detention centre from its opening in 1999 to its closure in April 2003, nor does he reveal very much about ACM's operations, but for other reasons his book is a powerful social document for which future historians will be grateful.

Mann arrived in Woomera in October 2000 when just 250 asylum seekers were interned there, including "only a handful of children". By the time he completed his second stint in September 2001, there were 1400 people in the compounds, including 331 children and fifty-eight unaccompanied minors. Teaching became "a nightmare" as detainees became more anxious and depressed, and as staff and facilities were "stretched to the limit".

Desert Sorrow is a somewhat chaotic book. Like *From Nothing to Zero* it is more a 'tapestry' than a linear narrative. It includes disturbing eyewitness accounts of hunger strikes, acts of self-mutilation, riots and mass escapes, along with compassionate explanations of why people felt compelled to take such extreme action. But for me the most potent stories are the personal histories of the detainees Mann came to know as friends: they have an edge to them that seems to have been edited out of the letters in the Lonely Planet collection.

Like *From Nothing to Zero*, *Desert Sorrow* ultimately reveals more about us as Australians than it does about the people who have been imprisoned in our name. "Enlightened people will ask how it could have happened," Mann writes. "The world came to our doorstep and as a nation we retreated into fear and darkness."

Lawyer Frank Brennan's *Tampering with Asylum: A Universal Humanitarian Problem*, examines this retreat into fear in great detail. In his preface Brennan recounts a conversation he had in January 2002 with Senator Bill Heffernan, Parliamentary Secretary to Cabinet, who used the analogy of a firebreak to explain the Liberal government's border protection strategy to stop asylum seekers reaching our shores. When there's a big bushfire you have to destroy property to "save the neighbourhood", Heffernan told him. "It's not pretty. There are hard moral decisions. But you have to do it."

The government later claimed that this firebreak strategy was successful, because no more boats were arriving. But at what cost? Brennan asks. He points out that implementation of this strategy had some very compromising components, including 'upstream disruption' in Indonesia, which as former diplomat Tony Kevin has suggested, may have been responsible for the *SIEV X* tragedy; the high-risk brinkmanship of the navy's Operation Relex; the so-called 'Pacific Solution', which Burnside argues is unlawful in both Nauru and PNG; limited access to lawyers and the courts; a very restrictive temporary protection visa that is "in flagrant breach" of the UN Refugee Convention; plus indefinite mandatory detention for anyone who seeks asylum without a valid visa. As *From Nothing to Zero* and *Desert Sorrow* reveal, has caused lasting damage to innocent people, including children, who have exercised their right under international law to seek sanctuary in this country.

Brennan identifies four waves of asylum seekers in recent Australian history. The first wave began in 1976 with the Vietnamese arrivals, and the second in November 1989, when twenty-six Chinese Cambodians reached Pendar Bay, near Broome, at the time when the Australian government was involved in delicate negotiations around the Cambodian Peace Plan. Brennan reminds us that it was in response to these Cambodian asylum seekers that parliament passed the 1992 amendment to Australia's Migration Act to legitimate indefinite mandatory detention for all undocumented arrivals.

The third wave, mainly Vietnamese and Chinese, arrived between 1994 and 1998; and the fourth, the largest so far, began the following year when the first boatloads of Afghans, Iraqis and Iranis landed on Christmas Island and Ashmore Reef, to be immediately arrested and detained for 'processing'. Since then more than eight thousand people have arrived by boat and the overwhelming majority have been found to be legitimate refugees. But,

unlike past groups, they were told never to expect to receive permanent residency and naturalisation.

As Brennan notes, the High Court ruled after the Cambodian experience that mandatory detention for undocumented arrivals was lawful only if it facilitated the processing of migration applications and if it was neither punitive nor used for deterrence purposes. But, as he argues convincingly, detention actually hinders processing and is now both punitive and imposed as a deterrent, so must therefore be considered unlawful. While he admits that some form of detention is "reasonable and necessary" to check people's identity, health and security status, he can identify no coherent, legitimate policy rationale for the government's current 'firebreak' excesses.

Immigration scholar James Jupp, the author of *From White Australia to Woomera*, confidently identifies at least one very coherent rationale for the Howard government's obsessive 'border protection' policies: the Coalition's need to woo back the one million Australians who voted for One Nation in 1998, in order to win the 2001 election. He claims the Liberals adopted significant chunks of One Nation's refugee policy, including the excision of Christmas Island from Australia's migration zone, and the return of asylum seekers to their homelands once conditions there improved, an option made possible by the re-introduction of the temporary protection visas in 1999.

He situates the One Nation phenomenon in a long tradition of populist xenophobia which stretches back at least 150 years, and suggests that much of the resistance to refugees and asylum seekers comes from people who were born and educated during the White Australia era, or from younger Australian-borns who remain uncomfortable with 'Otherness' because "they have lived very sheltered lives". He includes most politicians and bureaucrats in this category, and argues that such people "cannot be expected to fully understand experiences which they have never witnessed and which have never impinged on Australia. Indeed, many seem sceptical that refugee claims are authentic".

This is not a profound observation, but it is exactly why all the books and other cultural artefacts now being produced in response to what Jupp calls our "notoriously draconian" policies towards asylum seekers, are so important to the future of this country. Any writer, any culture-producer, has to believe, as even Keneally's tyrant does, that our work *can* effect change in some complex, chaotic but very human way. Our cultural interventions make people laugh at themselves. They make us cry. (Witness me weeping like a 10-year-old when Bibi kicked that goal in Morris Gleitzman's four-hankie 'kiddylit'!) They can help Amy Jericho's students at the little school in Murtoa, and even (perhaps) James Jupp's politicians and bureaucrats who've all lived very sheltered lives, understand experiences they have never witnessed. And they can allow readers to participate in what Frank Brennan calls a "considered moral discourse" through which Australians can re-write our country's 'border protection' policy, before the next wave of asylum seekers arrives. As they will.

Merrill Findlay is the author of Republic of Women *(UQP, 1999) and founding editor of the e-journal* Redreaming the plain*: <www.redreaming.info>. She has delayed completion of her second novel to write her own literary non-fiction response to the most recent wave of asylum seekers. Findlay also teaches in the Environment and Planning Program at RMIT University. See <www.merrillfindlay.com>.*

FAST MEMORIES

HOWARD FAST, American writer, journalist, activist and Jew, died on 12 March 2003 in his Greenwich, Connecticut, home. He was 88 years old. Fast had written and published more than eighty books, articles, plays and film scripts. Almost all of Fast's work had a clear political message, for freedom and against oppression and racism. A life-long leftie, from 1943 to November 1956 he was a leading member of the Communist Party of America.

Eric Lambert, once flatteringly called 'Australia's Howard Fast', was one of many people to leave the Communist Party in November 1956 because of 'Budapest': the Soviet intervention against the Hungarian uprising. Fast, however, walked out because he would not stomach Soviet threats against Israel.

I first met Fast in New York years before, when as a delivery-boy stock clerk and very occasional writer for the left-wing glossy monthly, *AYD Spotlight*, I delivered some books to his two-storey duplex apartment on Central Park West. By then I had already read and greatly enjoyed his *Freedom Road*, a tragic tale of black/white unity against the Klan in the post-civil war south, and *Citizen Tom Paine*, about the theoretician of the American Revolution. These had been runaway best-sellers and Howard Fast had become a famous author.

To my surprise and pleasure, the famous author found the time to offer a delivery boy tea and cookies, and to listen to my hopes of also writing. A little later I read an article Fast had written about me. This was very flattering, except he did say I was "short for my age", a truth I felt he could have omitted.

In the following years we saw each other occasionally at political rallies, meetings, demonstrations. I read all his books as they appeared, including *My Glorious Brothers*, a historical faction about the Jewish Maccabeans' fight for freedom against a Greek tyrant. In the background—I have no idea to what extent this was true—is already the looming shadow of the Roman slave empire. Its envoy to Jerusalem notes that "these Jews" could one day become dangerous for Rome, with their ideas of weekly restful days and of freeing serfs and slaves after seven years. Here, as in *Freedom Road*, and later *Spartacus*, Fast wrote for freedom, damning the slaveowners.

He also damned Imperialists. *My Glorious Brothers*, appearing in 1948, was unapologetically 'for the Jews' and for the then new Israel. Today, when some 'leaders of the Jewish Community' loudly ask 'Is the Left anti-Israel, nay, even anti-Semitic?' a whole period of history has disappeared into the 'memory hole'. During 1945–50, such a question would have been utterly ridiculous. The Left regarded Jews and Israel as obviously on our side.

It seems totally forgotten now that for leftists and communists worldwide, the principal foe of the Jews and, after May 1948, of 'Israel', was not the Palestinians or 'the Arabs', but Britain and British Imperialism. For us, the Jewish and Israeli fight was part of the worldwide struggle of the colonised for independence, part of the then growing campaigns of Indians, Indonesians, Iranians, Indochinese, as well as Iraqis, Egyptians, Moroccans, Tunisians or Algerians, against their overlords. We saw the enemy not as the Arab, Berber or Pakistani, Mallukan or Malay, oppressed neighbours next door, but as the imperial powers whose flags had dominated the world since 1492.

Palestine in 1945 was part of the British Empire,

ruled from London just as Egypt, the Sudan, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, India, Burma, Malaya and Singapore were. Whether these were officially known as a mandate, colony or dependency mattered little.

Fast, the communist, had been to India and met and helped the Bengali freedom fighters bring out suppressed news of millions of deaths there resulting from famines provoked by the British. For him, for us, the Glorious Brothers' Maccabean fight against their oppressors was a clear parable in an imperialist world.

Just as Australian communists, leftists, unionised seamen and wharfies inevitably gave active support to the Indonesians' fight against their Dutch Colonisers, so Fast and other leftists in the USA, Western and Eastern Europe were almost automatically 'on the side' of the Alya Beth, the 'illegal boat people', Jewish ships battling to reach Palestine through the British blockade. French and Italian partisans, many of course communists, helped refugees to their boats at Marseilles and Bari. Other 'Reds' in or outside the Russian, Polish and Czech armies supported the 'Jewish Brigade', transporting camp survivors towards Palestine.

Friends of mine, American lefties (nobody asked whether they were Jewish or not) also helped arm the Haganah. Mendy Weisgal was just out of the American army; in Manila he had organised soldiers against the planned anti-communist expedition to China. Now, quite logically, Mendy operated the radio on a Hagana ship in the Mediterranean. Other lefties, commie mates of mine, smuggled weapons. At one point they tried to fly three B-17s to Israel. I heard they were busted in the Azores and don't know if they ever made it.

The anti-British Jewish struggles of the pre-independence 'Mandate' period, 1945–1948, had become increasingly violent. The Irgun 'terrorists' (ah, who is whose terrorist, whose freedom fighter?) had blown up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, killing many Brits. In reprisal for the hanging of their prisoners they too had hanged British soldiers. These struggles had passed, almost seamlessly, into the 'war(s) of independence' of 1948–1950. Of course the British army had, officially, withdrawn after mid-May 1948, but it had been replaced by the invading Jordan Legion and 'the Egyptians'.

The Palestinians? They had been, early on, totally defeated, were now being expelled or were 'leaving'. We lefties, to our shame, almost ignored their plight. For 'us', the Left, the invading 'Arab' armies, even the Palestinian fighters, were but British puppets, colonial troops, fighting to maintain endangered parts of the failing empire.

That the first fighter planes of the Israeli Air Force were Messerschmidt 109s, smuggled in from Czechoslovakia, is well known. Less advertised today is their greatest victory, when they shot down five Spitfires over the Sinai, Negev. Officially Egyptian, the Spits were flown by British pilots of the Royal Air Force. 'Ernie' Bevin, British Foreign Secretary, thundered against Israel, threatening war.

Then in late 1949 Soviet–Israeli relations, and the position of Soviet Jews, soured. In show-trials throughout Eastern Europe, but particularly in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, yesterday's leading communists, many Jews, now were accused, convicted and executed, as TTZs, Trotskyists, Titoists and Zionists. Howard Fast, in Paris, met Soviet friends, leading communists, asked embarrassing questions, and got no answers. But at that time, heavily attacked by the American establishment, imprisoned, boycotted and impoverished, Fast kept his doubts about the Soviets to himself.

Only in 1956 did he go public. Fast said he hadn't known about Stalin's crimes. I wrote to him from France and asked: "How come? We, I, much lower down, had, then, for years. Up in the leadership, you must have . . . seen." Fast didn't answer.

He damned Communism, and went off towards the Right, or at least the 'centre'. He was rehabilitated in America and once again published in the mainstream media, selling widely.

With time Fast came back to the Left. He opposed the Vietnam war and American imperialism. I particularly remember the very tragic *Confession of Joe Cullen*, about US killings in Honduras, and in his very last published novel, *Greenwich*, the links between a comfortable home in Connecticut and murder in El Salvador. And, I noted, in almost every book there was a leftie Jew.

We corresponded last in 1991 during the First Gulf War, when I wrote to him about a seaman on the RAN frigate *Adelaide*, who said he would not go. Fast answered, offering his support . . .

Presente! Howard Fast.

Max Watts is a semi-retired journalist, writer and stirrer.

MOVING ON

AMERICAN NOVELIST Edward Hoagland has described it as "the current mantra, like mood-elevating pills and meditative therapy". We love to move on. The future beckons, drawing us to the light on the hill. And, in doing so, we can no longer see, in the fading darkness, our point of departure. The past? It's history. Political leaders are disciples of this mantra. But why? Is this in the people's interests or theirs? Perhaps these have become indivisible?

United States President George Bush knows the drill. Bob Woodward relates this exchange with Bush in his new book *Plan of Attack*: "History? We won't know. We'll all be dead." Bush's speeches are littered with a phraseology that's part biblical and part sports motivator. He commands; he exhorts. He sees divine will in his actions and in those of his country. It surfaced recently in his use of the word crusade. America was leading a "global crusade against terrorism". After September 11, he said: "This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take awhile." In his State of the Union address, he said:

> My fellow citizens, we now move forward, with confidence and faith. The cause we serve is right, because it is the cause of all mankind. The momentum of freedom in our world is unmistakable, and it is not carried forward by our power alone. We can trust in that greater power who guides the unfolding of the years. And in all that is to come, we can know that His purposes are just and true.

Words of moment: 'move', 'forward', 'strong', 'momentum', 'carried', 'power', 'unfolding', 'just' and 'true'. In this philosophy, Aristotle's prime mover is one part nation, one part God. It is the merging of might with right. It runs through his speeches like the threads in a tapestry: "Freedom is the Almighty's gift to every man and woman in this world. And as the greatest power on the face of the Earth, we have an obligation to help the spread of freedom."

Contrast this with one of Bush's predecessors. In 1862, during the US Civil War, Abraham Lincoln meditated on divine guidance in the affairs of men: "In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time." Bush knows which side God is on, Lincoln wonders.

John Howard does not look to the Almighty. His words are free of biblical references. Yet he does take the same road. Speaking about the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, he said: "My view is that the public by and large has moved on. I don't think you can say the argument's wrong. We certainly don't know the outcome in relation to all this. (But) it's too early to say that was wrong."

It's tidy to move on. But how did Howard gauge this? Did he ask people? Were there polls? Perhaps he had attuned his mind to the people. As it has turned out, there are investigations into what went wrong with the WMD intelligence. It's becoming messy. Distraction is not good for citizens on the road to the future.

Poet T.S. Eliot knew something of this travelling of the psyche, of the seasonal changes in the spirit. But to Eliot, in moving on, the past becomes us:

> *In my beginning is my end. In succession*
> *Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,*
> *Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place*
> *Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.*
> *Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,*
> *Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth.*
>
> 'East Coker, Four Quartets'

Time moves too fast nowadays and, it seems,

there is less of it. We crave distraction to blur our inaction. When a leader says we have moved on then the evidence is around us that that is indeed so. Who can remember last week's news? The reality, to many, is a television show that shows edited reality. And there's a winner at the end to collect a pot of gold. And we love winners.

History is not divided into episodes of a sitcom. It threads, entangles and encircles. It comes back in on itself. British Prime Minister Tony Blair would disagree: sometimes, there is no history, no ballad of accounting. Addressing the US Congress, he said:

> There never has been a time when the power of America was so necessary or so misunderstood, or when, except in the most general sense, a study of history provides so little instruction for our present day.

If there were no weapons of mass destruction well "that is something I am confident history will forgive". So history teaches nothing, yet it will judge us later, when we have moved on.

The Irish writer Jonathan Swift knew about human motives: witness this passage in *Gulliver's Travels, A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms*:

> He asked me, "What were the usual causes or motives that made one country go to war with another?" I answered, "They were innumerable; but I should only mention a few of the chief. Sometimes the ambition of princes, who never think they have land or people enough to govern; sometimes the corruption of ministers, who engage their master in a war, in order to stifle or divert the clamour of the subjects against their evil administration. Difference in opinions has cost many millions of lives . . . Neither are any wars so furious and bloody, or of so long a continuance, as those occasioned by difference in opinion, especially if it be in things indifferent."

Certainly, the toppling of the murderous and oppressive regime in Iraq is a good thing and not a matter of indifference. But in the reasons lie the rub. As Swift writes, many are the motives for war, and after it's over, does it matter?

The conflict in Iraq also brought forth a dichotomy: that of mathematics and morality. It divided (and still does) media commentators, analysts, politicians (and basically anyone with an opinion) into pro- or anti-invasion. Prewar, the moral high ground became a desperately crowded place. Both sides could justify their stance: there was evidence of weapons of mass destruction, no there was not; there were links to al-Qaeda, no there were not. Postwar, the moral high ground is still overcrowded. And there, one can also hear a tiny sound: it is the clicking of a calculator. Morality is being calibrated to the mathematics of war.

The equation goes like this:

> X x Y = moral justification/outrage
> where X is the regime/government/person/coalition/group and Y is the number of dead.

More than one equation may be at work at the same time. For instance:

> Saddam Hussein x 1000s dead in mass graves = moral justification for invasion.

But then, in the alternative:

> Coalition of the willing x 1000s civilians dead during invasion = moral justification for no invasion.

Mathematics is a pure science. What can be less tainted or corruptible than numbers? It is a universe unflinching: two plus two never makes five.

In the mathematics of morality, however, figures are lifted by all sides of the political spectrum and used to illuminate a person's argument. Does a second equation negate the first? No. Parallel equations can stand on their own. Of themselves, both Saddam equations can be argued forcefully. Does one truth override another? It's there that the numbers blur.

Is Y (the number of dead) ever worth more, intrinsically, than another Y? The most obvious example of where this came into play was during the Second World War and the decision by US President Truman to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was a long-held claim that the bombs were dropped to make the Japanese surrender immediately (which they did), thus saving a protracted strike at Japan in which many Americans would have died. This theory has been called into question with disclosures that the Japanese were near to surrender in any case. Truman wrote later that the dropping of the bombs had been a 'military' decision. Thus:

> Truman x projected calculated US dead = moral justification for dropping the bombs.

In this case, one set of Y (American casualties) was worth more than another set (Japanese civilians).

Professor Michael Walzer in *Just and Unjust Wars*, considers the Allied bombing of German cities during the Second World War:

> The issue takes this form: should I wager this determinate crime (the killing of innocent people) against that immeasurable evil (a Nazi triumph)?
>
> Many people undoubtedly found some comfort in the fact that the cities being bombed were German and some of the victims Nazis. In effect, they applied the sliding scale and denied or diminished the rights of German civilians so as to deny or diminish the horror of their deaths.

Ordinary men and women became assimilated to the actions of their government. Walzer believes that "to kill . . . in order to avoid the deaths of an unknown but probably larger number of civilians and soldiers is surely a fantastic, godlike, frightening and horrendous act". The Allied military, especially the British, believed that they had no choice against Hitler. Their people were dying in their thousands on their streets. They had to strike back.

The Second World War also opened up to the world a vast black hole into which numbers vanished and lost their meaning. Equations and incomprehension fused when people were confronted with concentration camps.

> Hitler x six million dead in the camps = ?

What words could go both to the essence of the act and give it meaning to those not touched by it?

The deaths of civilians in war, from classical times to the twenty-first century, have been a combination of collateral damage and policy. Is there a greater good? There always is. The catch, however, is that it is reasoned by the living. The world has moved on. Memories fade. In the passing of time some find refuge for their actions in the blurring of events. For how can you question when you can't remember? It would be a good question to move on to.

Warwick McFadyen is a journalist with the Age.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

These groups most loudly proclaiming who is and isn't a real Australian are generally direct offshoots of American organisations and closely follow a political-, economic- and cultural-campaign model established by the far Right in the US.

Nathan Hollier

A number of important media commentators are so 'pro-American' that they seem incapable or unwilling to accept that the national interest dictates that we act on facts not propaganda.

Peter Holding

Dr Cate Clinch-Jones and epidemiologist Dr Judy Carman have warned that GM foods have been deemed safe only "as a consequence of a political directive which overrode the warnings of the US Food and Drug Administration's own experts."

Katherine Wilson

Those who would later write in the letters pages of the daily press 'we do not condone acts of violence in Redfern' were in fact condoning an endemic system of violence perpetrated against Indigenous people that inevitably produces a violent response when no other defence is available.

Tony Birch

CULTURE

I have often wondered if the similarity between John Howard's and Geoffrey Blainey's views on Asian immigration is mere coincidence.

Chek Ling

I know I must be mad to say this. Being an economic dissident in today's West is equivalent to being a political dissident in today's China.

Ouyang Yu

Many progressive Australians fear that taking antisemitism seriously means abandoning the suffering of Palestinians. They need to locate Jewish victimhood in the linear past so that the Jewish community can occupy the mutually exclusive category of oppressor.

Dawn Cohen

Courtenay has ignored the vast bulk of documented material, and instead invented a grotesque Jewish caricature that has nothing in common with the documented Ikey Solomon. It is hard to imagine any book this side of the Holocaust in which Jews are depicted in such a derogatory manner.

Judith Sackville-O'Donnell

REVIEW

The American influence came to Australia in the sixties and seventies along with invert corn syrup and hydrogenated vegetable oils. What is startling, and very well demonstrated by the Craven anthology in particular, is that any good effect the American influence had seems entirely to have dissipated, and writers who were once placed in those two opposing schools, Les Murray and John Tranter, for example, seem to be writing much the same sort of poetry these days.

John Leonard

Monahan's book is a reminder that a study of the political novel in Australia needs to be written. We have good studies of Herbert, Devanny and Hardy. We need studies of Prichard, Hewett and others, but we urgently need the larger picture where these and others all figure.

Laurie Hergenhan

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