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CULTURE
CONTESTED

FEATURING MALCOLM KNOX ON AUSTRALIAN PUBLISHING AND LITERATURE

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AUTUMN 2006

Temper democratic, bias Australian

THE CULTURE CONTESTED

IN HIS AUTHORITATIVE ACCOUNT of *The Idea of Culture* (2000) Terry Eagleton observes that: “Men and women are more likely to take to the streets over cultural and material issues rather than purely political ones – the cultural being what concerns one’s spiritual identity, and the material one’s physical one”.

At the same time, and for the same reason, the ‘nature’ of culture, including Australian culture, is always strongly contested. Though the cultural realm can never be wholly reduced to or explained as a manifestation of politics – neither art nor a person’s whole way of life nor her ideal of a decent civilisation are ever *just* political – control over understandings of culture can help to yield or reinforce political power.

There is no real agreement on when the present ‘wars’ over the actual and proper nature of Australian and Western culture began. In the Australian context ‘black armbands’ and ‘political correctness’ and the general offensive against forms of affirmative action or positive economic discrimination really got going in the late 1980s. A crucial year was 1988, in which Australia, under an ALP government, celebrated, however imperfectly, its multicultural identity. How long ago that now seems, and in light of recent statements by Prime Minister Howard and his heir apparent, Peter Costello, how far away, culturally.

Thomas Frank argues persuasively that the particular rhetorical shape of our modern culture wars can be traced to 1968: “What beat the Left in America wasn’t inflation and uppity workers, it was the culture war. Starting with the Nixon campaign in 1968 and continuing up through the Gingrich years, the American Right paid the bills by handing out favours to business, but it won elections by provoking, organising, and riding a massive populist backlash against the social and cultural changes of the 1960s” (*One Market Under God*, 2000). Those who pointed to structural or social causes of inequality and injustice, who thought that greed, racism, sexism and homophobia were not the greatest ideas in the world and that such social problems could be counteracted by a more equitable distribution of society’s wealth, became a ‘new class’ of ‘elites’, who were not merely misguided but actively

involved in oppressing ‘the people’, the common folk and their ‘traditional’ cultural values.

The Australian Right, admirably free from any obsession with originality, conducted a wholesale importation of this rhetoric, and like some tiresome uncle you’re confronted with every Christmas, has doggedly, depressingly, boringly, repeated it ever since. The basic narrative was wheeled out yet again late last year, as part of a vicious attack by the right-wing media commentariat on the playwright David Williamson. He had dared to question mindless consumerism and thereby incurred the wrath of Andrew Bolt, et al., for whom this way of life is of course a sacred cow. As Susan George and Fabrizio Sabelli wrote a few years ago, in a study of prevailing, free-market notions of economic ‘development’: “There are no societies without religion, even, or especially, those which believe themselves to be entirely secular” (*Faith and Credit*, 1994).

In this issue Brian Musgrove examines the attack on Williamson, arguing that “the over-reaction to Williamson’s work exposed a deep paranoia about the fragility of both free-market ideology and ‘the people’ myth, reinvented by neo-conservatives”. Musgrove brings to mind here RW Connell’s still resonant 2002 observation that “There is a great secret about neo-liberalism, which can only be whispered, but which at some level everyone knows: neo-liberalism does not have popular support” (*Overland* 167).

Power relations are by definition relational. No power or control is ever absolute. While acknowledging the social reality of systemic power – variously capitalist, patriarchal, racial and sexual – contributors to this issue are centrally concerned with ways in which culture is currently being contested.

Malcolm Knox looks at the fate of the Australian literary novel, the one-time cultural flagship of the nation, and argues that many people involved in the publishing, selling and promoting of literary works have allowed themselves, because of an overall economic climate in which short-term profit is valued above all else, to become preoccupied with the ‘saleability’ of the author or the text, and so to lose sight of the actual

quality of the writing, and so also of the reading experience. This said, the writer's major enemy, according to Knox, is not the present publishing system but "the person telling the writer, 'You are a cultural elite, you are a wanker, you are irrelevant, your day is past. Give up. Bend. Write thrillers – sing for your supper'". Knox suggests, against the trend of academic literary discussion over the past two decades, that what is needed is a way of talking about the emotional impact of the writer's use of language: "What we lack, it seems to me, is a way of talking about the work itself in a way that expresses what gives us the most pleasure".

Contemporary Australian literary fiction is surveyed in this issue by Paul Gillen.

Sylvia Lawson writes on the courageous attempt by protesters Will Saunders and Dave Burgess to remind Australians that they have a say in the meaning of their culture and its icons. Saunders and Burgess used the Sydney Opera House as a vehicle for an unofficial, but highly popular message: 'No War' in Iraq. In recalling this 2003 "instance of spectacular and passionate protest", now "all but forgotten", Lawson suggests that "our amnesia connects with the general sleepy indifference to the tally of civilian deaths in Iraq".

The Western reception of war in the Gulf is also explored in Anthony Macris's 'Highway of Death' story; while Peter Holding continues his *Overland* commentary on the subject, putting forward rarely publicised evidence as part of his argument for Australia's withdrawal from Iraq.

Elsewhere, in his thoughtful account of the 2005 'Two Fires' festival, held at Braidwood in New South Wales to honour and build on the artistic and activist legacies of Judith Wright, Philip Mead searches for a language capable of bringing these different aspects of Wright's life together. Merle Thornton reveals the deep psychological and political value of the feminist novel, while Ceridwen Spark discusses recent books dealing more directly with issues of feminism and motherhood. Gloria Davies profiles the important Chinese intellectual Wang Hui, outlining his courageous attempt to advance Chinese cultural traditions capable of providing policy alternatives to neo-liberalism and state-socialism. And Thomas Shapcott, Mungo MacCallum and Vane Lindesay recall and praise in turn three great contributors to Australian culture: Brian Johnstone, Donald Horne and Sidney J. Baker.

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PUSHING AGAINST THE REAL WORLD

THE CASE FOR 'ORIGINAL' AUSTRALIAN FICTION

I USED TO THINK that if you were a writer of fiction the worst thing you could do would be to read book reviews. I don't necessarily mean reviews of your own books, which is bad enough. In Keith Richards's words, reviewers are either at your throat or at your fly. Reviews turn your head by dismissing your work or, worse still, inflating it so that you cannot possibly recognise yourself in the genius author.

Reading reviews *in general* has a corrosive effect. An eloquent review praising a well-written book will convince you that there is no point competing. A gushing review praising a poorly written book will convince you there is no point laying down your pearls before the philistine swine of the reviewing community. A hatchet job on a fine book will anger you. Cumulatively, reading too many reviews will eat away at you until you believe every story has been told, every theme explored, and the last word has been written; your only dignified response is to retire into silence.

I've since discovered that there is one thing worse for the writer than to read a lot of reviews, and that is to edit a lot of reviews. All the above corruption bears down on you, but as an editor there is so much more.

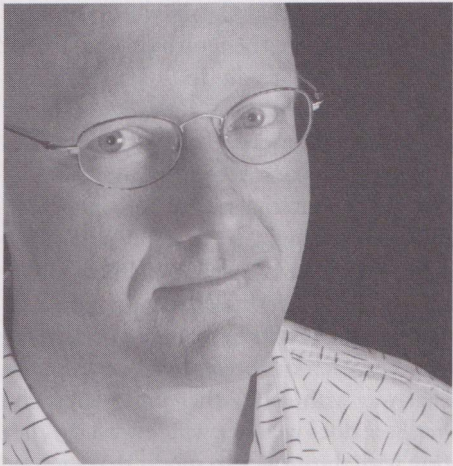
The writer's most precious illusion – the belief in his singularity, the wild notion that his is a story that must be told and only by him – the illusion that what he is doing is important – is under unrelenting, daily assault.

This assault arrives in my office in padded envelopes and boxes at the rate of some sixty or seventy books a week. Every week of the year. Without remit.

This is not even the total number of books published each week, but the tip of the iceberg: books that somebody thinks may appeal to the literary editor of a newspaper for review. That is, sixty or seventy books a week lay some claim to 'literary merit' or other compelling public interest. A new novel by Peter Carey or Roger McDonald, a work of history by Inga Clendinnen, the sweat of Helen Garner's brow, a self-published hash of a bush memoir with potential readership of one, if that. Major and minor alike, each book is just one of the sixty or seventy that come in those padded envelopes, encased in felt or bubble-wrap – a device protecting books thrashing about inside with the force of their madness. Some arrive in the straitjacket of extra wrapping, just in case they do themselves harm.

These books are either reviewed at length, reviewed in short, or not reviewed at all. The author may be interviewed, given a public free kick for her book. The book is variously sold or not sold in bookshops, and read or not read by readers. It comes and, invariably, it goes. Though the writer, as a class, is of course essential to the publishing industry, each individual writer is a wraith, of whom a great fuss is made for a short time, before he or she vanishes back to the garret or farmhouse from whence she came. The author is at once the star of the show and the puniest extra, less important than the scene-builders, less permanent, certainly, than the producers and the money men.

WHILE MY ILLUSIONS as an author undergo this daily mortification, as a literary editor I enjoy the opposite



It is harder than it has been
in generations for a first-time
literary novelist to be published
in this country.

illusion, that of power and centrality. Publishers want me to notice their books so that I will confer some publicity on them. To do so, they rely on a weird kind of circularity. Back at the beginning of the process of acquiring a book, they will discuss the author's promotability – does he or she have a story, or some distinguishing characteristic, that will attract attention outside of the merits of the book itself? Is she a 'brand-name' author? Does he have what Americans call a 'platform' of ready-made attributes elevating him above the competition? When the publisher acquires and decides to publish the book, it may well be on the basis that yes, the author does have a platform. But when the book comes out, they don't know if the platform will be sturdy. They call me and say here's an author who famously survived a murder attempt. Now she's written a novel. Here's an author who starved himself, literally, to write this book. Here's an author who is reinventing herself – you'd know her as a TV newsreader, or a chef. Here's an author who got a million-dollar advance from Disney Studios. My attention aroused, I will commission an interview and a review of this author's work. Or at least, that's the idea. And this is, to me, the strangest thing about it. A book is being published on the basis of a hunch someone has about second-guessing my interest. Not only do I have the power to grant this book notice in a mass-media publication, but my tastes have the power to get the book published in the first place.

Of course, my sense of power is an illusion. It is an illusion in many obvious ways – a good review or prominent interview actually guarantees the book

no success in the bookshops; my decisions are as transient as the newsprint on which their outcomes appear – but it is also an illusion in a deeper and more worrying way.

I would like to refer to Mark Davis's paper of 2005, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm in Australian Publishing', in which he argued that the 'Australian literary novel' was a cultural artefact of a specific era relying on government support and various national and cultural assumptions that are no longer valid. It was part of the Australian literature project, which seemed so imperative thirty years ago in establishing our cultural identity. But today the literary novel's audience, Davis says, is a small and diminishing coterie, and the novel's future, if it has any, is as a niche product with over-designed hard cover and nostalgically deckled edges. This was Mark Davis's version of the 'death of the novel' lament.

There is much sense in Davis's paper, and it is backed by the empirical evidence that the audience for the Australian literary novel is indeed shrinking. This shrinkage, as I also wrote in an article for *The Monthly* magazine in May 2005, is hastened by the advent of Nielsen BookScan in Australia, which provides more or less accurate, more or less speedy data on book sales. Since publishers have begun to use and analyse BookScan, they have realised that Australian literary novels do not sell as well as had been thought. Therefore they are less likely to publish them. My argument was not against BookScan – you might as well blame the First World War on the machine gun – but against impatience. Authors take time to develop. Even Dan Brown had only

sold seven hundred copies in Australia before *The Da Vinci Code* – seven hundred copies of his three previous novels that have now sold hundreds of thousands each.

And of course, there are many better examples than Dan Brown, authors who became ‘overnight successes’ with their sixth or seventh novels. In *The Monthly* I urged publishers not to deprive themselves, their authors and their readers of great books, because they have looked at an author’s past BookScan figures and ‘marked the author’s card’, ‘worked out’ that that author’s audience has plateaued on some grassy knoll. BookScan can help publishers in a great many ways, particularly with control of inventory, but it can also be used as a stick to punish authors with. And BookScan describes last year’s success stories, not those two or five or ten years in the future.

Perhaps the most damaging influence of BookScan, which I didn’t really cover in that article, was in the self-fulfilling feedback loop it creates in bookshops who receive their BookScan numbers each week and press the order button according to what is already selling. Thus popularity engenders more popularity, and conversely a book that starts slowly has little chance of recovering, building up word of mouth sales, because the bookshops are not re-ordering it. Authors have all seen this, all had their hearts broken by it, and now, the process of dual-streaming – rich books and poor books, a ruling class and an invisible underclass – is accelerated. A book like John Birmingham’s *He Died With A Felafel in his Hand*, which built a large audience purely on word of mouth, would have less chance and arguably no chance of doing so now, because after its first few months at number 5001 on BookScan, booksellers would quite simply not stock it anymore.

Everything Mark Davis said about the declining coterie of literary novel readers is also applicable to the books pages of a newspaper. To understand publishing of any kind, we must understand the characteristics of the organisations that own the publishers. Most of our main book publishers are owned by Pearson, Bertelsmann, Viacom, Holtzbrink, News Corp. Our newspapers are likewise owned by diversified ‘media’ corporations. The governing management principles of such organisations include segmentation and internal competition. If you are the shareholder of such a company, you don’t say, ah, our movie and new media sections are doing

well this year, they can cross-subsidise our book or newspaper division, where the return on investment is on par with cash. What you do is, you pit these divisions against each other. You reward your more successful divisions with more resources, and punish the less successful by taking resources away.

Segmentation and internal markets are replicated down the line, increasingly, so that within a book publisher, if you used to say, well, our Bryce Courtenay and our *CSIRO Diet Book* have done so well for us, we can use the profits to maintain our poetry list, now you say, each of these books is a discrete unit and is at war with each other unit, and if the *CSIRO Diet Book* does well, we will reward the diet books section with the money to repeat that success. And if the poets continue to languish, we’ll have no more poetry.

Each publisher is now comprised of separate parts in internal competition. And of course, those which are set up with commercial aims will defeat those set up with artistic or otherwise intangible ambitions. The result is predetermined, rigged – if commerce is the measuring stick, of course the commercial will win. If there’s a general downwards trend in the population for valuing ‘cultural prestige’ through the literary novel, then this trend will be accelerated by the management structures of the publishing organisation.

The result is that the Australian literary novel is being slowly abandoned by those publishers who operate according to this model. Our biggest publishers will not publish a book which they don’t think can sell 4000 copies. And BookScan has told them that most Australian literary novels simply do not sell that many. Heaven help the first-time novelist. It is harder than it has been in generations for a first-time literary novelist to be published in this country. Heaven help the second- or third-time novelist. Who can promise 4000 sales, unless they’re already some kind of celebrity? Where is a risk-free novel, if not one sewn to a pattern laid out by Alexander McCall Smith or Di Morrissey?

The idea of segmentation, of internal competition, is perfectly suited to an environment where this quarter’s, this year’s returns are paramount. But even corporations that are more developed along these lines, more mature in the ruthless arts, know that you still need your sales division to cross-subsidise your research and development. Like many late adopters, it seems that publishers are falling over themselves to

We at the *Sydney Morning Herald* now have our book reviews wrapped inside a section promoting new theatre shows, new movies, new restaurants, new homewares. The advertisers rule, and books must seek homewares display ads for shelter and succour.

throw out babies with the bathwater, in the race for a better return to feed the giant maw of their global parent this quarter, this half, this year. I would liken a literary novelist's first three or four books to the R & D phase. Publishers disagree.

NEWSPAPERS – and this is the point I am trying to reach – are no different. Where I work, at John Fairfax, the idea used to be that the classifieds would cross-subsidise the opinion page. The big-selling Saturday paper, with its car and house ads, would cross-subsidise the lower-selling Friday and Monday papers. The purpose of a new lifestyle section, a magnet for advertisers even if its content was light in substance, was to keep afloat the parts of the paper that people actually read, such as news and, yes, book reviews.

But this has changed. Now, every day and every section must fend for itself. This is fine for the Saturday motoring section. Not so good for the books pages. HarperCollins and Readings Bookshop aren't as big advertisers as Ford and Toyota, believe it or not. And if you're part of the advertising sales staff who really run the newspaper, what would you rather sell? A \$10,000 glossy ad to Holden, which you can do in five minutes, or a \$250 ad to a second-hand bookstore, which might take you a week in cajolery and coercion, if not outright begging?

It used to be understood that the Holden ad in the magazine would pay for the book review pages – but no more. And this is why we at the *Sydney Morning Herald* now have our book reviews wrapped inside a section promoting new theatre shows, new movies, new restaurants, new homewares. The advertisers rule, and books must seek homewares display ads for shelter and succour.

So the illusion of the literary editor's power is undermined by the declining prestige of books pages within the modern newspaper. I think it's fair to say that if thirty years ago the wives of our board members showed off their knowledge of Patrick White, now they show off their knowledge of Paris Hilton.

Don't think the occupants of the boardrooms are any less dazzled by celebrity culture than their children are. At Fairfax, our top management don't want to know what books are out this week; they want to know what celebs are in town. With the best of motives, of course – they are only trying to keep up with the 'new readers', the 18 to 30s whom they must capture before the last of their old readers drop off their perches.

If we're trying to find the killer of literary culture, there is no shortage of suspects. It's a little like the *Murder on the Orient Express*: count the knives. Big publishers have given up on all Australian literary fiction, except for the big proven names, because they can't guarantee four or five thousand sales. Chain booksellers have given up because they don't have time to read everything, and thus handsell good books, and find it easier to just blindly hit the re-order button based on last week's BookScan figures. Bookstores fill up with frontlist – there's only so much room, and it makes so much more sense for the bookseller to order in one hundred Matthew Reillys than one or two of everything. It is de rigueur to blame the author, too – we hear how Australian literary writing is too much like homework, with too much pretty phrasing, too little story, too many themes, not enough rattling good yarns. This is the self-congratulatory philistine position, where the busy middlebrow reader decides that if a book is challenging her concentration then that's the author's fault. And while we're at it, why not blame the reader? If as Mark Davis says the readership of literary fiction is a diminishing coterie with values shaped by the Whitlam era, and later generations would rather play their Xbox or go whitewater rafting than read a book, then the grave is dug, and the casket is just waiting to be lowered in and covered over.

WHY, WITH ALL THIS in mind, would anyone be so insane as to write a novel and hope to have it published? As a writer, consider the cost. I am placing strain on my marriage, I am depriving my children

of time with their father, I am not providing as well as I could be for their future, I am jeopardising the friendships I have by modelling my characters on people I know, and I am risking my parents' shame with my explicit and confronting images, not to mention my children's embarrassment when they are old enough to read my diseased outpourings. And I am doing all of this for a dying form, with ever fewer readers, pouring my energies into an anachronistic black hole. And it's not even fun anymore, because I know that when I'm published, all I will face is momentary anxiety over reviews and the slowly-ebbing expectation of selling enough books so that my next novel might be published as well. Why the hell would anyone bother?

In answering this question, I want to go back to something I said earlier about being a literary editor. Mandy Sayer has written that the most harmful state for a writer is not too much isolation but its opposite – too much connectedness. Your attention span, your grip on the things that endure, is loosened by knowing too many people, hearing of too many new things.

She is right. The most corrosive effect, I find, is that being too connected can destroy your kinaesthetic sense of where the centre is.

I would like to start questioning some of the things I said earlier. A literary editor may fancy himself at the centre of the action, for all the reasons I mentioned. Essentially, publishers flatter you, and like you to believe you are in a position of power. Yet really, you're not. You don't determine a book's future, and you have no active input into what is published. You are more like a bird circling above a feast – you can see it all, people throw you scraps, but really your sense of importance is inflated by your altitude. You don't actually cause change; you watch it go by.

As a writer, I know this much: the centre of the world is someone sitting at a desk on their own, thinking, laying down their thoughts. There are centres of activity whirring away behind closed doors, behind doors that won't even close properly, in rooms that don't even have doors. As a writer, I cannot help but believe that for all the anxiety over publishing and bookselling and literary editing, the people involved in the books industry are on the whirring peripheries and those isolated individuals, separated from each other, living with their ghosts, are in fact in the centre.

But publishers are not peripheral, you might argue, if they will not publish the writer's work. By saying no, the publisher asserts her importance. And nor is the bookseller or the audience an incidental player if they are not selling and buying the writer's books. We are in symbiosis, writers and readers, and it is not good enough for either of us to throw up our hands in despair or disgust.

If writers have an opponent, that opponent is not the publisher, the bookseller or the reader. The writer's enemy is the person telling the writer, 'You are a cultural elite, you are a wanker, you are irrelevant, your day is past. Give up. Bend. Write thrillers – sing for your supper.' The opponent – the great destroyer in Canberra, his spies in your neighbourhood, his allies in your family – the opponent is telling the writer that the last word has been written. Give up.

Which is the first answer to my question: Why bother? I will not give up, because this is what the enemies of my spirit want me to do.

But there has to be more than this. As a literary editor, what frustrates me most of all is the decline of a common vocabulary with which we speak about what we call Australian literary fiction. As I've said, publicists and publishers expect either a name to carry its full loading – 'a Peter Carey novel' says all you need to know – or that the author's biographical details will provide an interesting enough diversion from the work so that somebody may be curious enough to read it. Or, they speak about fiction as if it is nonfiction – 'this is a book about the early settlers'. 'This is a book about General Custer.' 'This is a book about shearing.'

That is no way to speak of a novel. That is subject matter, not writing. What we lack, it seems to me, is a way of talking about the work itself in a way that expresses what gives us the most pleasure. How do we talk about writing? I think if we answer this question, we have a way forward.

The worm in the apple, I think, is that word 'literary'. What is literary fiction anyway? Usually it is posed as an antonym for 'commercial', and so commercial fiction is what sells in large numbers, and literary fiction is what doesn't sell. But this ignores the fact that most fiction that is written to a formula, for a mass audience, does not sell any more than non-formula fiction. Your average Australian thriller or chick-lit novel sells no more than a work of literary fiction. And sometimes, as in the case of

Tim Winton, fiction sells in large quantities while losing none of its literary qualities.

But still, I am presupposing an understood definition of 'literary'. Is it a matter of packaging? Do we identify literary as something small and precious, while commercial is big and fat and embossed? Well, this is obviously absurd, because some books are packaged both ways, while remaining the same book. Sometimes this is a matter of the publisher trying to have it both ways – appealing to the blockbuster audience and the 'literary' audience at once – and deliberately confusing the issue. But more often, I would submit, we are confused because we have no viable working definition for what is 'literary'.

LET ME PROPOSE, or adopt, such a definition. The American writer David Foster Wallace said popular culture is what tells us what we already know. Conversely, what we might call 'original' culture is what seeks to transform what we already know. To tell us what we don't know. I think when we're talking about fiction, 'original' is a much more useful word than 'literary'.

What we lack, it seems to me, is a way of talking about the work itself in a way that expresses what gives us the most pleasure. How do we talk about writing? I think if we answer this question, we have a way forward.

What's original, then? This often depends on the reader's experience. And from the outset, I want to stress that I don't believe there is 'original' or 'high' culture in one box, and 'popular' or 'low' culture in another. Most novels will have some of both. When I read a Shane Maloney book, I see many of the status quo conservative hallmarks of popular culture: property developers are bad, politicians are craven, the dogged everyman is the hero, the villains get their come-uppance. But in the line-by-line reading, I find real literature with a transformative power. When Maloney writes something like, "My breath came in short pants, dressed for the weather," I sit up and cheer. When he unleashes an epigram like, "Acquired with parenthood, the habit of compulsive deception is not easily shed", I sit up and read it again. This is what the best fiction does for us. Raymond Chandler, remember, for all the weak plotting and the when in

doubt, get Marlowe beaten up, was one of the great line-by-line prose writers of the last century.

I feel a need to get specific here, and I want to give four examples in ascending order of what I would call 'original' or 'artful' writing. Of course anyone is free to disagree, and I confess that I am taking examples out of context. I want to compare specific phrases rather than entire books.

To compare like with like, I've chosen the depiction of birds, our feathered friends, in four different novels. The first is *The White Earth*, by Andrew McGahan, which won the Miles Franklin Literary Award last year. McGahan writes at one point: "William saw crows take flight as the utility approached, heard their harsh croaks over the engine." At another point he writes of: "The piping of birds, crystal in the high air." The crows, I repeat, 'take flight' and their 'croaks' are 'harsh'. Other birds 'pipe', with a sound 'crystal in the high air'. This is prose that doesn't want to get in the way of story. Note also that when things are black in *The White Earth*, they are "pitch black". The air is "perfectly still". The sky is "clear" and "blue".

This is all prose that we've heard before. You

don't need to go into the bush to imagine that a crow has a 'harsh croak'. As writing, it confirms what we already know, or imagine we know. *The White Earth* is popular fiction. At micro level it uses stock phrases, in its characterisation it presents people we've already read about, and in its issues it dramatises an agreeable set of politically correct storylines. It is a well-executed work of popular fiction. This novel's receipt of the Miles Franklin made it, I believe, the first popular commercial novel to do so. Remarkably, nobody commented on that. For all the disputes over the years about eligible books having to be 'distinctly Australian', there was no argument over our highest 'literary' award being won by a book with few 'original' qualities. It may well have been the best book the judges read – I don't know, I haven't read them – but it seems surprising that a work of popular

fiction can win such an award without attracting comment. What this says is that fewer and fewer of us know what we're talking about when we talk about fiction.

It's worth noting that *The White Earth* has enjoyed and deserved commercial success. It's not strong sales that make a book 'popular' rather than 'original'. I think that for all its shortcomings, Nikki Gemmill's *The Bride Stripped Bare*, which has sold more than 100,000 copies in Australia, is a bona fide work of 'original' fiction. It seeks to transform its readers' knowledge of themselves and their world. It strives to avoid the stock phrase. Whether or not it does this well is beside the point. It remains 'original literary fiction' that happened to be very popular with readers.

Back to birds. My second example is from *The Secret River*, by Kate Grenville:

The black bird watched him from its branch. He met its eye across the air that separated them. Caaar, it went, and waited as if he might answer. Caaar. He saw how cruel its curved beak was, with a hook at the end that could tear flesh. A pelican, serene with its broad wings and great beak, planed through the sky over the river.

This, I would contend, is better. Although it remains recognisable. The anthropomorphism – birds are 'cruel' and 'serene' and 'wait as if he might answer' – is a little old, but this is the bird seen through the eyes of a man two hundred years ago. The language does its job, it does it well, without cliché, yet, for me, these passages are effective rather than thrilling or transformative. (There is, by the way, plenty of thrilling and transformative original language elsewhere in *The Secret River*.)

My third example is from *The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers*, by Delia Falconer. I must emphasise that these are just books I read in the past year and have stuck in my memory, and the point I am making is quite specific.

Birds. Two passages. In the first, the character Benteen is throwing bread into a duck pond:

Two crows as sleek as big black cats linger on the edges of the quacking, and take it in turns to hop in with pointed ease to steal a mouthful. He throws a crust to a drake that has lost a foot to a trapper or a fish.

The second refers to birds and other animals collected by the soldiers and the sounds they make around the camp at night: "Their sense, at night, of those small chests pulsing in the darkness as they slept; a soft moonlit telegraph of watchful hearts."

In the McGahan and Grenville examples, the birds are part of scene-setting. Both serve an incidental purpose in the narrative, dashes of colour to enhance story. In Falconer, I submit, the creatures are brought to life. They have histories. The drake has lost a foot to a trapper or a fish. They communicate – the 'soft moonlit telegraph'. They have an existence independent of mankind, independent of the story. This is writing that regenerates the world, and makes me think differently of the sounds I hear at night. And, in my opinion, the phrasing is so original – not one tired or second-hand sequence of words – that I, as an experienced reader, derive real pleasure from it.

When I speak of what I enjoy, I don't just mean fine language; the so-called 'pretty writing' school doesn't appeal to me unless it carries some content. And the last example I'll give, of wonderfully original fiction, is not pretty at all. It's from *No Country for Old Men* by Cormac McCarthy, in which the author makes a passing comment on redtail hawks. The character, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, has just found a dead redtail and is picking it up off a desert road somewhere in Texas:

They would hunt the blacktop, sitting on the high powerpoles and watching the highway in both directions for miles. Any small thing that might venture to cross. Closing on their prey against the sun. Shadowless. Lost in the concentration of the hunter. He wouldn't have the trucks run over it.

This is writing that really satisfies me, and it doesn't have any ostentatious fineness or difficult words. It satisfies me because McCarthy has taken a dead bird and given it personality, given it strategy. It watches the highway. It positions itself relative to the sun so it won't throw a shadow. It is lost in concentration on its hunt. After reading this passage, next time I'm driving on an isolated road and I see a bird sitting on top of a power pole, I shall look at that bird differently, with curiosity and some insight. My world is microscopically changed after reading that passage. And it's all wrapped up in a device of characterisation

It would seem that the political Left has allowed the Right to steal – the high ground of standards and connectedness to real life.

to show the compassion of Sheriff Bell.

It might be a pipe dream, but I long for the day when a publisher or their representative calls me up and instead of telling me ‘this is a novel about blah blah blah’, or ‘this writer is really interesting because she lived in blah blah blah’ – instead of that, talks to me about the writing. Not in a general or airy-fairy sense, but in such a way that I get an idea of what’s inside this book and how good it is. As a reader, that’s what I want to know. As a literary editor, that’s what I want to impart to our readers.

I think the durable characteristic in the best writing, whether you call it literary or original, is that it’s drawn from life. I feel that McCarthy has gone out there and studied those hawks. I feel that Falconer has studied her birds and agonised over each word to renew and refresh the language.

Original writing derives from real life, from the real world, from the concrete. And here, as I move towards a conclusion, I would like to situate what I’m saying in a small-p political context. The hostility to cultural elites that is ever present in our world and egged on by the current federal government is based on a supposition that the elites are detached from real life, that their art is only answering other art. Another of its precepts is that cultural elites have no standards, that for these elites – for us – everything is relative.

I reject both suppositions. The best original writing, which I have tried to mount a case for, is grounded entirely in life. Cormac McCarthy bringing a dead hawk to life on the page, and raising it off the page, is a writer who has gone out and looked at it. Falconer and Grenville, likewise, are saying, ‘here is a crow, you may think you know what a crow looks like, what it does, but I am giving you that crow afresh’.

Formulaic writing, on the other hand, is entirely grounded in other writing. This is what cliché is – writing that mimics other writing. I’ll give you another example. The most market-friendly writer in

Australia is Matthew Reilly, who writes highly entertaining action thrillers. He is very good at it. This is writing that provides escape and entertainment and reiterates the world as our culture knows it. He’s out to divert, not subvert. His point of originality is not in his phrasing or characterisation or storylines or situations. Where Matthew Reilly is different from other action thriller writers is that he takes out the pauses. He has studied the form, and figured out that it can prosper if it takes no breathers, no breaks, if the action is sustained throughout. Now, this is not a response to life. It has nothing to do with life. It is writing responding to other writing. It is writing that the political Right, I imagine, would love, and most of all because it makes money. Yet it is writing that pushes against other writing, not against the real world.

AS FOR RELATIVISM, I have made a case for the superiority of the ‘original’. Does this make me an elitist? Well, yes. I respond to quality. Sometimes I demand quality, or I will put the book down. I am not saying I can only find quality in a book with deckled edges – I can find it in Shane Maloney too. But I am saying that I develop a sense for what is high quality and what is poor quality, there is a difference and it is an important difference. I am not relativistic. The relativists are those who say that the only measure of quality is found on the scoresheets of BookScan. The relativists, in other words, are those who say the market decides what is good and what isn’t.

It would seem that the political Left has allowed the Right to steal the high ground of standards and connectedness to real life. How on earth can this happen? How can a government that helps set off the homicidal inferno of Iraq claim to be connected in any way with reality? How can a government that seeks to commodify workers claim any kind of moral or family values? It is to the Left’s discredit that it has allowed the political language to be so thoroughly inverted.

Original writing is always going to threaten such inversions. Formulaic writing on the other hand is going to entrench them, and entertain us while entrenching, by repetition and cliché, what we think we already know. And this is the answer I find to the question I have been posing.

Why bother? Because art – invention, original thinking – is the answer. Why write? Because the alternative – silence – is unbearable. Silence and compliance are what the opponent wants. For that reason alone, giving up is not conceivable.

Is the novel dying, or its audience shrinking? You know, in a way I don't care. Are new media taking over? Well, in a sense, yes. But when was I last moved in my guts by something I read on a website? When was my vision of the world transformed by an SMS? When did I feel a common purpose with another person from another age in another place, when did I last feel renewed, by something I read on my telephone?

The point is that books are the greatest influence, outside my loved ones, on my world. Books have formed me and will go on forming me. I will write. Perhaps my multinational publisher won't be able to sell enough of my books to keep publishing me. Okay. I'll go to a smaller publisher, of whom there are many, to take up the slack. And if my audience keeps shrinking, I still won't give up. Most of us are content to make a difference to a tiny handful of lives around us. If the writer influences an audience of one thousand, or five hundred, rather than ten thousand, then so be it. Striving to say something new is still worthwhile.

And my bet is that the future is not so bleak. The world needs original thinkers. The 'market' needs originality. We have to take a long view. And if I started by chiding publishers for their impatience, I ought to say the same to writers. Your books don't disappear after three months. They don't vanish when they go out of print. You don't know when you are going to shake the earth under your reader's feet. It may be years after your last book has been sold. Someone will find your book in a holiday house, and start reading. You may never know when you have rung their bell. But if you're serious about what you're doing, you must hold faith and be prepared to wait.

Australia, or the globe, whoever we are, will respond to invention, because people cannot be

suppressed. Are we to be artists or content suppliers? I don't care what they call us. Theirs is the dead language, the water off a duck's back. Are we to write in books, or on the recycled fibre of the free zine, or on some kind of electronic page? That doesn't matter. There's no point privileging either traditional media or new media, because they both survive on the response they get from individuals, and the way those individuals talk to each other. Macro- or microscopic, all media that carry writing depend on word of mouth. And the place to start, with that word of mouth, is in thinking more about what we already know, in rephrasing our language, in questioning our own assumptions, and in assigning words their true value, rather than today's market price.

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DAVID WILLIAMSON IN THE DOCK

PARANOIA, PROPAGANDA AND 'THE PEOPLE'

ON 8 SEPTEMBER 2005, playwright David Williamson delivered the annual Rupert Hamer Lecture at Swinburne University; subsequently published in *The Bulletin* under its original title, 'Cruise Ship Australia', on 12 October. The furor that followed saw a national treasure recast by the right-wing commentariat as a pariah. The *Australian's* editorialists joined with Andrew Bolt, Gerard Henderson, Piers Akerman and others to vilify Williamson for his out-rages: a media teeth-gnashing disproportionate to the occasionally sensible and often pedestrian things that Williamson had to say.

It's worth examining the raw nerves on the body politic's right side that Williamson touched: worth arguing that the concerted, vituperative attack upon him was *really* motivated by the Australian media's general acceptance of its role as propagandist for market fundamentalism and the associated dogma of 'happiness'; and to suggest that the over-reaction to Williamson's work exposed a deep paranoia about the fragility of both free-market ideology and 'the people' myth, reinvented by neo-conservatives.

It's instructive to survey the personal politics of the playwright who was so variously reviled in the media – as anachronistic, alienated left-wing intellectual; as patronising lord-of-the-manor type; and as right-wing Modernist, re-enacting a tradition of lethal hatred for ordinary folk. In a companion essay to his 1995 play *Dead White Males*, Williamson outlined some core beliefs. Here, he dismissed the practice of studying literature as a discourse of power, and countered the attitude that "Liberal humanism . . . is in fact the handmaiden of the patriarchal cor-



porate state". The essay, 'Deconstructing Human Nature', revealed that the play was intended as "satire aimed at the political correctness enforced on society by the 'holy' ideologies of post-structuralism, radical feminism and multiculturalism"; and that *Dead White Males* affirmed "that heterosexual family life . . . can still be one interesting and valid way to live, and males and females are still capable of needing and loving each other". Given these positions – familiar in Howard Government rhetoric about everything from the national 'education crisis' to the return of 'family values', the spectre of gay union and the 'ethnic' besieging of Christmas – Williamson's party-political allegiances could easily be mistaken. But despite the scent of social conservatism in Williamson's work, the stink created by 'Cruise Ship Australia' saw him re-imaged as a radical anti-humanist ideologue. As Laurie Hergenhan reflected in a letter to the *Australian*, "David Williamson, hardly

a leftist, becomes a scapegoat, not for his fine plays which have filled theatres for decades while ironically being critically disparaged as conservative, but for a recent piece of journalism".¹

Williamson's 'Cruise Ship Australia' recounted how he and his wife won a trip to Noumea at a charity auction and "convinced ourselves it was going to be great fun". It wasn't: "our fellow passengers gave us some misgivings . . . and the adults didn't seem to be discussing Proust or George Eliot". What ensued was an eye-opening encounter with "John Howard's beloved 'aspirational Australians'", obsessively discussing "new cars . . . kitchen refits . . . private education for their children . . . The one surefire topic of conversation that connected erstwhile strangers was price comparisons". These carefree inhabitants of an un-ironic Lucky Country indulged in organised shipboard entertainments: shuffleboard, bingo, trivia quizzes and – especially – American musical dance-floor shows, 'feel-good' American movies, line-dancing and Stetson-clad boot-scooting tournaments. Consequently, Williamson had a nautical epiphany, but one in generic agreement with what occasional essayists do: extrapolating greater meanings from a specific experience. "It struck me" he conventionally wrote, "that this cruise ship was a kind of metaphor for Australia. Cruise Ship Australia, all alone in the south seas sailing to god knows where. And in fact, like Australia, many of the passengers didn't care where we were headed."²

Williamson juxtaposed this with an account of a previous British cruise he'd taken, visiting Vietnam, Cambodia and Singapore: "lecturers from Oxford" gave talks about the cultures of ports-of-call; dinner discussion "was a lively examination of what we'd seen". But on Cruise Ship Australia "there was no inquiry into anything".³

'Cruise Ship Australia' concluded with an essayistic bigger picture: the fantasy of unlimited economic growth is unsustainable; it comes at considerable environmental cost; technology might not save us from future calamity; public figures, the much-reviled 'elites', should courageously avow "that intelligence and intellectual curiosity are not some kind of abhorrent anti-Australian behaviour, and that thinking seriously about the long-term future of our country and our planet is not some kind of cultural betrayal"; and Australians should no longer be gulled by the "obsessive focus on material acquisition, encouraged by governments who

worship economic growth and little else".⁴

There were problems in Williamson's lecture-article: his Arnoldian sense of 'culture' as beyond the reach of the market and distinct from popular pursuits like shuffleboard and movies; his reversion to the 'cultural cringe'; his apparent acceptance of official cant about affluence; his unreflexive embrace of the notion of 'aspiration' and consequent blindness to substantial class analysis. As Sean Scalmer capably demonstrated in *Overland* 180, 'aspiration' complexly "appeals to the myth of classlessness" but as a label it merely confirms the persistence of class and requires innovative analytical tools. And the myth of affluence can be bucketed by a cursory reading of Wayne Swan's *Postcode*, Elizabeth Wynhausen's *Dirt Cheap* and – most devastatingly – Mark Peel's *The Lowest Rung*.⁵

Likewise, Williamson's view of hedonistic carelessness about the future could have been culled from Donald Horne – Australians "are a largely non-contemplative people" who cannot imagine the future in "detail". His view of Australian identity as Americanised and thought-policed into mindless consumption echoed the work of Ian Turner and others in the 1950s and sixties, who wrestled with consumer-capitalism's social transformations and the people's depoliticisation: issues which Scalmer notes became "sociological cliché".⁶ True to an extent; but these issues clearly remain sensitive and unresolved in the minds of right-wing commentators, as the response to Williamson showed.

The 'Cruise Ship Australia' affair unfolded with some intriguing twists and paranoid. Williamson gave the Hamer lecture, published an abbreviated text on 12 October, and there was silence: until the Prime Minister's department contacted Williamson's agent for a full transcript on 15 October – a highly unusual request on a Saturday. Williamson has a home at Noosa, on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, and his local paper – the *Sunshine Coast Daily* – printed an account of this, reproduced in the *Australian's* 'Cut and Paste' column: 'John Howard's hand in a vast right-wing conspiracy'. Williamson was "a man under attack", Frank Wilkie wrote: "And he suspects the office of the Prime Minister John Howard is behind it . . . he is concerned the attacks came just hours after the PM's office asked for copies of the article". Later, Williamson disclosed that "an approach was made for the full transcript of my speech" by a government functionary "who

These are well-networked persons of concrete power and influence whose collective agenda is pretty much as Williamson described it: to propagandise market fundamentalism and to keep people stupid and shopping.

would not declare who he was” – “My agent said the PM’s staff were pretty cagey when he asked what they wanted the article for”.⁷

Maybe they passed it to Piers Akerman, who launched the first torpedoes on 16 October in Sydney’s Murdoch-owned *Sunday Telegraph*: ‘Elitist sneer at the battlers’. A war-fleet of indignant critics followed, aiming to sink ‘Cruise Ship Australia’. On 18 October, Gerard Henderson’s riposte – ‘Seasick green on the good ship Australia’ – appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Gibing at the outset that Williamson was “wealthy . . . with homes in Noosa and Sydney”, Henderson was particularly piqued by the playwright’s suggestion that the woes of ‘Cruise Ship Australia’ were “all the Prime Minister’s fault”. But he was more aggrieved by the accusation that he was doing the government’s bidding: “Williamson believes that the Prime Minister’s Department was behind the fact that a number of commentators criticised his ‘Cruise Ship Australia’ . . . count me out of this particular conspiracy”. Three days later, Henderson was still smarting: “I have never been fed any column idea from anyone in the PM’s Department” – he had merely stepped forward to nobly support aspirational Australia, to “defend Mr and Mrs Suburbia against Lord Noosa”.⁸

Williamson responded: “Gerard Henderson, perhaps a little bit paranoid yourself? . . . I am reliably informed by someone who did work in the PM’s department that it’s a common practice . . . to alert journalists to articles they may have missed that the Government wants rebutted. It doesn’t imply at all that the journalists are given instructions about what to write”.⁹

Indeed, as Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky valuably recognised in their *vade mecum Manufacturing Consent*, people like Henderson don’t need instructions. Their alacrity to conform to corporate-political mastery is second nature. Herman and Chomsky’s vital ‘propaganda model’ of media tracked the ways in which the ownership, structures and procedures of capitalist media function: how “money and power” can “marginalise dissent, and

allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public”. As a result of the “elite domination of the media”, even media employees “frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill are able to convince themselves” that they are free and objective. But this isn’t innocently so: the media is “indeed free”, but only for those who play by the rules and “adopt the principles required” for its “societal purpose”. It’s a resplendent instance of hegemony; the reflex absorption of ruling-class values and demands that is “pervasive, and expected . . . freedom prevails . . . for those who have internalised the required values and perspectives”.¹⁰ Upper-media and think-tank circles are a hot-house where personal capital is raised by deeply internalising an understanding of the worldview that political and media paymasters require, and acting upon it.

That’s why almost nobody – apart from newspaper letter-writers – came to Williamson’s aid. Rosemary Sorenson, arts editor of Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail* (a Murdoch daily broadsheet) seemed eccentric in at least proposing that although ‘Cruise Ship Australia’ wasn’t “thought-provoking” Williamson was “always worth listening to, even if you disagree with him”.¹¹

As the ‘Cruise Ship’ debate raged in *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Australian* and *Bulletin* letters pages, Williamson became an available whipping-boy for op-ed and feature writers. In an unrelated *Australian* review article, on bardolatry, Simon Caterson paused to snipe that *Dead White Males* epitomised theatre “without any apparent sense of professional irony”; and Gerard Henderson devoted his 9 December Radio National slot to a general dismissal of Williamson’s plays. Former Victorian Liberal Party president Michael Kroger sneered at Williamson as the avatar of a doomed left-wing class: the “urban superlatives” which could not connect with the “flashy aspirational” of Howard’s new Australia. Opinionista Janet Albrechtsen intoned that the mention of racism as a factor in Sydney’s Cronulla riots was “the latest adaptation of the David Williamson

school of thought that treats ordinary Australians with disdain. It's a form of elitist self-loathing that gets us nowhere". The *Australian's* national political editor, Dennis Shanahan, minted the term 'Williamson effect' to describe the discrepancy between "the public's views and public discourse": "where ordinary people . . . are scorned by commentators such as playwright David Williamson" and their values – "fidelity, family, work ethic" – receive "a sneering put-down".¹²

None of Williamson's detractors reacted to his arguments in a serious or reasoned way. Instead, they created a field of abuse; staying on message, organising their assaults around a series of popular shibboleths. Predictably, the first of these co-ordinates was 'Lord Noosa's elitism'.

It's almost hackneyed to observe that the shibboleth 'elitism' masks real power; and that the discourse of 'elitism' is a populist appeal to the discomfited "mass of people living in suburban and regional Australia" whose lives are being often painfully transformed by the forces of "neo-liberal globalisation . . . ardently promoted" by politicians and their media accomplices. To mislead ordinary people about the source of their pain and worry it's "necessary to find a fifth column . . . Australian by citizenship but 'un-Australian' by inclination . . . The people the Right were calling elites" – university-educated, "living in the inner-urban areas of the capital cities, and a few other places such as Byron Bay" (or Noosa), working as academics, teachers, or in the arts – "fitted the bill nicely". Looking for *real* elites, Guy Rundle writes, one finds the Australian media "choked" with them.¹³ Gerard Henderson, Piers Akerman and Andrew Bolt are prominent members of that privileged cabal. Henderson: B.A. Santamaria protégé, ministerial staffer under Malcolm Fraser, senior advisor to John Howard in the 1980s, founder of the business-funded Sydney Institute, newspaper columnist, weekly guest on ABC Radio National's *Breakfast*. Akerman: senior journalist for News Limited's *Daily Telegraph*, close to the Murdoch family and SBS board member. Bolt: columnist for Australia's biggest-selling daily, Melbourne's *Herald Sun* (another Murdoch tabloid)), whose columns are syndicated to Brisbane's *Sunday Mail*. All three are fixtures on ABC television's talk-fest *Insiders*. These are well-networked persons of concrete power and influence whose collective agenda is pretty much as Williamson described it:

to propagandise market fundamentalism and to keep people stupid and shopping.

Williamson was prepared for a bagging: "Right-wing columnists and commentators have a habit of sneering at what they call 'elites'," he wrote in 'Cruise Ship'; and in a newspaper letter he said, "I fully expected the kind of response I got . . . All the usual right-wing heavies were wheeled out to pour scorn".¹⁴ He certainly did not foresee the savagery of the attacks upon him. Nor could he have predicted the fruitiness of the second co-ordinate on the abuse-map: the imputation that he was a special brand of elite, a dangerous subversive, duplicitously concealing his inner impulses to murderous hate.

In the propaganda build-up to the current Iraq tragedy, pro-war governments and their compliant media outlets perfected "a delicate game of not-quite-lying insinuations".¹⁵ Politicians and journalists repetitiously planted references to September 11, terrorism, al-Qaeda and Iraq in the same speech or opinion piece, for example: not explicitly asserting a connection on the basis of fact, but rather implying it by including such material in a single utterance. This tactic was revived by Henderson, Akerman and Bolt in their vendetta against Williamson. Indeed, Williamson became a cultural tyrant, implicitly associated with the subversion of democracy and – surreally – genocide. The net effect of this not-quite-lying insinuation game was hyperbolic high farce.

Henderson's *Sydney Morning Herald* 'Seasick green' piece proclaimed the playwright to be in "alienation mode". This alienation was both an historical and a very contemporary syndrome; and Henderson reminded readers of a recent article in the *Canberra Times* by the alienated Robin Gollan, who considered Australia "a country . . . governed by lies and fear" and dubbed the Australian-American alliance "a militaristic plutocracy". But Gollan, Henderson knowingly confided, "was a member of the Communist Party from 1936 to 1957".¹⁶ The anomalous guilt-by-association insinuation was that the wealthy 'Lord Noosa' belonged to a genealogy of dissent that was secretive, subversive, anti-democratic, anti-capitalist and un-Australian. (How strange that a wealthy beneficiary of the market and literary entrepreneurship should keep such disaffected company in Henderson's mind.)

The comic extremes of the insinuation game were re-inscribed by the News Limited flagship, the *Australian*, in an editorial titled 'Titanic Conceit'. This

The necessary illusion here is that everyone involved in concerted media processes is a fiercely independent actor, directed by no-one; the demonstrable reality is that this is an ideological bloc in action.

editorial attempted to plant the seedling idea that Williamson's psychology was shaped by frustration and tyranny: "the Australian Left has been repeatedly disappointed: by great charismatic leaders such as Lenin and Mao, who turned out to be nothing but vicious butchers". The editorial moved on to perform a dazzling conjuring trick, asserting that the contemporary Left (usually characterised in the paper as 'postmodern') shared the mind-set of the old Modernist Right: "the strangest thing", given Williamson's "political predispositions . . . is the deeply anti-democratic impulse in the whole line of thinking: if only the stupid proletariat would listen to its intellectual betters . . . Such anti-democratic impulses are well recognised in the modernist writers of the 1920s, where they go hand-in-hand with an explicit attachment to fascism".¹⁷ The themes and connections were established; Andrew Bolt dutifully amplified them, following both the *Australian* and Piers Akerman's leads, raising the horrors of fascism, the concentration camp, the death squad and genocide and exemplifying bathos – that literary mode in which writers seek the sublimity of truth but slide into preposterousness.

Akerman had tacked starboard, evading Williamson's central arguments but seizing on the playwright's visit to a Cambodian death camp on his previous 'British' cruise. "Williamson didn't mention", Akerman wrote, that it was "Australia's self-described intellectuals . . . who championed the Cambodian mass murderer Pol Pot and that earlier incarnation of evil Mao Tse Tung"¹⁸ – insinuating that Williamson was a self-described intellectual and fellow-travelling apologist for the slaughter: guilty, again, by association.

Remarkably, Andrew Bolt kept his powder dry for days after Akerman and Henderson opened fire, but his broadside was worth the wait. Bolt took line honours, sailing into absurdity with his rejoinder 'Squalid line of contempt'. He mobilised his readers against Modernist artists who "see the public not as their audience, but their enemy – and rich government funding encourages their arrogance": an insinuation that Williamson was a rorter of taxpayer

dollars. (Williamson is neither a Modernist nor in need of public subsidy: he is the most commercially successful writer in Australian theatre history, the author of popular middle-brow drama – not a Strindberg.) Nevertheless, Bolt continued to hammer the playwright's disdain for 'the people', looking on despairingly as "we see Noosa-based Williamson strip suburban Australians of humanity, reducing them to a contemptible mass, dead to all but money". But Williamson was "unoriginal" in this, and Bolt eagerly identified the long line of people-haters to which he belonged: in Australia, Donald Horne and Patrick White; on the international stage, "Ezra Pound, a lover of fascism, who said all but artists were 'a mass of dolts' . . . And soon another accomplished artist, Adolf Hitler, also talked of 'exterminable subhumans' and 'an inhibited bourgeois herd'". Bolt's conclusion matched disingenuousness with unrelieved distortion: "Williamson, of course, would be horrified by talk of killing the stupid" – a lovely concession – "but his artist's contempt for the mass has a squalid lineage, with nasty consequences".¹⁹

● Once again, hysteria and deception of this order have parallels in the propaganda campaigns that preceded the invasion of Iraq – same method, different target. Just as the media and governments in the US, Britain and Australia circulated identical arguments, 'intelligence', misinformation and tales of perfidy, Henderson, Akerman, Bolt and the *Australian* editorialists engaged in a coherent, collective strategy to demolish Williamson. Refined at the highest level of international public relations, this tactic can obviously be applied to any local situation – as it was in the 'Cruise Ship Australia' affair. The main hatchet men stayed on-message, cross-mapping dark suggestions about Williamson's inherently despotic character.

The necessary illusion here is that everyone involved in concerted media processes is a fiercely independent actor, directed by no-one; the demonstrable reality is that this is an ideological bloc in action. It wasn't autonomous media players who ganged up to mug Lord Noosa: it was a political cohort – an elite, no less – parroting themes and recycling appalling

insinuations; traducing Williamson's past, his politics and personality. In the case of the *Australian*, Akerman and Bolt this is unsurprising: the fact that News Limited management locks down employee opinion and demands toes on the party line is hardly news. But even in the case of Fairfax (publishers of Henderson's columns) Guy Rundle finds that "the liberal and pluralist spirit that governed its conduct in previous decades has largely gone". Rundle attributes this to a broader syndrome: the vengeful "war on pluralism" and the need to crush dissenting voices, like Williamson. The convergence of government and media "intent is not simply to advance a right-wing message but to shift the entire public sphere rightwards". Consequently, government and the media can co-operatively propagandise "a fairytale social conservatism" and radical free-market reformism; and mainstream media is dominant as never before, "cynical and monolithic", becoming "an agent of social control, rather than a forum for liberal and open discourse".²⁰ Pity the poor playwright who anticipated ducking rotten eggs but was run down by a pantechicon – and reconsider his conspiracy theory.

If the government-media coalition is more powerful than ever, why is it so critically sensitive, or paranoid, as the 'Cruise Ship' affair revealed? The simple answer is that there's an abiding anxiety in ruling-class circles that the business of promoting market fundamentalism might be easily confounded by the slightest forms of public reflection – like the occasional essay.

In market fundamentalist scripture, Naomi Klein observes, the "role of good government . . . is to create the optimal conditions for corporations to pursue their bottomless greed, so that they in turn can meet the needs of society". The problem is that its acolytes "never get the chance to prove their sacred theory right". John Gray identifies the foundation of market fundamentalism in misreading of economic history and theory – and a perverse view of 'human nature'. Consequently, the abiding irritation of market fundamentalists is that the world defies them. Their Utopian dreams remain unfulfilled, and they fear 'the people' might get stubborn or bolshie in the gap between promise and realisation: particularly when the free market's costs are so evident – "unemployment, destruction of traditional industries . . . poverty" and environmental degradation, as Williamson said.²¹ Market fundamentalism

is a callous corporate calculus that blights lives and communities; and it requires a constantly enforced compact with 'the people' to sustain the faith that it's in their interests, and they love it. To merely suggest that this isn't so, as Williamson did, invites media vengeance.

On 21 October, Gerard Henderson continued the anti-Williamson offensive on his regular Friday morning Radio National *Breakfast* slot. He began with weary observations on cultural elitism, but veered into an apparently unconnected diatribe about satisfaction and happiness – with considerable effervescence. Henderson recounted survey findings (discussed in his *Sydney Morning Herald* column) to a bewildered ABC host Fran Kelly: "how satisfied are electors with democracy in Australia? . . . 80 per cent are satisfied . . . 72 per cent of Australians care a 'good deal'".²² Kelly protested: what's this got to do with the topic of David Williamson? These things are related, Henderson revealingly insisted. But what about Williamson, Kelly probed – and the normally reasonable and modulated Henderson lost his composure. It's about happiness, he ranted: go into any suburban shopping centre any Saturday morning and tell me if people aren't happy!

This was a direct response to a Williamson letter, printed in slightly different versions by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian* the previous day: "We have tripled our real income since 1950, but surveys show we are no happier . . . What's the logic in eating up the Earth's resources if the habit isn't even making us happier?"²³ But Henderson's radio outburst was also cued by a right-wing advertising campaign for 'Happiness' that was running at the time.

Happiness is the emergent Soma of market fundamentalism. It's a chilling *Brave New World*-style drug on the market: like the Soma of Aldous Huxley's dystopian nightmare, Happiness is the co-ordinated, on-message brainwash designed to reconcile 'the people' to adjustments that come with the free market: lives of uncertainty, diminished quality, communal deterioration and misery – but you can only get the Happiness palliative if you shop. And it was no coincidence that Johan Norberg, the high priest of Happiness, was in Australia to deliver the Centre for Independent Studies annual John Bonython Lecture, scheduled on 11 October 2005 – the eve of Williamson's *Bulletin* piece.

Happiness and Norberg were widely advertised:

on the CIS website and ABC radio; the *Australian Financial Review* and the *Australian* carried his articles and ran profile pieces. All evangelical religions love a convert best, and a dashing former anarchist-environmentalist is a market-fundamentalist prize – and Norberg’s it. His ubiquitous diatribes on Happiness indicate why free-marketeers adore him: “For centuries, philosophers and poets have tried to understand what happiness is” but today “scientists have started to come up with the answers. Happiness is electrical activity in the left front part of the brain, and it comes from getting married, getting friends, getting rich, and avoiding communism”. Norberg fervently believes that technology will solve all human problems, and that the most profligate free-market delivers the most happiness. In his ‘Seasick green’ article, Henderson concurred: “the creation of the global economic institutions that played a key role in postwar prosperity” was the bedrock of contemporary Australia’s relaxation and comfort: “That’s why those on board Cruise Ship Australia seem happy” – and how dare Lord Noosa deny them the simple pleasures the market provides.²⁴

Williamson’s cardinal sin was to suggest that this wasn’t so. Despite allegations of misanthropy, Williamson never claimed that ‘the people’ were ‘cultural dopes’. But he did argue that they could be doped, or duped, by the likes of Henderson and needed to hear alternatives: that market capitalism’s uninterrupted governance of their work and leisure time wasn’t spiritually uplifting; that consumer cultism didn’t empower or liberate and was not in their best interests; and that the abundant happiness on Cruise Ship Australia was delusional. It’s worth reflecting on why these pedestrian propositions attracted such media venom.

What the principal actors in the ‘Cruise Ship Australia’ affair ultimately (and unwittingly) did was to provide the resources for a textbook case study: of how contemporary propaganda works, and how a paranoid power-elite deals with those who speak back to it. It’s also a classic exposé of how false consciousness is manufactured; and of how the struggle over what values genuinely represent ‘the people’ remains unresolved.

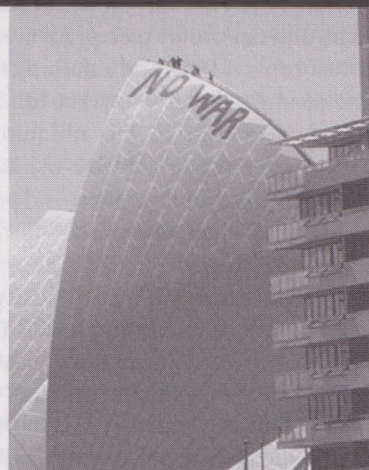
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DESECRATION & DEFACEMENT

CRIMINALISING DISSENT IN A TIME OF WAR



IN AUSTRALIA, the anti-war protests of early 2003 are now all but forgotten. In recalling one instance of spectacular and passionate protest, I am arguing that our amnesia connects with the general sleepy indifference to the tally of civilian deaths in Iraq. It also presents a pathetic contrast to the lively, ongoing anti-war dissidence in the US itself. Here, the war has become so much monotonous background noise. Australia's position toward Washington as a supine little colony, rather than a grown-up critical ally, infantilises the country. Like children, we are told what we are to think about in local and global affairs; raising other matters is disruptive, out of order.

The Opera House protest of 18 March 2003 is a story with more concentrated symbolic value than its main actors probably intended. The action itself was brave, swift and romantic; for many witnesses, both on the ground at the time and everywhere at large from TV and internet images, it was highly exhilarating, a great moment of political and emotional release. It was in the official reaction – a matter of immediate ruthless censorship, conviction for 'malicious damage' and protracted draconian punishment – that the affront to the state was manifest.

This had everything to do with the status of the building, a prestige object of acknowledged national significance. I want to raise the question of what the Opera House represents, historically and now; of how it has been damaged, and how not. I will consider the censorship of the anti-war protest at the building, and connect this to other major instances of censorship in our present situation: censorship

which, because we've become so used to it, we can no longer see for what it is.

RED PAINT, WHITE PAINT

Mr David Burgess is a film-maker and environmentalist; he has been active in anti-logging protests, facing bulldozers in several New South Wales forests and in Papua New Guinea. Dr Will Saunders is an astronomer, who came to Australia in 2000 on a five-year contract with the Anglo-Australian Observatory; his speciality is the design of astronomical instruments. In February 2003 he accepted a continuing appointment with the observatory, intending to stay in Australia. He knew that conspicuous anti-war action might endanger his working visa, but he felt a passionate opposition to the war, which, as he said publicly, had to do with belonging to two countries; George W. Bush needed something that looked like a coalition, and so Howard and Blair didn't simply allow him to go to war, they actively enabled it.

The two met through a green group in 2002, and as long-term activists, they shared their concern that war was looking inevitable. They saw it coming early and, as documents recently published have shown, they were right: the Bush regime's commitment to the invasion never did depend on the pursuit of WMDs, and it was operative from July 2002 if not earlier.

Will wanted to go off and be a human shield, and made a plane booking for Amman. He was talked out of that, and let the booking lapse; then after the major demonstrations of mid-February 2003, he and

Dave agreed do something toward sustaining the momentum. They also agreed that one more anti-war message on some well-graffiti'd wall in Newtown would make no difference to anything. Their gesture must express, as conspicuously as possible, Australian opposition; but no-one should get hurt. Will said that when Dave mentioned the Opera House, he gulped three times; but he'd already declared that he was prepared to be arrested. Nowhere else had that kind of visibility, and the glazed tiling was certain to be cleanable.

They reconnoitred, calculated the climb, and took the train to Circular Quay on the morning of 18 March. Two friends came with them, carrying notes to be delivered to the Opera House security staff and the police. The notes said that the two were engaged in a peaceful protest against the US-led invasion of Iraq, that their action involved no danger to themselves or to others, and that they would co-operate with the police and Opera House authorities.

On the western side of the building there are three points where the roof structure meets the Broadwalk at difficult 60-degree angles; they finish the gutters defining the side shells from the great main shell on one side and the smaller, southward-facing one on the other. Looking at those points, I still can't imagine how they did it; while each gutter makes a kind of path, it's steep and curving, with nothing to hang on to. However it was, they reached the central joint of the roof, and climbed the steep spine of the major arch, carrying eight litres of deep red oil-based paving paint, with a tray and roller and telescopic extension rods. The backpacks must have been heavy.

Dave poured paint and spoke to the police on his mobile, while Will handled the rollers, leaning across the rail, working fast, putting on three coats, and making the letters very large. They were five metres high, stretching across the whole top third of the arc, dominating the building's profile as seen from the quay area, from the office towers across the southern end of the CBD, from the Harbour Bridge and from the air. Most conveniently, a Channel 9 helicopter was circling the inner harbour at the time. In no time flat, the image had flashed around the globe. Unequivocally and immediately, it meant that however Australia might be numbered in the coalition of the willing, it was not with the full consent of the Australian people. In that sense, almost instantaneously, it was mission accomplished.

Will was working on the R, paint dripping down the tiling, when they saw the two jump-suited officers from the Rescue Squad coming up the walkway. As they arrived, Will asked if he could finish, and the answer was no; but then, as the officer told him he was under arrest, he managed to get in another few seconds of paintwork. Other police arrived; one said, "Nice view from up here, boys". Packing up – it was quite easy there right at the top, where the walkway flattens out – they had no chance to notice the audience reaction down around the waterfront. Passengers on the crowded ferries, churning in to the quays, saw something utterly startling; there were gasps, cheers, sounds of offence, instant babblings of argument.

Some have said they felt real elation and release, a sudden sense that this war didn't have to happen, that ordinary human beings could choose after all not to do it. But Annabelle Lukin – an academic linguist who, as it happened, was researching the language of war – reacted differently. She came in on the Manly ferry, rounding Bennelong Point close in to dock; she looked up, felt a second's shock, and then a drop into absolute gravity: "I love the Opera House, and normally I'd hate to see anyone defacing it. But not then – that anyone could feel driven to do *that* showed me how desperate the situation was. What they did was right."

Getting down was a cumbersome business, and they had paint all over them. They climbed through the hatchway, and were formally arrested on the next level; then the awkward procession moved down on steel ladders and narrow walkways, through the above- and backstage levels of the Concert Hall, finally passing a crowded space on ground level near the loading dock. It was packed with stagehands and musicians in mid-rehearsal. The news had spread fast through the building. The music stopped dead, and as they were led through, the players and stagehands cheered and clapped them all the way through to the police wagon in the underpass.

They were charged with malicious damage, and after several hours locked up, they were bailed, and walked out to meet a pack of journalists. On that and other occasions, both insisted that they had taken no pleasure in the action; Will said he had never intentionally damaged property before, "and I hope never to have to again". Dave offered apologies to anyone who was offended by the action, but, he said, "this was a day in our history like no other". Almost

immediately, Will was re-detained and asked to wait, while one particularly kind and friendly officer talked to him at some length about how difficult he found it to police unpopular government policies. Then the man from DIMIA (Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs) appeared, and Will was told that he could well be judged “a danger to the peace and good order of the Australian community” and deported in consequence.

The two hoped for a deal with the Opera House, so that they’d meet the costs of the clean-up and contribute their own labour to the work, while avoiding criminal prosecution and gaol. The police seemed to view the episode with complete tolerance, but the Opera House management wouldn’t hear of it, and some blistering words came down the phone line. Both the building’s authorities and the state government’s were in the highest agitation. They’d all been made to look foolish, and this action, which couldn’t have been more conspicuous, was an intolerable affront. The state premier, Bob Carr, went into security overdrive. He said: “This is a dishonourable way of making a protest because it defaces a beautiful piece of our public property.” The scandal, however, was less in the protest, even the defacement, than in the fact that nobody had stopped it.

The Opera House CEO, Dr Norman Gillespie, had ordered that the paint be cleaned off immediately. A firm called Techni-Clean, reportedly specialists in eliminating graffiti, was summoned; before the red paint was dry, the abseiling workmen quickly got it covered over with white paraffin wax.

This was like saying: this didn’t really happen, cover it up now, it mustn’t be seen. People I’ve spoken to, gentle liberal conservatives, have said: Why couldn’t they have left it, just for twenty-four hours? Given the degree of opposition to the war at that stage – some tallies showed disapproval reaching 85 per cent – keeping the No War message on the Opera House for twenty-four hours would have been a reasonable measure of tolerance, leeway for peaceful citizens’ protest.

No way. Next morning the abseilers from Techni-Clean came back; using very hot water forced through high-pressure hoses, they cleared away the white wax, then worked on the scarlet letters. Because the paint hadn’t been dry to begin with, the process yielded a highly eloquent public image, the huge red letters remaining legible as the paint flowed down the whole side of the major shell. Some

witnesses said it was as though while the bombs began falling on Baghdad, the Opera House itself was weeping and bleeding, as though from an open wound. The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran an eloquent four-column photograph of the clean-up in process, with some clear subeditorial sympathy. The heading ran “Opera House is theatre of war no more”, and the caption began: “Blasted out of memory . . .” As, quite irretrievably, it was not.

By then John Howard had publicly confirmed Australia’s commitment to the invasion. (Immediately, in Qatar, *Al-Jazeera* pounced on the irony: Howard was marching out in the Middle East to help liberate those to whose kin he had refused shelter – again and again, implacably – when they came as asylum-seekers to Australia.)

For themselves, Will and Dave thought Dave would be allowed to keep his job with a large environmental organisation, but that Will might well be ejected from the Observatory, a major institution in the national scientific establishment. What happened was the opposite. At the Observatory’s Epping offices next day, Will got congratulations and near-universal support. Later the whole staff weighed in to supply the character references requested by DIMIA; finally, when those were coming in by the truckload, the embarrassed bureaucrats asked Will to call a halt.

It was Dave, much less securely employed, who was pushed out; a month later his employers told him they no longer needed a forestry officer – although he found that they hired another one not long afterwards. He settled in to a chancy routine of odd-jobbing through an agency, driving trucks, building sets and shifting scenery. At times those jobs took him back to the Opera House, where – as he likes to remember – he found himself one day touching up a set with the same colour and brand of paint as they’d used on the roof.

Meanwhile the *Daily Telegraph* said the community was entitled to be outraged. Terms like desecration, defacement and vandalism were scattered around online and in print, and they got some serious hate-mail – one person wanted them chained to the site in leg-irons to do the cleaning up, then (both) deported; another said they were exactly like Mohammed Atta, one of the hijackers from September 11.

But most mail was overwhelmingly supportive, and it came from around the world. In exchanges



Will Saunders (left) and Dave Burgess face the media

Judge Martin Blackmore, a true black-letter lawyer, would not allow that the political context of the action made any difference; this case of defacement and damage was like any other, and the war was no excuse. He wouldn't allow them to present a defence of any kind, or even to say that one had been prepared: they were silenced.

with friends and fellow professionals, some with links in the Middle East, Will found gratitude that people in Australia cared enough to protest, anger that the Western media were falling into line with their political leaders, fear for people in harm's way. Replying to one correspondent, Will wrote: "I think many of us who are trying to stop this insanity are haunted by the thought that many people in Iraq will be willing the war, to end the terrible things that have been happening in Iraq – with the connivance of western governments – for so long."

There was a message from an Aboriginal community in the Territory, letters in unconventional English from recent immigrants, expressing shock for Australia's support of the war; from old acquaintances – "I am proud of you and your actions . . . what you did was because you felt so deeply about the way this has been done in our name" . . . Someone invoked Oscar Wilde: "Disobedience is man's original virtue" . . . "What the good lads did to the Opera House provided a beacon of hope . . . when I was seriously considering leaving the country."

In the District Court of NSW the two were found guilty of malicious damage. They had chosen to appear before a jury; they and their counsel had worked hard on their defence, and they seriously believed that a conviction was unlikely. But Judge Martin Blackmore, a true black-letter lawyer, would not allow that the political context of the action made any difference; this case of defacement and damage was like any other, and the war was no excuse. He wouldn't allow them to present a defence of any kind, or even to say that one had been prepared: they were silenced. Nor could they lodge an appeal before being sentenced.

After the first sentencing hearing on 11 Decem-

ber, both finally got their say in public statements. Will said: "The governments of my countries of birth and residence were about to embark on an unprovoked and illegal invasion, on the basis of lies knowingly told, and against the wishes of their peoples. I say that each of these elements is clearly established, and that there is no greater wrong governments can do . . ."

Dave's statement began: "I did this as an act of civil disobedience against a war I feel is illegal, immoral and will have terrible consequences for our country. Having watched our Prime Minister and his government ignore the wishes of the vast majority of the Australian people and flout the international statutes and safeguards of the United Nations and the Geneva Convention, I felt betrayed by our democratic system . . . [the act] had to be as strong as possible while not being violent."

There it seemed that they were trying to break through the blanket of indifference which, nine months after the invasion began, seemed to have settled on Australia. On 30 January 2005, they were sentenced to nine months' periodic detention and \$151,000 fine and compensation – close to ten times the police estimate of the damage. The amount was much contested, and I am reliably told that some of the Opera House staff wanted to issue a statement in Will's and Dave's defence. The management clamped down on those moves, and the personnel silenced; their jobs were at risk.

Again there were messages of support: "Dudes, I'll be happy to contribute"; "I wish I could pay the lot for you because that was one hell of a way to protest" . . . "I do not have any money otherwise I would give you all I had. Those fuckers of the fifty-third state will be out to get you guys . . ."

So it seemed. Will and Dave were the first peaceful protesters to be gaoled in Australia since the Vietnam war. Six months on from the sentence, when both had spent several months of weekends in detention, an appeal was heard; their counsel told the court that the action had been “an attempt to affect a decision which would cause death and destruction on a large scale”. He cited a British precedent which states that “a person may use such force as is reasonable in the circumstances in the prevention of a crime”.

Rejecting the argument, Justice Michael Adams said: “The logic of the argument applies to every act of terrorism. All terrorists say we are doing this to defend our homelands, our people . . .” This didn’t quite amount to calling Will and Dave terrorists. It was rather what lawyers know as the floodgates principle: let this lot through, and there’ll be a whole horde of troublemakers coming after them.

After another six months of deliberation, the court rejected the appeal and confirmed the sentences, which were not completed until late August 2005. Meantime, among friends and supporters, a trust had been set up to raise the money demanded; a successful small business grew up, turning out snowdomes, fridge magnets, T-shirts, cards and stubby holders. Within each snowdome – they’re much like the one in *Citizen Kane* – the miniature Opera House shows NO WAR in red lettering on the crest.

Will arranged to pay \$1000 a month from his salary. Dave made the video, *Seeing Red*. Website and email circuits hummed, and there were hugely successful benefit nights in pubs and small galleries. By now the snowdomes are scattered around the world, and it has been romantically said that owning one is a small way of showing which side you’re on (but it is also the case that some quite conservative recipients treasure them as well). The central images in *Seeing Red*, and the tiny models in the domes, become emblematic, at once comic and serious; changing the Opera House while also keeping it, binding it into history. These images will never be acknowledged in the building’s abundant official iconography, and the event will not be mentioned in the bland accounts approved for relaying by the tourist guides to the building.

Through the process, Will and Dave never went in for false heroics, nor lost their sense of absurdity. (Deflecting a rhetorical tribute one evening, Will said they were just a pair of gonzos who’d got fired

up.) Once on the No War website, however, they did link their effort to a major strand in the moral tradition; they ran this quote from Gandhi: “What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans, and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty and democracy?”

This was appropriate. The action was classically Gandhian in that no-one was hurt, no real damage was done, and the meaning was unmistakable. They know their punishment, however excessive, was a small thing in the wider picture; they know also that they were very far from alone. Elsewhere in Australia and around the world, there were other places where the words NO WAR had been spelt out, large-scale, in March 2003, and other places where protesters were arrested and gaoled.

In Italy, hundreds of protesters blocked the trains carrying US men and weapons to a military base near Pisa, and dockers stopped work in protest, rather than load shipments of arms for the Gulf. Ten people were arrested at Shannon airport outside Dublin for trying to stop the refuelling of USAF planes bound for Iraq. Around the world, activist theatre groups ran readings of *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes’ anti-war comedy, a piece of performative activism two thousand years old.

In the event, the giant NO WAR remained in place, in full red view over the city, for three or four hours at most, on that building’s highest sail, for just one morning of a brilliant Sydney autumn. Ruthlessly censored though it was, its work was done.

THE BUILDING AND THE STATE

Before the appeal was determined, the state government finalised its response. A new allocation of \$13.6 million was made for upgrading security at the Opera House, and another amendment was added to the Sydney Opera House Trust Act (a veritable middenheap of amendments, piling up steadily since 1960; a long, strange record of the wrestlings of politics and culture). The 2004 amendment provided for new penalties: trespassing on the building can now mean two years’ gaol, a fine of \$22,000, or both; trespassing with intent to cause damage incurs a maximum sentence of seven years, and damage performed, intentionally or recklessly, a five-year sentence.

These provisions connect with the Summary Offences Act list, which includes climbing up a public building and possession of a spray-paint can without

Terms like desecration, defacement and vandalism were scattered around on-line and in print, and they got some serious hate-mail – one person wanted them chained to the site in leg-irons to do the cleaning up, then (both) deported; another said they were exactly like Mohammed Atta, one of the hijackers from September 11.

lawful excuse. The state's attorney-general, Bob Debus, said that many people had been concerned "about the damage done to the Opera House sails last year" and that the new laws would "ensure that such damaging acts are punished appropriately".

This was overkill; they'd already passed an amendment to crimes legislation to take account of possible terrorism, providing new penalties in fines and imprisonment (up to seven years) specifically for defacing or damaging the Sydney Opera House. Those provisions had been announced in January, a few weeks before Will and Dave's sentencing. It seemed like an attempt by the government to save face after the security failure of the No War protest. It could also have been seen as an attempt to influence the proceedings toward the sentence.

During parliamentary debate in late June 2004, one member of the Liberal (read conservative) state opposition, a Democrat and the Greens' energetic Lee Rhiannon joined, in an odd momentary coalition, to comment on the government's ways of covering its embarrassment. Rhiannon praised the alleged vandals for their courage, and challenged those Labor members of the government who had once marched against the Vietnam war and supported principled civil disobedience: "The Greens would like to hear from some of those people from the Labor left. The vandalism is the war that this Government supported; that is a huge crime. How do they feel about this silencing of activism?"

The confusions in the public response are thickly tangled: the security anxieties of the political leadership, with state authorities desperate to prove their control both to the federal government and their own populations; the peculiar status of the Opera House as a secular cathedral, the suggestion that this act amounted to a sort of blasphemy; and with that the Opera House management's own commercial anxieties, an odd suggestion that the fiery peace message might have driven the tourists away. (It might well, of course, have drawn them closer; you never know.)

The Opera House management issued a statement that as an arts institution, the building could have nothing to do with the war or politics; that, in Dr Gillespie's words, the protest action had been "a totally unacceptable use of Australia's most significant international tourism and cultural landmark to promote a political message". Dr Gillespie had won his appointment in 2002 because of a special blend of qualifications; besides a track record in business management (much of that within the oil industry), he holds degrees in musicology and literature. In his statement, he registered the antique and discredited tradition that art and politics can somehow be sealed off from each other, held apart.

Perhaps he had yet to learn that no story disrupts that tradition more decisively than that of the Opera House itself. With all its glamour and standing, this building is a deeply ruptured, compromised major object. It is by now well known, even to younger generations, that the architect Jørn Utzon and his team were unjustly forced to leave the building site in early 1966. The exhilarating outward structure was then essentially in place, but the interiors which would have matched it, and also fulfilled the difficult brief on acoustics, were still in the course of planning. That planning was fatally obstructed, not only by grudging politicians, but no less by malice and jealousy on the part of the local architectural profession; for this was always an immigrant story, one marked by deep cross-cultural misunderstandings.

In the outcome, the dated kitsch of the interiors, designed by a government-appointed consortium after the architect's departure, is profoundly at odds with the splendid structures which contain it. The inside doesn't understand the outside; it doesn't understand it at all. Today Utzon, who has never returned to Australia, remains a pre-eminent local hero. The cultural establishment has made him many symbolic reparations in honours and dignities, and by all accounts the man himself, at 88, is admirably free of rancour, benign in his feeling toward Australia.

But as a managed institution, the Opera House

is at least as much about tourism and money as it is a centre for the performing arts. Unlike other structures ostensibly centred on art, it has no dedicated bookshop. Until the late 1990s it contained a library and performing-arts archive, built over decades from private endowment, dedicated voluntary effort and a prolonged, painstaking assemblage of oral history, an invaluable cultural resource. In 1998 all this was dismantled, and the resources were dispersed to a range of smaller institutional libraries scattered widely across Sydney. The building no longer has a mind and memory of its own. In the brochures and the tour guides' spiels, the issues in its history are evaded or smoothed over; ideals are denied, lying tales are told.

The public need is that its history should be properly understood, a history which is emblematic of the whole nation's around it. That of all buildings could have borne a spectacular anti-war message for longer than one morning. Its own history is repeatedly denied and smoothed over, like something done with white paraffin paint.

THE COST OF WAR

The full clean-up of the Sydney Opera House exterior took several days, but by the end of 19 March the words were gone. By the end of 20 March the bombing, the great fireworks, the shock-and-awe horror show was blazing over Baghdad. No-one knows when the first civilians were killed, the first houses demolished. But even before that, through early 2003, both British and American air forces were flying sorties and bombing, supposedly on specific targets; eleven civilians had already died in consequence. Australians, in general, didn't know that. They did know that their Prime Minister had chosen on their behalf to involve this country with America in war which was precipitate and unprovoked.

Three years on, the question of the human cost is pressing more urgently. The international media have been compliant; reliable tallies on civilian deaths have been hard to find. But then in October 2004, a landmark article appeared in the international medical journal the *Lancet*, where the authors estimated the civilian deaths from military action in Iraq since March 2003 at around 100,000.

The Iraq Bodycount website publishes much lower estimates, now (February 2006) between 28,473 and 32,088, figures based on what are held to be reliable media reports. One set of figures did

not, however, undermine the other; the two groups of investigators were measuring different kinds of data. Occupation and insurgency are hopelessly enmeshed, but the Iraq Bodycount investigators have distinguished between deaths from bombing by the coalition and those from crime and insurgency. What matters is that all these deaths were inside human control, they were foreseen, they were avoidable. "Stuff happens," said the American warlord, nonchalantly.

If the *Lancet's* findings did not make major headlines, they found their way into general consciousness. Letter-writers to the liberal press seized on the ironic contrast between responses to the tsunami, on one hand, and the silence, on the other, over the carnage of war. Paul Greenway wrote from Adelaide to the *Guardian* that following the tsunami, "there seems no end to the misery that the media are willing and able to show us" while on the other hand, after "the preventable, deliberate invasion and occupation . . . the deaths of tens of thousands . . . uncounted hundreds of thousands of wounded . . . where are the graphic photos of dead and wounded Iraqis, of begging orphans, of the homes destroyed by US bombs?"

The question was as naive as it was urgent. 'Embedded' journalists have necessarily limited opportunities to report on those aspects of warmongering which the military authorities don't want them to see or publicise; that's the whole point of the embedding practice. It is an authoritarian shackling of journalism as effective as Stalinist censorship, although it works in different ways; often the constraints are not perceived as such by the professionals themselves, and often too, journalists who are not embedded – known in the business as unilaterals – seem to be no more independent than those who are.

In any event, the bloody devastation they have witnessed is something to which this Australian nation was made to consent. It is our business that it has happened; it is our duty to know, and the duty of our political leaders to tell us.

Only one politician, however, has appeared to take that duty seriously. During a Senate Estimates hearing on 21 February 2005, the Labor senator John Faulkner interrogated the director-general of the Office of National Assessments, Peter Varghese, who said ". . . we do not have any independent information which would provide . . . a number based on a well-grounded source of information".

(Did the *Lancet*'s widely reported investigation not count as 'well-grounded', or did it somehow escape the attention of the ONA?)

Faulkner asked him whether any member of the government had asked the ONA for a briefing on civilian casualties. The answer was no. Faulkner then questioned officials from the Prime Minister's own department, and finally turned to the Minister for Defence, Senator Robert Hill. After almost an hour of it Faulkner's anger became apparent. He said: "What I'm told is nobody knows, nobody has asked, nobody even tries to establish what the casualties might be." Senator Hill couldn't deny it. Faulkner finished: "I happen to think it does not suit people to find out these statistics . . . I am merely asking what efforts have been made. The answer is none. Nothing."

In a later speech, Faulkner showed something of what it means to keep awake, to refuse to become inured:

Wars are bloody and horrific. A lot of people die, and they die hard. Most of them have no connection to the abstract causes being fought for or interest in the politics that brewed the battle. Every one of them leaves a lasting wound in the lives of those who loved them.

And knowing that, we should be very careful about when and why we go to war. It is inexcusable to pretend we can wage a war without cost, as the Howard Government is trying to do. And it is inexcusable to take our nation to war based on a lie, as the Howard Government did.

This government didn't have the strength to say no to the United States nor the integrity to tell Australians why we were going to war.

There, for a moment, I want to stop him; Washington isn't the whole of the US. We could say no to Bush and yes to those who didn't vote for him, make our links with those who still put energy, day after day, into opposition, the likes of those who keep on rowing hard against the current to record the deaths and the costs. We could be a critical ally instead of a supine little colony.

Faulkner finished: "They ought at least to have the courage to count the dead."

Then, and later on ABC Radio National, he spoke of "the thousands of children killed", and he named names. He was trying to bring the war home to his listeners, and what he chose to do was talk about

children. Their twenty-first-century lives had been waiting for them, and then they were smashed. Faulkner named Bahaar Ali Kadem, two years old, killed on 20 March 2003 by a missile in Helaa Al-Kefell; and Ali Shaker Abed Al-Hassan, aged four, killed two days later, also by a missile, in Al-Bassra.

POSTSCRIPT

However little the masters of cultural institutions may like it, culture and politics go on being irresistibly, often painfully entangled. Having finished their gaol terms, Will and Dave went with friends to the Opera House on 30 August to present their cheque for the final payment of the \$151,000. They had a few problems getting in; they found the staff stressed and flustered. Maximum security arrangements were in train for the impending Forbes CEO Global Conference, a major international meeting of 350 business leaders. This was hosted jointly by *Forbes* magazine and the NSW state government, and opened with fanfare by the Australian Prime Minister. The choice to hold this event in the Sydney Opera House was made against the advice of the police.

In consequence both the building and the forecourt – perhaps the most significant of all the city's public rallying places – were closed off from the public by high steel fencing erected for the occasion. It was widely known that many of Forbes' highly placed guests were corporate leaders who strongly supported the Iraq war and were profiting from it. A peaceable protest rally, involving about 1000 people, was held at Circular Quay late on 31 August; there was then a rambling march to the barricades, attended by a hugely disproportionate force of police. There were a few arrests when a small number of people succeeded in overturning a section of the steel fence.

Six months later, the building was used, at public expense, for the prime minister's memorial gathering of celebrities for his friend the billionaire Kerry Packer. There were only a few protesters in the forecourt; several were arrested. They too were driven partly by intense anger that this of all public sites should be thus misused, with contempt for the people who own it.

Sylvia Lawson's most recent book is the novel *The Outside Story* (Hardie Grant, 2003) which is centred on the early history of the Sydney Opera House. This essay was developed from her *Overland* lecture delivered 13 July 2005.

IRAQ

THE ARGUMENT FOR WITHDRAWAL

OPponents of the war in Iraq accurately predicted almost every outcome of the war to date: no weapons of mass destruction, no immediate withdrawal of US forces upon removal of Saddam's regime, no seamless transition to a western style democracy, ongoing war and violence after the intervention and the increased likelihood of giving al-Qaeda a foothold in Iraq.

Alexander Downer has responded to calls for Australia to consider withdrawing its forces from Iraq by stating that this would result in leaving "the country to al-Zarqawi and the terrorists".¹

Apart from the obvious appeal to emotion, this type of characterisation oversimplifies the realities on the ground in Iraq. These realities are more complicated than the simplistic suggestion that it is 'us and the Iraqi people versus the terrorists'. There are deep divisions within Iraq regarding the presence of foreign troops and opposition to their presence is not limited to the insurgency.

Nobody disputes that, just as predicted, the intervention in Iraq has given a foothold to al-Qaeda. This is the Zarqawi group, dubbed 'al-Qaeda in Iraq' by Bin Laden. It may number up to 1500 fighters out of an insurgency variously estimated at fifteen to twenty thousand fighters (with a larger support group). But Zarqawi's group seems very capable militarily and claims to be responsible for a large proportion of the more serious attacks.

The concern is that the continued occupation of Iraq feeds the Zarqawi group as well as the insurgency in general. In June 2005 the *New York Times* reported on a CIA assessment which stated that Iraq may prove to be an even more effective training ground for Islamic extremists than Afghanistan was in al-Qaeda's early days, because it is serving as a real-world labora-



tory for urban combat.² This is already likely to be a major legacy of the occupation of Iraq no matter when the Coalition forces leave. With Iraq's porous borders this situation will not be improved by prolonging the occupation and indeed may be worsened by it.

Although al-Qaeda, or its proxy, is now present in Iraq, the insurgency is made up of various groups. It includes some that oppose both the US occupation and the actions of the Zarqawi group. The Association of Muslim Scholars, the most influential group among the Arab Sunnis draws a distinction between what they call 'honourable resistance', which is striking at occupation troops, and what they themselves call 'terrorism' – actions aimed at civilians or fellow Iraqis.³ They have condemned calls by Zarqawi to declare comprehensive war on the Shiites and those Sunnis who wished to participate in elections.⁴

Withdrawal is no panacea. Just as there was never a likely prospect of seamless transition to peace or democracy following the invasion, neither is such a transition likely upon withdrawal. But it does seem beyond question that both the occupation and post-occupation action have fed the insurgency.

The Bush administration plan was not simply to remove Saddam and to rebuild Iraq but to transform it into a neo-liberal economic utopia. Paul Bremer's earliest actions in Iraq were to fire five hundred thousand state employees, mostly soldiers but also doctors, nurses, teachers, publishers and printers, and to foreshadow privatisation of some two hundred state-owned industries.⁵ Unemployed, many victims of Bremer's measures went straight into the insurgency.

The insurgency has also been fuelled by abuses committed by US forces in Iraq. US administration

claims that the abuses at Abu Ghraib were isolated actions have now been discredited.

According to the 2004 Schlesinger Commission report, coercive interrogation methods approved by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld for use on prisoners at Guantánamo “migrated to Afghanistan and Iraq, where they were neither limited nor safeguarded”, and contributed to the widespread and systematic torture and abuse at US detention centres there.⁶ These methods included the use of guard dogs to induce fear in prisoners, stress techniques such as forced standing and shackling in painful positions, and removing prisoner’s clothes for long periods. Tony Lagouranis, a US Army interrogator who served a tour of duty in Iraq from January 2004 to January 2005, has described a ‘culture of abuse’ in Iraq and has referred to the widespread use of torture of people in their homes by US detaining units.⁷ The fact that Saddam’s regime routinely used even more brutal forms of torture, as well as summary execution, provides no basis to assume that abuses by US forces could operate other than to fuel the insurgency or support for it. The US does not have a monopoly on the use of wounded national pride as a political weapon.

The main constituency for the insurgency is the Arab Sunni areas of the country. Political settlement with this group is a pre-condition of peace with or without occupation. President George W. Bush himself has conceded that the insurgency cannot be defeated militarily. Democrat congressman Jack Murtha, a much decorated Vietnam War veteran who supported the intervention, has stated that the “[multinational] troops have become the primary target of the insurgency. They are united against US forces and we have become a catalyst for violence”.⁸

The main argument in favour of withdrawal is that most Arab Sunnis will understand that it is in their best interest to negotiate and compromise. More moderate Sunni groups, including those advocating peaceful resistance to the US occupation, will be in a better position to then characterise the Zarqawi group as the only remaining undesirable foreign presence impeding Iraqi self-determination.

There are some powerful factors that should lead the Arab Sunnis to compromise. The Arab Shiites are three times the number of the Arab Sunnis. The Kurds in the north are more or less equivalent in number but are now much more powerful than the Sunnis as an organised military force.

Of course there can be no guarantee that, upon

withdrawal, political settlement will occur. But under the current conditions of the occupation the Sunni based insurgency can strike out at occupying forces and at the same time, those elements that wish to can also engage in low intensity civil war against the Shiites, with the risk of major retaliation by the Shiites being minimised by the presence of the US forces and their allies.

A major US fear is the creation of a separate Shiite state in the south of Iraq. But Iraq is a country with mixed Sunni and Shiite majorities and even tribes that are mixed religiously. The Shiites probably know that if they were to secede in some formal manner this would risk more widespread civil war or sectarian ‘cleansing’ in regions with Shiite minorities, not to mention general hostility from the wider Arab community.

All the signs are that the Howard Government’s policy in Iraq is based upon doing as directed by the US. It did not protest Bremer’s actions in fuelling the insurgency by engaging in mass sackings. It seems to have accepted without question US assertions that Abu Ghraib reflected a few ‘bad apples’ rather than a more widespread culture of abuse. It has not criticised a single aspect of the Bush administration’s handling of the war either before or after the invasion.

It is obviously not consideration of actions that are most likely to foster peace in Iraq and isolate the Zarqawi group, that forms the framework for the Howard Government’s policy in Iraq. Rather the Howard Government has and will continue to uncritically and completely align Australia’s position in the Middle East with that of the US and will leave Iraq only when the US determines that it is time to do so.

1. See Downer’s comments quoted in the *Age* at: <theage.com.au/news/National/Australia-wont-abandon-Iraq-Downer/2006/01/10/1136863231711.html>.
2. <www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/iraq/attack/consequences/2005/0622prime.htm>.
3. ‘The case for withdrawal’, interview with *Gilbert Achcar* <zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=15&ItemID=9483>.
4. <www.globalterroralert.com/pdf/0905/zarqawi-amsulema.pdf>.
5. ‘Bagdad Year Zero’, Naomi Klein in *No War*, Gibson Square Books, 2005.
6. Human Rights Watch, <hrw.org/reports/2005/us0905/5.htm#_Toc115161410>.
7. <pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/torture/interviews/lagouranis.html>.
8. <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi_insurgency#endnote_cbsnews0>.

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TWO FIRES

POETRY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT



Judith Wright: An inspiration for the Two Fires festival.

IN MARCH 2005, the NSW southern tablelands town of Braidwood was host to the inaugural Two Fires Festival and Conference. The brainchild of RMIT environmentalist Martin Mulligan, this event drew its energy and focus from the afterlife of Judith Wright and from the work of one of Australia's best-known ecophilosophers, Val Plumwood. An extension of Wright's legacy as poet, conservationist and reconciliation activist, the festival borrowed its name from her Herakleitian book of poems of the early 1950s – "an ever-living Fire, with measures of it kindling, and measures going out" – and represented the twin human flames of artistic creativity and political activism. Given the number of times the friendship of Wright and Oodgeroo was evoked in various talks and reminiscences, one couldn't help but think of the fires as also emblemising those two shadow-sisters and their poetic and cultural collaborations. Wright spent the last twenty years or more of her life living in Braidwood or just outside the town, at her Mongarlowe property, part of the Half Moon Wildlife Refuge and on the edge of the Eastern Escarpment above the Shoalhaven. Val Plumwood, also a local, lives on the edge of that escarpment too. The event was about reconciliation, about strategies for environmental activism, and about rekindling imagination and compassion which, as the organising committee put it, "have not been travelling well in Australia in recent years".

Braidwood is a distinctive and appealing New South Wales country town. 'Settled' in the 1820s by land-grantees and convicts on assignment, the area

originally belonged to the Walbanja (Yuin) people. Their descendants reminded festival participants of their traditional ownership. The town enjoyed a boom in the 1850s and 60s due to the discovery of gold, and much of its infrastructure dates from those decades. It also maintains its original, rectangular, Georgian layout, having missed out on a rail connection. The Braidwood-Araluen goldrush encouraged some serious bushranging (Ben Hall, the Jingera mob), and brought Chinese to the area, too, including the Nomchong family whose descendants ran a general store for a hundred years and built the town's National Theatre, one of the main venues for the Festival. There's an electrical goods store in the main street still owned by a Nomchong. For Emily Manning ('Australie'), though, in her poem of the 1870s, 'From the Clyde to Braidwood', about travelling up over the range, the town was "bare, bald, prosaic", "too new to foster poesy". Despite Manning's adopted pseudonym, Braidwood could engender no context for the word 'national' in her imagination. Now a pastoral and rural service centre of about 1200 people, the town has also been a pit stop, where the Kings Highway turns into Wallace Street, for two or three generations of Canberrans on their way to and from the south coast. Halfway between the national capital and Bateman's Bay, Braidwood's main drag is a strip of huge old pubs full of pokies and unused back rooms, cafe-galleries, touting real estate agents open on a Sunday, Shire offices, CWA rooms, craft outlets, and a local museum, a zinc-white First World War memorial with

a low post and chain fence, and a park. The last day of the festival happened to be Canberra Day, and so the slow coil of four-wheel-driving long-weekenders was heading back up the Clyde, towing boats, the sun in their eyes all the way home.

The Tallaganda Shire Council building, one of the most impressive edifices in Braidwood's heritage streetscape, hasn't yet changed its name, in semi-circular stencilled letters, on the ground-floor windows. In 2004 it was restructured by the NSW government into a new, enlarged entity, the Palerang Shire. The legend on the pediment of the building still reads 'Literary Institute, Erected 1869'. A handsome gold-boom, two-storey building, topped with urns and rows of balusters, it was originally a lending library, writers' centre and proto-TAFE, but has now been taken over by local government administration. This material conjunction of the literary and local governmentality is not merely historical, as various comments throughout the festival suggested. There were evidently some issues around the council's attitude to the festival. The unfortunate polarisation of 'professional' and 'community' artist, for example, obviously stalks such events, and local businesses were evidently ambivalent about the influx of non-locals. Where country towns are concerned, what's new? The community represented itself most positively perhaps through the schoolchildren's involvement and by Barry Waters' role on the organising committee. Although the local RSL club was also a venue for a strand of Festival events. But the tensions between 'national' literary culture and local government were alluded to more than once in the controversy over the non-naming of the Community Library. As I walked past the Library on the last day of the festival, just around the corner from the former Literary Institute, a 'This Is Not the Judith Wright Library' placard was still there, between two giant swan puppets. This bit of local activism referred to a recent stoush within the shire council over a motion to name the library after Wright. The motion was defeated and feelings still ran high. In one of her talks, a well-known Australian poet who has lived in Braidwood for decades quoted a local government office-bearer's comment about Wright in the midst of this contention: "She might've been world famous but what'd she ever do for Tallaganda Shire?"

For more than thirty years now, Braidwood, like other small Monaro towns that have become

satellites of the ACT – Bungendore, Captains Flat, Collector – has felt the impact of the socio-economic desires of people linked, for one reason or another, to Canberra but preferring not to actually live there. Like coastal and hinterland development, the ACT/NSW border, 'Capital Country' in tourist designation, is one of those regions where the natural and built environment have a long and complex history, that is subject to the demographic and economic corrections (in Jonathan Franzen's sense) of contemporary Australia.¹ The dream of a semi-rural life – 'country grows you' – produces named estates of acreage blocks and lifestyle communities at the edge of urban conurbations ('The Poplars'), one ridge away from small rural properties being bought up by other people 'from' the city, sometimes hobby farmers, sometimes new locals, with only slightly different dreams. 'Encroachment' is a finely calibrated word in these new social and economic territories. Canberra extends its armatures of 'Drives', centres, artificial lakes and eponymous suburbs to the borders of the Capital Territory – the city-planning equivalent of plantation monoculture – while the surrounding country towns and their environmental regions are repopulated and reshaped according to an emerging model of non-urban life, landcare and wilderness. The word 'identity' was slightly too degraded to get much use at the festival, but the Venn-rings of desire and absence it can refer to were strongly at work in the language of land and environment that people were using. These multiple concepts of 'land and self', with all their inflections and individual narratives, were expressed in autobiographical, witness, celebratory, analytic, policy or activist modes. The specifics are always more complex and unpredictable than can be thought by any one individual: someone working in a sleek, corporate-styled office-bunker in the administrative hub of the new Parliament House, for example, brings in the eggs she's collected that morning from the chook-shed on her couple of acres this side of Captains Flat to sell to other office workers. You see muddy utes on Constitution Avenue (ACT, that is, not DC).

The Two Fires event brought together artists, including musicians, poets, novelists, magazine editors, visual and performance groups, dancers and film-makers, with a broad alliance of social justice activists, representatives of green NGOs, environmentalist academics, and representatives from more recently formed groups like ChilOut (children out

of detention) and Rural Australians for Refugees. There was a strong Indigenous presence from near and far, which, together with the younger activists of various kinds, and the extraordinary intellectual drive of Val Plumwood, provided the real energy and interest of the event. Heavily reliant on ready volunteer support, there were concerts, discussion panels, readings, performances, workshops, choruses, exhibitions, screenings, circus arts in the park, launches, prize announcements and presentations, platypus walks, and a parade featuring spectacular three-metre totemic pelican and swan puppets made by children from the school. At times a bit shambolic, there were people and kids wandering up and down Wallace Street, going from one event to another or hanging out in the pie shop, the Albion, or the country-town chic Café Alternberg (ex-Commercial Bank).

Some of the environmental activism had actually been going on in the local community and region. The launch of Robyn Steller's book *Monga Intacta: A Celebration of the Monga Forest and its Protection* was a happy recognition of a significant local victory for conservation and grassroots activism. This volume had learned a lot from previous uses of wilderness photography and high production values in the service of forest conservation. Everyone agreed the parade was a great success, as was the performance based on Judith Wright's poetry and life by Jane Ahlquist and Christine Draeger. So the event was worthily ambitious, and essentially a 'boomer' festival as one organiser characterised it, meaning I guess, it was a kind of avatar of the Aquarius Festival and Nimbin. The Peacebus.com kombivan was certainly there. In fact, it was a brief space of resistance to what everyone frequently referred to, for short, as 'John Howard's Australia'. We knew what we meant, at the same time as we felt the civic unease such solidarity always occasions. Despite the spontaneous and enthusiastic communitarianism of the event, there was also the sense that a current national rule, deeply antagonistic to a reconciled republic and dissenting lives and work, would always close in. This made it also, at moments, forlorn: 'People no longer have the sense they can change things'; 'We're going through this problem saturation'.

My interest in the occasion was critical and linguistic: I wanted to see how the languages of poetry and social activism might interact in a contemporary cultural context. With a long interest in Judith Wright and her work, I had noticed the way

in which literary studies had repeatedly not been able to encompass the contradictions and provocations of her career. Frustrated by the inarticulateness within literary criticism about poetry and activism, I had also noticed the energetic proliferation of work in what Deborah Bird Rose has called the 'ecological humanities in action' where Wright was frequently cited as a pioneering figure and a continuing influence. What we might call decolonising writers, broadly speaking, in cross-disciplinary modes of inquiry and green pedagogy, like environmental history, eco-political criticism, postcolonial archaeology, ethnoecology, arts activism, eco-feminist philosophy, and transnational poetics are busily remapping Wright's life and work in ways that are relevant and useful to them.

Remarkably, just as Wright's nationalist literary canonicity was being restricted to the productions before her activist work in the 1960s and after, by most historians of Australian intellectual and literary culture, she was being canonised as a pioneer of ecological thought and hailed as one of the most influential public intellectuals in Australia in the second half of the twentieth century. Engaged studies like Stuart Hill and Martin Mulligan's *Ecological Pioneers: A Social History of Australian Ecological Thought and Action* (2001) and Peter Read's reconciliatory history in *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (2000), but also recent work by Tom Griffiths, Tim Bonyhady and Deborah Bird Rose all draw upon Wright to frame their thinking and to articulate their positions within contemporary Australian cultural studies. The Two Fires event could also be seen as one of a series of recent expressions of urgent intellectual and cultural work in Australia by these (and other) writers concerned with land and environment. There is a nexus of similar concerns driving other collectivities of new knowledges like the Watermark festival of nature writing in 2003 (see *Southerly* 64.2), new tertiary courses in 'place-based' education, the e-magazine *thylazine*, the ecological humanities corner and archive on the *Australian Humanities Review* site, and the WA-based School of Environmental Poetics and Creativity.

Martin Mulligan and Val Plumwood and the other environmentalists obviously thought of creative practitioners (artists), given Judith Wright's powerful example, as social allies, as energisers and facilitators of community action and dissident perspectives. Behind this was the intuition that what lies

The greening of literary criticism and scholarship has barely begun in Australia and what that paradigm might entail in our uses of poetry in local and national contexts remains to be seen.

at the origin of political activism is 'the heart', the ability, whether individually and/or collectively, to be emotionally *moved* to action. According to this paradigm, the poetic imagination, like any artistic impulse, is fundamentally opposed to destruction and on the side of 'creation' and therefore axiomatically against all exploitation and degradation, human or non-human. Creation = creativity. On this view, for all its solitary production and consumption, poetry is an articulation and enunciation of empathy, of interconnectedness, a value in itself. And a number of the NGO-greens and eco-writers, like Don Henry of the Australian Conservation Foundation and James Woodford of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, paid tribute to the way Wright's poetry had made them feel about place, and had moved their lives, professionally and emotionally, in the direction of careers in conservation. They were also saying their careers in contemporary environmentalism had led them deep into relations with government and the discourse of policy, including the imperatives of media savvy, none of which seemed to connect any more with poetry or with what might have been their original environmental activism. Their nostalgia for poetry seemed akin to their nostalgia for un-degraded environments and for the language and social forms of protest, for community as opposed to institutions. In this context a Wright poem like 'At Cooloolah', which was frequently cited, was the equivalent of Dombrovskis's 'Rock Island Bend', an iconic anthem of environmental value.

While I knew what they meant, I was also uneasily aware of the way in which the 'language of the heart' is also currently being appropriated by a range of politically ugly fundamentalisms: conviction, of whatever kind, can be said to come from the heart. Let's forget about policies, they're too hard, and go with 'faith issues'. Far from exemplifying the 'waning of affect', late capitalism seems to be producing communities with aggressively adopted dialects of 'feeling' that are simultaneously exclusive and othering. What kind of protest and activism was possible against degraded language, by analogy with those

against degraded environments? In this context, even for green bureaucrats, poetry is the equivalent of a national park, where a privileged language of values and feeling is gazetted as a zone apart from the flows of development, exploitation and everyday life. One of the tasks that we might have expected critical theory to take up is an analysis of the language of 'feelings' about economic reform (for example). In this context novels like Andrew McGahan's *Praise* and *The White Earth*, with their representation of how economic reform and nationalist ideologies impact on individual lives, might be read alongside Michael Pusey's attempts, in his recent research, to get behind the media-structured expression of 'opinion' to a less alienated language of feeling about contemporary Australians' economic and political being. The poetics of contemporary structures of feeling?²

Despite its overt thematics of language, history and culture, the professional discourse I move in – Australian literary studies – has no ethnomethodology, if you will, to 'read' activist writers or texts in deictic performance or the relations between the linguistic modes of life-narratives, affect and writing (individual and collective). The relations of poetry and public policy tend to remain inarticulate, phobic. If academic textual analysis has evolved its understanding of textuality in response to the array of theory it also remains blocked and limited in fundamental ways. Even 'creative writing', a burgeoning development within literary studies disciplinarity is strangely limited in its focus on generics and self-expression. With the relatively extensive amount of literary critical work on Judith Wright, the impossibility of 'good' protest poetry and the incompatibility of social praxis and high literary value are part of a judgemental loop it is hard to escape from. Nor is there much language for talking about the variously discrepant engagements (Nathaniel Mackey's term) in Wright's work between iconic nationalist aesthetics ('Bullocky', the New England poems) and political revisions of that nationalist tradition. In my recent rereadings of Wright, I was deeply dissatisfied

with the repetitive claims, clichés by now, about the incompatibility of social activism and artistic practice, that characterise the bulk of her critical reception. It seemed to be underpinned, not just by a privileged aestheticism, but by a narrow understanding of poesis, the heteronomy of language and the complex calculus of Australian culture. More than anything it looked like a strategy to hold onto the remnants of a homogeneous tradition and therefore an unproblematic identity, both of which had been completely overturned by multiculturalism. Homeland security in cultural guise.

Part of the difficulty with Wright, and there are other contemporary poets to whom this might apply, has been in finding terms and methods for the conversation about her writing, including and primarily the poetry, beyond the constricted disciplinary regimes of literary criticism and cultural history. The fact that we haven't developed a dialect of critical analysis to keep pace with the complexities and distinctiveness of work like Wright's, with its unique relations to historical, Indigenous, environmental and aesthetic languages means that we keep being frustrated by a severely delimited set of interpretive options. If the key to evolution here is language, in its everyday uses, including political ones, and as artifice, then what is the relation between poetry which is generated in language but out of a concern for environmental integrity or social justice? How are these 'impulses' *equally* and yet differently linguistic? And what if, as in the case of Wright, it is a traditional, formalist poetics that is embraced? In this context, the greening of literary criticism and scholarship has barely begun in Australia and what that paradigm might entail in our uses of poetry in local and national contexts remains to be seen. One thing is certain, though, it will need to take its lead from the already extensive work of the decolonising writers I referred to above.

The Indigenous participants at the festival lobbed in contributions that were variously discomfiting. The acronym on the ANTaR banner, for example, should stand for Australians for Native Title and Reparation, rather than Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation. The charge here was that there was an assumption that (proper, full) social justice is for privileged, existing classes, while human rights are for (latter) refugee, detainee and indigenous populations. And there were other sharply targeted deflations of what Ghassan Hage has called the

'White-and-very-worried-about-the-nation-subject'. When the film-maker and poet Romaine Moreton, for example, in a free-wheeling, introductory rave to one session, asserted that English was not born of the land, like traditional languages, there was some sceptical resistance in my row of seats. In 2005 a whole national cultural tradition could be thus discounted. What Moreton was saying was a neo-nationalist's worst nightmare: I'm here to dispossess you, not just of your backyard, but of your home in language (English) too! Was she really suggesting that this predominantly white audience of environmental activists, academics and intellectuals should give up on their language and its heritage, such as it is, and embark on a five-hundred-plus-year project of multilingual multiculturalism, just for starters? (Actually, this was the third or fourth time I'd heard reference to a revolutionary millennial calendar of reform and economic planning in Australia, obviously deriving from knowledge about the length of the Indigenous presence in Australia, and traditional Aboriginal temporality and its relation to land management and social structure. Our governments are incapable of it of course, but it's an interesting question: what kind of cultural institutions would grow up under a constitution that mandated five-hundred-year cycles of government?)

Moreton was being usefully and deliberately provocative. In a less polemical mode Deborah Bird Rose was one of the other participants to talk about language as both the medium of and the resistance to cultural change. She emphasised the importance of finding alternatives to words from the colonising tradition. That may sound merely politically correct, but she enacted this linguistic politics in her own highly articulate, astonishingly hybrid idiolect of academic ethnography, Aboriginal English and vernacular Australian, including terms such as 'ecological signature', 'lawful country', 'the wild', the *Ramayana*, drovers' inscriptions on cattle-country water tanks. In her talks, as in her recent *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (2004), there is that intent listening to Aboriginal English, for its differences of concept, history, culture, expression and ethics, and its incorporation into a shifting language of contemporary Australian cultural understanding. The sense that the writing of Aboriginal Australians and the vocabularies and genres of their oral traditions, in so far as we have access to them, have to be translated into disciplined,

grammatical English, is fast disappearing in favour of the recognition of Indigenous linguistic adaptation. There are the obvious problems of power imbalance here, but the decolonisation of English in Australia is leading currently to a fascinating and majorly hybrid linguistic universe, and will be seen as one of the most important aspects of cultural change begun in the past quarter century.

In Rose's performance of linguistic decolonisation, in Val Plumwood's almost Faustian appropriation of rationalist philosophical discourse to produce inclusive networks of anti-rationalist and eco-feminist thinking, all locally grounded, in Rodney Hall's interesting recollections of Judith Wright's unease with the actual business of protest in Brisbane in the early seventies, in Tom Griffiths' reading of Wright's rewriting of *The Generations of Men* in *The Cry for the Dead* in terms of the early outbreak of the history wars, and in Veronica Brady's ongoing wrestle with the meaning of Wright's life, the interactive relations in Wright's life and work were occurring. In their very different ways, these writers were testing and redefining their own use of language in response to Wright's body of work, both poetic and political. The politico-linguistic work was happening not so much in the evocations of Wright as the heroine of humanist values and icon of nationalist poetry – although those impulses served an important semiotic purpose – but in the actual working through and performance, by a diverse set of individuals, of enunciating positions, making knowledge and sharing imaginaries. This is precisely the value of such events, that they constitute a performance of knowledge, as conducted by a collective of individuals, self-consciously in reconstituted modes of language, and in a particular place.

But an event is one thing; cultural meanings are another. Amnesia and discrepant languages remain issues. For all their materiality, both the Braidwood Literary Institute and the Tallaganda Shire are signs that are destined for the archive and the heritage register. Even if the built edifice in Wallace Street retains their written traces, we would still need to research them to understand exactly what they referred to. They are no defence against the politics of the present, as the comment of the Palerang councillor shows. The continuity they seem to represent, between literature as an educational and improving resource in an exploitative frontier setting, and the governance of local community, will continue to

be contested and forgotten. The relations between poetry and the civil (art and local government) may be momentarily restaged and re-enacted, as in the forum of the Two Fires event, but what conjunction of language and memory does this actually represent? Bringing together in the one place, arts practitioners and environmental activists, doesn't seem to create other than a momentary discursive space. Languages – like poetry, or conservation, or green policy, or political protest – don't work like that, especially under pressure from postmodernity, where specialisation and disaggregation are the rule. And there may be even further problems with cultural memory, as Tom Griffiths' paper strongly suggested. The current pastoral custodians of the Dawson River country that Wright had written about in both *The Generations of Men* and *The Cry for the Dead*, and that had been pioneered and settled by her own ancestors, know nothing about her writing, either because of a lack of memory about their own place of habitation or a lack of connection to those who did know and remember it. How can you have activism, or art, or social justice, without memory? And what might ensure the continuation of memory? Signs on buildings?

Perhaps Judith Wright knew the intractability of these questions well enough, as the disappointments and frustrations of her writing career and creative life exemplify. She certainly couldn't get poetry to do everything she wanted it to. Perhaps that's what also drove her to live at 'Edge', her name for her last property on the Shoalhaven escarpment. Psycho-geographically, edges are where you can escape, almost, the impossibilities of everywhere else. It looks like the Two Fires festival is set to continue as a unique and positive contribution to the dialogue about the obdurate issue of how to encourage dissidence, and how to preserve compassion and imagination, at the centre of local and national life and how to keep working at the joint conservation of language and environment. And Judith Wright's implacably realist spirit continues to burn in that ambition.

1. Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).
2. Michael Pusey, *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform* (CUP, 2003), with the assistance of Shaun Wilson, Nick Turnbull and Toby Fatorre.

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INVISIBLE WOMEN WORKERS

FEMINISM, CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE NOVEL

WHATEVER HAPPENED to our second wave feminism? That's the movement that opened options for Australian women outside domesticity. And inside domesticity. It's more than unfashionable. It's under systematic attack in the media, and in books on the front shelves, for having 'got it wrong', having 'promised' women they could 'have it all' in a way that has ruined lives. There are plenty of excellent people beavering away at implementing and extending the equal opportunity laws and policies and giving dedicated lives to legal services and refuges, but the movement itself is in hiatus. It lacks extended vision of the way to go. It has lost the sense of an idea whose time has come.

Vision requires penetrating and informed imagination. Where do you look to sensitise and sharpen your imagination? One of the main places is the novel, especially the contemporary realist novel¹ – itself a form on the outer. I'm for putting this into reverse.

FEMINISTS AND CONSCIOUSNESS

It was the distinctive contribution of the Women's Liberation Movement to locate some of the deeper misconceptions *within* ourselves and to insist that we need to look inward as well as outward, need to base policy and action on an assessment that is well grounded in our own experience and our own continuously growing consciousness of our own life and behaviour – to work at inward personal change along with outward social and political change.

Institutional change remains essential. It has removed many obnoxious barriers and actively helped

many women. In the professionalisation of the effort to get institutional change officially sanctioned and to implement it, though, there is the occupational hazard that we may forget to carry on with that empowering and enlightening self-examination and consciousness-raising.

My own personal conviction of the importance of consciousness came prior to the emergence of the Liberation Movement (under that name) in Australia (the Liberation Movement arrived in and around 1969). In August 1966 came the legislated end of the marriage bar in the Commonwealth Public Service combined with the first Australian legislation of maternity leave (for those Commonwealth public servants). It was the successful outcome of our Equal Opportunities for Women Association campaign and meant opening career work to Australian women for the first time on any scale. The following morning I passed in a flash from the sentiment that had carried me through the demanding campaign: 'If I can just get this one thing, my life will have been worthwhile', to the enlightenment: 'It's not enough. A thousand times such institutional change will not be enough. There has to be a deep change in the consciousness of women and men in our society. It's the long haul. It will take more than my lifetime'. That conviction has never left me.

Consciousness is now emerging in quite other contemporary fields of thought as a last frontier, resistant to both neurological investigation and philosophical accommodation.² That part of consciousness that is the human ability to imagine, the faculty of imagination, intellectually difficult as it

can be to come to terms with, is nevertheless the human faculty that best enables us to penetrate the nuances, one might say the secrets, of human consciousness.

It is impossible in principle to enter the consciousness of another person. This necessary truth has sometimes been drawn out and formalised as radical philosophical scepticism of one kind and another (solipsism and so on). But imagination works against such scepticisms. Imagination makes use of the phenomenology of consciousness, and does enable us in varying degrees to approach putting ourselves in the sensory, emotional and thinking processes of another person. Imagination is required even to realise that there exist consciousnesses other than our own.

It is a realisation that is absent in the earliest years of life and is developed in childhood. It is what is possible in the novel, the extended exploration of individual characters' consciousness through the imagination, that is of distinctive value in extending feminist understanding.

IMAGINATION AND REALITY

There is some tendency in recent times to assume, mistakenly, a general opposition between imagination and reality and to identify imagination with fantasy, or other kinds of distraction from the real, while reifying and exalting what makes claim to being fact. The recent literary trend preferring *non-fiction* – political studies, histories, memoirs, biographies or autobiographies – on the ground of their being more authentic and enlightening than literary fiction, takes some of its appeal from this tendency. The influence of this trend might seem to make the novel an unlikely vehicle for any central place in feminist development.

There is a straightforward fallacy in opposing imagination to reality. Fantasy, daydream, and other forms of time-out from reality certainly do exercise the imagination, but the converse is not equally true. Not all exercise of the imagination is directed at escape from the real. Quite the contrary. Exercise of the imagination, informed by remembered experience, is an essential element of everyday observation, as well as of more extended understanding of what is going on around us.

If I walk into a room where I have never been before, and take a seat on a chair I have never seen before, I need to imagine all sorts of characteristics of the chair which I cannot directly observe, such as that it has a back I can't see as well as a front I can see, that it is made of materials that will support me and so on. Even to cross the room, I need to exercise this kind of informed imagination.

It can be informed only because I have memories. But remembering itself involves imagination. In particular the kind of remembering that involves a going over of a past experience – this requires imagination, just as the original experience did. Indeed, such memories can notoriously come to incorporate imagined elements that crucially vary from the actual past experience. In the absence of independent supporting evidence, it can be (or can become) impossible to distinguish for sure the remembered from the imagined.

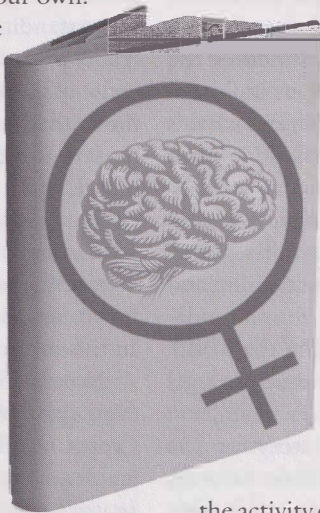
It is nevertheless self-defeating to go to the extreme of claiming that memory is totally and generally speaking unreliable and is no guide to what has happened in the past. Some reliance on memory is indispensable in any form of inquiry or indeed social life.

Further, imagination is a vital part of the activity of forming *intentions* as part of any action – everyday action like sitting down on a chair or what might be called grand action, the kind that has broader and/or deeper feminist, social, political or broadly human import. To form the intention, one has to be able to imagine the intended outcome.

STORY FORM

The vital link between imagination and action brings out the temporal and especially the *dynamic* nature of imagination. The contents of imagination are sometimes mistakenly thought of as static (perhaps with visual art objects such as paintings or sculptures in mind), but the primary *function* of imagination is its role in *action* (which has of course been involved in the creation of those art objects or works of the imagination).

To remember or indeed to identify an action requires what might be called *story form* because of this sequence implicit in an action: before-state,



formation-of-intention, acting-with-intention, consequential-after-state. This dynamic sequence is action's essential shape. It can be called story form so long as it can be accepted that story form is a substrate of story not necessarily implying verbal expression – notwithstanding that verbal expression, or at least mental verbalisation, is normally thought of as an essential part of a story. I use 'story form' in this spare sense; it neither implies that the story is verbalised nor that it is not.

I attribute story form to simple actions such as sitting down on a chair, but of course intentions and actions and their potential told stories are nested within each other to form wider and more complex sequences. It is story form's inhering in action and intention from simple to complex, from relatively trivial to relatively important, that underlies the importance of story form in the mind, its indispensable role in shaping what is memorable and what is comprehensible. Story form is in this way a dominant form in human consciousness.

Imagination takes place in the consciousness of the individual, uses story form and has to be seen as partner of sensory intake in the conceptualising and the remembering of experience. It is thus a fundamental dynamic component of acting in the world. Story form in the novel therefore picks up strongly on the intuitions of the reader.

A good test of the dominance of story form in consciousness is the way story form aids memory. And conversely the way departure from story form makes remembering more difficult: for instance a novel which radically breaks up the temporal order of the world of the book can create a teasing difficulty in locating a particular passage after you've finished reading the book.

Another way of thinking about the match between story form in the novel – and the non-match when it is departed from – is the alienating effect of departure, especially where there is immoderate structural discontinuity of story. In a review article on Muriel Spark's work, John Lanchester expresses the alienation effect like this: "The great flaw in postmodernism . . . has always been that the writer's enthusiasm to expose the fictionality of a fiction tends to be paralleled by the reader's consequent freedom not to care what happens in the book".³

A sense of self has stories as its components, stories hierarchically ordered in their importance to the individual. The dominant story is what I call the

'spine-story' which shapes one's sense of the narrative of one's life past and (in projected intention) one's life to come. As the disoriented Claire puts it in my own novel *After Moonlight*:⁴ "In my consciousness are nested stories of wider still and wider range . . . all plaited and spliced and plied and cabled and cobbled into my buried and fractured spine-story." Too much damage to the spine-story and one comes apart. (The trajectory of repair/restructuring of a spine-story structures *After Moonlight*.)

CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVEL

A developed imaginative exercise, such as creating the world of a literary novel, can be the kind of informed imagination that is directed at observing and understanding the real world. The experience of the reader of such a novel is to go through a guided exercise of the imagination – this is a virtual experience, rather than an imparting of information as such. The reader can reflect on this virtual experience, compare it and 'add it up with' other real and virtual experiences. Resulting conclusions can come as ignition at the end of a slow fuse. The bright image from literature goes on radiating in the mind, can be held for years while continuing to yield fresh significance. In this it resembles real-world experience.

Novels are often seeded with exotic snippets or even slabs of straightforward information – some airport novels and historical fictions are prime examples – but the snippets and slabs are incidental to *literary* content rather than part of it.⁵ The literary novelist needs to supply information in the course of a story *only where it is important to understanding such beliefs of the characters as are relevant to their emotions and actions*. Novels invariably rely on a wealth of common knowledge in the reader which will also be common knowledge for the characters; it is only the relatively unusual or exotic or very local information within the consciousness of characters that will need to be written.

In entering via imagination the consciousness of a character in a novel the reader is continually being exposed to *what the character believes*. In entering the emotions of the character, it is essential to understand what are the relevant beliefs of the character. Emotions, unlike such simple urges as hunger or thirst, essentially contain beliefs as to what is the case (sometimes called the 'intentional cognitive content' of emotions). The beliefs that in this way form part of an emotion will be contained, as well,

in the intentions that belong to actions flowing from the emotion.

For instance, in Amanda Lohrey's *The Philosopher's Doll*, when protagonist Kirsten's beliefs about her husband Lindsay and the possibilities of their relationship change, her emotions, which have till then supported a marriage both settled and passionate, necessarily change. In *After Moonlight*, it is only when Claire's beliefs, about ex-lover and postmodernist intellectual guru Roger, change, that she is able to modify her obsessional emotional attachment to him. The essential belief content of emotions is sometimes expressed in terms of emotions being *cognitive* or *intelligent*: the cognitive content changes, the emotion changes. A strong form of this kind of position is the claim that it is emotions that know.⁶

This breaking down of the division between emotion and rationality accords well with the feminist tradition of rejecting the sexist man-of-reason, woman-of-emotion disjunction.

Questions of true or false do not apply to literary content as such, except to the extent that the reader may question the plausibility of the connection between a character's beliefs as presented and that character's emotions as presented (and thus consequent intentions and actions). (The author's getting this right is sometimes called 'authenticity'.) The complex intimate belief content of emotion is a matter of individual consciousness and the characters of a novel are presented as individuals – into whose situations we can imaginatively enter. This goes some way, but not all the way, towards explaining how the novel can play a unique and even essential part in readers' moral and political education and thus be indispensable to feminism.

A novel's characters are shown in a particular focus which determines what it is relevant to show – the theme of the novel. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Crime and Punishment*, for instance, announce their themes in their titles. Their characters are challenged, in the course of the story, in ways that clearly show aspects of the themes at work in what the characters think, feel and do. Imagination, though, has unpredictable force. An author may write a story she finds interesting without her being able to summarise what is interesting about it and what constitute its criteria of relevance. Readers may not be able to say what a novel they have read is 'about', thematically. Either readers or author may have a more definite idea later,

or never. Novels do not simply present crunch cases of matters that might as well or better be presented in non-fictional psychological, social, moral, political and so on, work. The conceptual frameworks to deal non-fictionally with what is presented in the novel may remain to be developed.

This 'slow fuse' quality of the novel (here it is an example of works of the imagination more generally) can leave room for the mistaken belief that they are remote or dissociated from personal, social and political action. The novel's focused character can make it even more important than diffuse personal experience in arriving at enhanced understanding, clarity of intention, new ways of acting.

At every stage of its development, feminism needs understanding of women's changing consciousness; the novel is an essential means to alerting us, sensitising us and enhancing our use of the imagination to this end. *The Golden Notebook*,⁷ which I acquired and read in 1962, the year of its publication, is a book that has influenced me personally. Doris Lessing's own experience with this book is significant: the very passages she feared were 'hopelessly private' turned out to be those that 'spoke for other people'.⁸

WOMEN & WORK IN AUSTRALIAN NOVELS

While the personal is political and while consciousness, the core of the personal, is itself both personal and individual, it is important not to confuse the personal and individual with the private, as per the old public/private political divide. In particular, the personal is not confined to the domestic and/or intimate.

Has there often been confusion on this point in the literary mind? A tendency to eschew the public (non-private) context? Because novels are concerned with emotions, passions, moods as well as related actions of their characters, is there an entrenched tendency to think of the non-public realm as their rightful realm of concern?

It is a fallacious political presumption (favouring capitalist moral conservatism) that the workplace world of paid employment is or can be insulated from personal relations and emotion. The current Australian workplace culture is laced with sexual harassment, bullying, even sadistic power plays; in the military there is bastardisation very much including women, and so on. There are deep passions involved both in the givers and takers of this bad behaviour (fear, anger, resentment, hate). Very

much the personal, though also very much in the 'public' realm. No doubt there are positive workplace emotions as well.

How much of such territory is to be found in Australian novels of the past quarter century? Not a lot.

The importance to feminism of the novel and its imaginative exploration of consciousness is not in its providing either some distorted form of political tract, or in showing some exemplary feminist behaviour of a caricature heroine. Rather, the core concern is giving imaginative entry into the inside or conscious life of women (particular characters) in the circumstances of their time and place. A few writers, including recently in *Overland* Ken Gelder (179) and Andrew McCann (177), have commented on the drying up of the contemporary realist literary novel in Australia.

It should be added that even among the relatively small number of realist literary novels with contemporary content over the past quarter century there have been few novels which have followed women into the world of non-domestic work and attempted to show at any depth the consciousness of women characters there. From contexts of production line to check-out till to office desk through to responsible and even powerful professional work where women have moved (from domestic confinement) in substantial numbers in this period, the possibilities for women characters have been largely passed over in our novels.

Of her *Bobbin Up* (1959), Dorothy Hewett said, forty years later: "This depiction of life in working-class Sydney in the late fifties has an uncanny verisimilitude".⁹ Few now attempt such depictions. Suzie in Joel Deane's *Another* (Interactive Press, 2004) has authentically unpleasant experiences working in McDonald's, under an oppressive and harassing manager where unemployment is the ever-looming threat. Earlier, Helen Garner has characters who are, as it were, professional-life-ready, but unemployed (*Monkey Grip* [McPhee Gribble, 1977] and the novella 'Other People's Children' in *Honour and Other People's Children* [McPhee Gribble, 1980]). There is a dearth of characters out in the non-domestic workplace. Sara Dowse's *West Block: The Hidden World of Canberra's Mandarins* (Penguin, 1983) is a notable exception from some time back. Amy Witting has women characters vividly shown at work (*Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop*, Penguin 1999; *After Cynthia*, Penguin 2001) though in contexts

from Witting's long memory rather than contemporary situations.¹⁰ The impressive works of Amanda Lohrey seem to edge towards showing women in (paid) work contexts, but don't actually get there. Though especially in the more recent works they explore worlds where women are assumed to have work roles. While her earlier novels *The Morality of Gentlemen* (1984) and *The Reading Group* (1988) take the reader into public work-and-politics worlds, the women characters have background private-world roles. In *Camille's Bread* (1995) Stephen is shown in his working life, Marita in her private life (which is impacted by his working life). In *The Philosopher's Doll*, telling scenes show husband Lindsay at academic work; protagonist Kirsten does have contrasting paid career work and we do glimpse it, but it is very much background to her private life.

J.M. Coetzee's major creation, character Elizabeth Costello, prestigious writer, is certainly shown in non-domestic contexts, though hers is very much an atypical working life.

Kate Jennings' powerful short novel *Moral Hazard* has protagonist Cath working in a major investment bank in New York, at the world centre of corporate finance, while caring (in their apartment then back and forth to the nursing home) for husband Bailey as he goes from advanced Alzheimer's to death. Here is a book exceptional for giving a vivid, complex and authentic presentation of a woman in her non-domestic work – a presentation made the more involving for its extreme discontinuity from her private life. The private life itself, Cath's emotional dedication to Bailey in his scarifying decline, would have been more sharply realisable by the reader had there been more opening into the character of Bailey before it had been more or less made absent by his disease. Nonetheless, *Moral Hazard* is exceptional for its foregrounding of a woman in her non-domestic work.

I've tried to write Claire, in *After Moonlight*, as a character grappling with problems both at work and outside work. Claire goes through a shift in personal identity; her work and intellectual life are in the foreground, interacting and conflicting with domestic and intimate.

Others may have other books in mind, but the overall picture seems to me to be that while Australian women have moved in a big way into the non-domestic workplace, the women in Australian novels have not gone there nearly as much.

THE FUTURE OF FEMINISM

Australian women of the last adult generation have grown up without the expectation that they will have an adulthood in enforced domesticity. They have, generally speaking, achieved greater independence of personal identity. But they have not reached some *final* goal of feminism. There is no such goal; the idea of a final goal makes little sense. At the same time feminism is facing something of a hiatus in its sense of purpose. Much valuable effort is going into administering, improving and extending laws that seek to protect women from discrimination and abuse. The academic wing of feminism does valuable teaching and gives a lot of mental energy to detailed empirical studies of what goes wrong for women in various social practices. There is also the work that goes into the theorising of gender. At times this theorising employs highly specialised vocabularies to delineate fine-grained phenomenological phenomena; there is the problem for the feminist movement that such arcanisms percolate insufficiently into the public culture and have little political effect. This problem is compounded where postmodernist theories emphasise fragmentation: complex discontinuities in thought, personal identity and society for the self-defeating point of denying the possibility of coherence.

In the press lately there has been a spate of letters and op-ed pieces blaming feminism, or at least feminists, for a disappointment among contemporary women with the lack of a happy ending for them in the attempt to combine successful and rewarding career lives with generous and rewarding experiences in childbearing and child nurture. There is the late-baby phenomenon; there are the women who let the opportunity to bear a child pass by until fertility is gone; and there is the mother who, on finding it is difficult or impossible to perform at the best of her ability both in career and in motherhood, claims to have been misled by feminists into believing she could 'have it all'; she claims to be caught instead in a "feminist booby trap".¹¹

Perhaps it is stubborn of me, but I nevertheless continue to think of such women as a minority, and to believe it is plainly apparent to most that combining a demanding career with generous and fulfilling motherhood always, under current conditions, brings challenging difficulties, often impossibilities. Further, it is clear enough that women experience serious strain and perplexity in combining regular work, including

career work, with the intimate mother-child relationship they expect of motherhood.

What is less remarked upon is that mothers tend to think what they experience is an *individual* problem, a problem that it is entirely their own responsibility to fix (in some cases with help from the father or co-mother). While holding this assumption, they still argue that somehow they have been misled or are being short-changed about the life-courses open to them.

This is a central concern for Western feminism of our time, an increasingly individualistic age. Feminists need to know not only the broad area of the problem, but as well just how women's sense of themselves is affected. We need to know just how, in combining their work and reproductive lives, Australian women experience obstacles and contradictions both within themselves and in their circumstances at home and outside it. This is something for feminists to concentrate thought and imagination upon; something feminists should expect the realist novel to explore in extended imaginative effort; something that calls for well-conceived action, personal but also political and extending well beyond the domestic and intimate.

If anyone thinks that in directing attention to the novel and to individual consciousness I am myself committing to an excessively individualistic position, I appeal again to the liberationist slogan *the personal is political*. The novel's special territory is the connection (since *intention* is formed in our consciousness) between consciousness and action. *Action* includes both intimate and broader social interaction, including non-domestic work and political action. It is of individual interactions that social and political life are made up, notwithstanding that they can be considered under more abstract and inclusive concepts. Yes, Virginia (and Margaret), there is such a thing as society – and as political economy.

The personal will remain the political, but women's 'personal' should not be gender-stereotyped into our domestic and intimate spheres. The novel can provide a developed bridge between our full personal experience and that of others. The novel remains an essential part of the feminist project.

1. I confine myself here to the realist literary novel (just say 'the novel'), the genre in which I write myself. My argument may in principle be extended to cover non-realist genres of the literary novel, though not to such genres as are directed at escape from reality.
2. For instance John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*,

- MIT Press, 1992; John R. Searle, *Mind: a brief introduction*, OUP, US, 2004. See also discussion of Christopher Koch, *The Quest for Consciousness*, Roberts and Company, 2004, in John R. Searle, 'Consciousness: What We Still Don't Know', *New York Review of Books*, 13 January 2005, pp.36–39.
3. John Lanchester, 'In Sparkworld', *NYRB LI* 18, 2004, p.21.
 4. *After Moonlight*, Interactive Press, 2004, pp.109–110.
 5. Sometimes information is offered because it will come to have an important role in the thought and emotions of the characters. For instance in Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* one might for the first time learn about the structure, physical strength but very particular vulnerability to explosive shattering of the glass form of Prince Rupert's drops (*James bataviques*). The inclusion is justified by the metaphorical value of the drops and the plot position given them. See Peter Carey, *Oscar and Lucinda*, UQP, St Lucia, 1988, pp.131–132 etc.
 6. See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: the literary imagination and public life*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995, pp.60–63. See also Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: body, emotion and the making of consciousness*, Vintage, 2000, pp.40–42 on the integration of cognition and emotion in contemporary neuroscience. For an extended discussion of philosophical and scientific theories concerning the emotions, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: the intelligence of emotions*, CUP, 2001.
 7. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, Michael Joseph, London, 1962.
 8. Noted in the Doris Lessing entry in Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements & Isobel Grundy, *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, Yale University Press, 1990.
 9. Dorothy Hewett, 'Afterthoughts on *Bobbin Up*' in *Bobbin Up*, 40th Anniversary Edition, Ian Syson, ed., Vulgar Press, 1999.
 10. Frank Moorhouse's notable creation, character Edith in *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace*, 'lived' even earlier than Witting's women workers.
 11. Among differently nuanced examples: Joanna Murray-Smith (one of Australia's more able and successful playwrights): 'Feminism's booby trap', *Age*, 19 November 2004, p.15. Since headings are the responsibility of editors, it is possible the 'booby trap' expression is not J.M-S's.
- Merle Thornton is a feminist activist and writer. She has written drama for television and stage, also documentaries and numerous academic publications. Her first novel *After Moonlight* was published in 2004.

Potpourri

Luck

superstition and faith makes you glow with pride
so it must be worth your while.

Hope

when the best of times is just around the corner
and that's as good as it gets.

Future

choose to do whatever you'll want to remember
in ten years time.

Love

I believe anything you tell me because it's true
or it's what you want me to believe.

And then, all hell breaks loose
the way it is, the truth of it.

UGO ROTELLINI

SALON SAIGON

I COULD BE IN another country, at least another city, like Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City as it is now called, but one of the signs I see – Little Saigon – through the window of the hairdresser's, ignores the shift in allegiances in the same way that the good citizens of St Petersburg stuck with Peter after Vladimir Ilyich hijacked their city. What's in a name? A lot, it seems to me as Phuong and the girls crowd around deciding what to do about my hair. I am stealing Phuong from Graham Greene and Little Saigon has stolen the essence of his city and planted it here, to the west of Melbourne, sometimes called the world's most liveable city, generally by those who live in the comfortable east.

It is hot. The mangoes in piles exude the sweet smell of something so ripe it is almost rotten. I can see the smells of Little Saigon rather than actually smell them because Phuong's place is full of chemicals, the kinds that turn a Vietnamese girl's hair red and keep mine from turning grey. The smell is also sickly sweet, a cover for the ammonia, but the sweetness has little in common with the smell of tropical fruit. There is a big bunch of flowers on Phuong's desk, tiger lilies and greenish spiky chrysanthemums, very showy but without perfume which is just as well. I'm sure she's done a deal with some trader of flowers in the market that is Little Saigon. Phuong is a businesswoman, par excellence, to borrow from the French who hijacked the whole of Vietnam for

some time. Phuong, my hairdresser, is more like the sister of the Phuong in *The Quiet American* who is constantly on the lookout for an opportunity, or perhaps she is the same Phuong after the foreigners have gone home. She is a survivor and she is successful. She owns this salon and the girls who work for her know their place. They smile and they joke but they defer to Phuong. They watch her expression. She doesn't need to give orders, usually. A quick look, and one of them is sweeping the floor. Another look, and everyone in the salon falls quiet. Phuong is not as pretty as the girls who work for her but she is charming. She flatters me by asking for advice about her little boy. She is shrewd. We both know she charges me more than she does her fellow Vietnamese but it's okay. They're still struggling and I am a daughter of the postwar migration, university educated, well travelled – I've been to the 'real' Vietnam – and, up until a few months ago, lived in the leafy green eastern suburbs of Melbourne.

I'm back in the west where I grew up, the child of poor refugees, but nothing has quite prepared me for Little Saigon, and nothing has quite prepared me for the sheer exhilaration of casting off the cold niceties of the genteel suburbs and nothing at all has prepared me for the production that is my visit to Phuong's salon. I met Phuong when I walked into her other salon, in an adjoining suburb that has become smart, or at least a lot less confronting

than Footscray. Phuong is smart. Smart enough to realise she would never make any real money from the smart salon which closed almost as soon as I had discovered it. But I met Phuong again. I was eating in the Ha Long restaurant and she came up to me, genuinely surprised at my being there. She gave me her card. The charming young proprietor of the restaurant noticed the exchange and has been extra charming since. He too, is smart.

When I walked through the glass doors of the salon today, several weeks after our encounter at Ha Long, Phuong gave out an uncharacteristic cry. The girls left their clients – three or four Vietnamese boys of uncertain age but all with the same fastidiously groomed and madly spiked hair – and raced about while Phuong snapped orders. My shopping bag was taken out of my hands by one girl, another ushered me to this seat but only after a third had wiped it with a cloth, as if it needed to be wiped clean of any traces of a previous customer. Phuong clapped her hands and a cup of tea appeared in mine. The commotion was bizarre and it was touching. The girls smiled nervously, unaccustomed to such an ‘important’ client. I tried to put them at their ease by chatting about Vietnam. At one level, I knew it was a lame thing to do. As kids we used to snort when ‘Australians’ told our parents they had been to Europe with a know-it-all pride as if their trips to Europe bore any relation to the grim journey of the refugee, but the girls in Phuong’s salon were too polite and took my clumsy compliments about their country with good grace. Yes, yes, it was very beautiful. Yes, yes, I had been to Hue and to Ha Long Bay. Yes, yes, they were beautiful places. Eventually I broke away from this well-worn path of dialogue between those of us who have travelled to a place in search of new impressions and those of us who have lived through its turmoils and are still in the process of erasing some of the bitterest impressions. I made the salon laugh when I told the story of being mistaken for a blind person in Hue because of my prescription-lens sunglasses which I never took off, even at night. We all laughed:

Phuong, the girls and even the boys who had taken their eyes off their own images in the mirrors and were enjoying the spectacle.

There was a long consultation about my hair. Between lamenting about the grey and deciding about the length, one of the girls told me she was from Hanoi. We spoke about that beautiful city for a while. Phuong was pleased in the way that headmistresses are pleased when a student makes an impression on an important visitor. The girl saw Phuong in the mirror watching us and she saw that she was doing okay so she told me about her parents and about how she had come to Australia, following a husband in pursuit of a better life. Her reflection in the mirror was of a very young girl – perhaps a 16-year-old – but she was a mother who worked for Phuong six days a week and spent more time in the salon than she did at home. This was their common story, even Phuong’s. They were separated from their families in Vietnam and here by necessity and by the decision of their husbands who seemed, to me, to be the ones who were getting the better deal. The girls spoke of loneliness, a loneliness difficult to discern when you saw them joking around together in the salon and greeting their customers who all appeared to be old friends from the old country and therefore, from the outsider’s point of view, tight-knit, supportive and foolproof buffers against suburban isolation. Apparently it is not so. These young mothers live further out, where it is cheaper. They scrimp and save in order to send money back to their parents and grandparents and to feed their husbands well. Their hopes already – though they are so young themselves – are for their own children.

I am left undisturbed for a while to absorb the colour, that is to say, my grey roots rest in a lather of chemicals. There is music. The song is sung by a Vietnamese crooner. I don’t need to understand it because it’s one of those songs that is the same in any language. It is bland and romantic and the girls sing along quietly as they go about their work. While their hopes are centred on their children, there is

evidently still some room for the dream of romance. Outside, someone is walking along the pavement and balancing a box full of bright yellow pawpaws above his head. He swerves to avoid a very old woman in a long green cardigan and the box tilts, suspended at a precarious angle for a full second and then the pawpaws begin to slide and spill. The waiting clients – there is no appointment system here – who have gathered on the long plastic seat near the windows jump up and rush to the door. Phuong leaves her position near the vase of flowers and says something very loudly. There is laughter. The old woman on the footpath scores a whole pawpaw out of the mess of yellow flesh and shiny black seeds on the ground. She wipes it on her sleeve and puts it into a pale blue plastic bag.

Graham Greene wouldn't stoop to using the scene as a metaphor for the girls' lives. It is too easy. I retreat to watching, rather than thinking about what I am seeing. Slowly, the hubbub outside the salon subsides, the old lady shuffles off, the man who had purchased his bargain box of fruit from Little Saigon philosophically accepts the odd condolence and wipes his hands against his khaki trousers. Inside the salon, Phuong establishes the old order and, pushing the other girls aside, marches towards me, her 'important' client, with scissors in hand. "I will give you very special haircut," she says, and I look into the mirror expecting to see a different person. My world has changed.

Olga Pavlinova Olenich is a Melbourne writer. She has published widely here and overseas.

Graphology 503: Orphic Interiority

In conversing with animals, plants, rocks, sand, and the weather,
I have catechised the redemptive nature of poems,
of the minuscule observatory in the bush
of Talbot Reserve, the rolling hills
and poison drums arranged
friendly-like
by the hall, site of the old school.
A bird place, where hollowed-limb wandoos
make resounding statements
against farmland: bird's megaphone,
taunting real estate developers. How much
horizon would be eaten by foliage –
the small eye of the telescope
peeking out of the black-out '60s white brick,
municipal architecture in reservation?

JOHN KINSELLA



Beach scene, Clifton Pugh (Erith Island, 1974)

THE BRIAN JOHNSTONE GALLERY

PICTURE THIS: it is a Brisbane Sunday morning, say 10 a.m. Let's make it June; the air is still fresh and crisp, there has been a frost down in the gully below our Brookfield house, and white shadows stay on the western side of trees and bushes. The two children, Katie and Alison, are dressed for an excursion, but not for the beach. This morning we are driving into the city for the opening of a new exhibition at the Brian Johnstone art gallery. It is something that happens every three weeks or so, though we do not get to all of them.

The children are quite excited; it is something they enjoy because there are lots of other kids and the gallery is a wilderness as well as a giant cubbyhouse, and they will be offered cordial and Jatz crackers, as much as they want. They will play hide-and-seek among the garden shrubs and statuary, and there is always someone they know or have met before. Brian Johnstone believes passionately in encouraging children and young people to his gallery openings. He knows they will probably become future clients.

No formality here. Their elders might sip cask white wine and nibble cheese but it's wonderful how hordes of children underfoot puncture pompousness. Even the gallery Queens have learned to smile and pat the occasional head.

Upstairs, the old colonial wooden house has been converted entirely. The hanging space consists of room after room of astonishing new paintings by the almost famous new generation of artists. In this decade of the 1960s they have filled their canvases and our minds with a sense of adventure, colour and possibilities. The Boyds, John Perceval, Charles Blackman, Robert Dickerson, Russell Drysdale, Lawrence Daws, John Brack, Louis James, Rodney Milgate, James Gleeson, Sam Fullbrook, Judy Casab, Clifton Pugh, Donald Friend: they all exhibit at the Johnstones. Jon Molvig of course, and Margaret Olley, Brisbane locals, and then on to first exhibitions by new artists – Ray Croke has recently made a mark, as has Andrew Sibley, among others.

It's twelve o'clock. We gather up the kids from the safe and high-walled garden, wave goodbye to people we have met or run into again, and move outside the magic compound. The glare of bitumen and the meagreness of vegetation strike us, up on Bowen Hills, and the huge expanse of sky overhead is always there, once you leave the cover of those shady trees. We decide we will drive to the Botanic Gardens down by the river for a picnic lunch. Margaret and I will talk over the things we have seen and wish, again, we had even a little spare money: what an

investment! What obviously memorable paintings, paintings we could live with!

YES, WONDROUS THINGS happened in Brisbane during the decade between 1960 and 1970. My personal recall of this period has been influenced, no doubt about it, by my own growth and discoveries: these were the building and budding years, the years I was aged between 25 and 35; the years of new independence, the years of starting a family, a house, the willing embrace of responsibilities as well as of new life adventures.

I discovered the Johnstone Gallery at the very outset of that decade. Only a few years after decade's end the Gallery was closed to the public.

The previous decade, of the 1950s, of course, led up to this plateau. The War both emphasised and ended our cultural isolation, and despite our clinging to the conservative colonialism of Robert Menzies, it also laid the foundation for a sense of possibilities. The Yanks had been here. Many eyes were opened. Great change was in the air.

Brisbane had been a transit base of interstate servicemen as well as for the great influx of Americans and American know-how: Brisbane's difference (sub-tropical, relaxed, the fruitbowl of possible new ways of gathering-in the environment) had already overcome some of the stuffer habits. Backyard mango trees or papaws somehow invite a more sensuous response than oranges or pears.

In those postwar years Brisbane had even approached culture, official culture, with some liveliness of its own. The Queensland State String Quartet regularly toured the scattered towns and schools with more mobility than any Symphony Orchestra, and with an eclectic repertoire. I first heard quartets by the Australian Alfred Hill, and the Swiss Ernest Bloch, as well as the more predictable Mozart and Haydn, or even late Beethoven. First violin was Ernest Llewellyn (later to lead the Sydney Symphony Orchestra) and they had the advantage, in Donald Scotts the second violin, of a youthful blond surfer type as a living embodiment of sex appeal and the occasional cheekiness, as well as an impressive sense

of dedication. As a role model he was a welcome change from cricketers and tennis players.

The State Art Gallery was still housed with the Museum and was imbued with a formaldehyde stuffiness, but the French Exhibition in 1953 stirred up the silt in Queensland as vigorously as it did down south. The youngsters who opened their eyes to that show were young adults by 1960.

Variou newer and younger Australian artists had dropped in or through Brisbane, or had stayed. Jon Molvig taught here, and would not be silenced. The Viennese art critic Gertrude Langer established, in the *Courier-Mail*, standards of excellence that were probably rather more perceptive than Arnold Shore in Melbourne, or Paul Haeflinger in Sydney.

If Brisbane ever felt it was poised on the beginnings of cultural adventure, by 1960 all the signs were propitious.

The whole Western world was, in a sense, similarly poised. The long domination of Swing, in music, had been overtaken by Folk and the new Rock rhythms, more insistent but more attuned to basic heart-beat. Rock was here to stay.

Literature had, in our country, begun a new thaw and there were even people in Brisbane who were reading Patrick White. Xavier Herbert had established himself in Cairns. Judith Wright, living privately but with a world presence up on Tamborine Mountain, was the unofficial Australian Poet Laureate, complete with a sort of implicit label which she, herself, hated. But it was true, she was what we would now call a media presence and her strangely taut voice became a powerful call to a sense of regional responsibility. The naming of ecological commitment, of acknowledgement of Aboriginal primacy, and of the need to give, not to take, from this environment, were crucial in this period to how we were beginning to see ourselves and our possibilities. Judith Wright was the poet and essayist who would not give up, who would not let us retreat into blandness and blindness. Heady times, if frightening.

Brian Johnstone opened his commercial gallery in the city in the late 1950s but it was at decade's end that he moved up to the house-on-stilts in the

inner suburb of Bowen Hills, just below the famous Cloudlands Ballroom, where many a Second World War Yank or Australian Serviceman serviced the locals, and where nearly every student in Brisbane had sat, sweating, during their end-of-year exams. It was approached up a steep hill by a dogleg bitumen street full of similar old timber Queenslanders with parched gardens. The streetfront to Brian's was a high wooden fence. Anything could be hidden behind that.

Once you opened the gate you looked down on a steep pathway to a bush garden – masses of tall trees for their shade, ferns, rockeries, quick growing hardy plants that could cope with the weather and invite you in. You were indeed invited in down a rickety set of wooden stairs to the first terrace and the approach to the house itself, with open verandas, big airy rooms with high ceilings and the easy timber walls, tough and indifferent to damage – mould, cyclones, children's fingerprints or hammers. The main part of the house interior had been gutted for the exhibition space. There were always huge containers with arrangements of dried pods, grasses, plants you had until then regarded as roadside weeds but which now presented themselves in delicious individuality and decorative appeal.

These arrangements were the work of Brian's wife, Marjorie, who had for years been one of the more talented, and beautiful, actresses in local theatre. In those years before a true professional theatre in Australia, performances by Twelfth Night Theatre, or Brisbane Arts Theatre, or Brisbane Repertory Theatre, reached a standard that allowed them to tackle such new international works as the plays of T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, Tennessee Williams and Jean Anouilh. Marjorie Johnstone and Diane Cilento were probably the 'stars' of the Brisbane theatre world in those years.

The first time we – Margaret and myself – visited the Brian Johnstone Gallery was shortly after our marriage. At that stage I had only ever purchased, from another gallery in Edward Street, one 'original artwork': a four-colour woodcut by Murray Griffin, of a Bird of Paradise. Our friends, Stan and Joy

Malec, who lived on the other slope of Bowen Hills, invited us to come with them to an exhibition opening, works by the young Charles Blackman. It was my first experience of a roomful of Blackman paintings and I was sent into shock waves. We had met Charles and his wife Barbara and I had seen a few isolated examples of his work, but this was a major exhibition, room after room of work by the one artist. That, in itself, was a revelation. The overwhelming image was of fecundity, opportunities seized, not of repetition, or variants on a theme. Not back then.

Many artists were exhibited, apart from the now 'big' names, including young Queensland artists, but of course I remember most clearly those big shows. I think they would now be called 'blockbusters' and have people queuing. In retrospect I curse myself that I did not buy that densely luxuriant John Perceval painting of wallum country, full of thick detail and even the occasional actual leaf. For a couple of hundred guineas it would have been mine.

In those years of starting a family and negotiating the lowest and longest terms for a house (we did not even have living-room curtains for a couple of years) two hundred guineas was a fortune.

I could have bought one of the truly magnificent gold Nebuchadnezzar paintings of Arthur Boyd for two hundred and fifty guineas. I looked, and I lusted. I didn't have enough to earn savings-bank interest.

Brian had a deeply committed policy of making work by leading artists available to young people, to beginners and novices. In exhibitions by many of his top artists there were always a few small works, priced very modestly. I remember an Arthur Boyd exhibition inspired by Judith Wright's book of bird poems: seven guineas was the asking price for the small studies. They were, I thought, in a direct line from the Heidelberg School cigar-box-lid paintings. Snapped up, of course, long before I got down to look and be tempted.

When I have jostled with glass-tilting crowds at later openings, the relaxed style of Cintra Street is what comes back to me. Yes, of course there would have been pre-opening suppers and pre-pre-view-

ings, select buyers encouraged and the artist in waiting. There would have been carefully plotted assignments and meetings – we were never invited to this closeted world of the art cognoscenti though we heard wondrous tales of Donald Friend being outrageous and salacious with the salad ingredients, and Margaret Olley, who was in her drinking period, going over the top. But the Sunday morning ‘official’ openings were for us, and that included the kids.

At the end of 1967 we moved from Brookfield back to Ipswich, fifty kilometres west. We were freshly into metric measures and not liking it much. We were still naïve and knowledgeable. In the Brian Johnstone educational cycle we were at the curve of becoming buyers, investors, art lovers.

But our inability to respond, by actually investing, was to be curiously echoed – though from a presumably more ‘responsible’ source. The Queensland Art Gallery, in this decade, was dominated by an extraordinarily conservative Board chaired by someone my French friend Stan Malec referred to as ‘Sir Tooth’. Every one of those major exhibitions offered first choice to the Queensland State Gallery. They purchased a pitiful handful. Did someone mention something like ‘two paintings?’ When I recall the remarkable and now immensely significant works of the artists represented over this period, and then look at the holdings in the State Gallery, I still clench my teeth in anger and a sort of frustration. They were at that stage concerned, chiefly, in enhancing their meagre selection of early Australian impressionists.

Later, after the Johnstone gallery closed to the public, and so many of the artists had become crucial for any respectable art gallery to include, the Queensland State Art Gallery had to purchase, at inflated prices, lesser and often noticeably inferior works by these same artists. For a few hundred pounds in the 1960s their collection could have been built up into one of the key representative holdings, certainly excelling the New South Wales and Victorian State Galleries, simply through the major work offered for sale through the Johnstone Gallery.

But then one has to remember the other scandal-

ous farce concerning the Queensland Art Gallery in the 1960s. This was the mysterious theft, by vandals (or art lovers) who stole the Picasso masterpiece *La belle Hollandaise*, and led the cops and the Trustees on a paperchase. It was surely that exploit which became a role model for the Victorian ‘theft’ of another Picasso painting, *Weeping Woman*, in the 1980s. The great Blue Period Picasso, undoubtedly the most important single work in the Queensland Art Gallery, had been the gift of the late Major de Vahl Rubin and he had let it be known that he was considering bequeathing to them his entire art collection, one of the most important private treasures in the country. Shortly after his initial gift, rumours flew that the Gallery Trustees wanted to sell the Picasso. Reason: with the fund from the sale of that one work they would have enough cash to build a whole new gallery. Enough, presumably, to house the anticipated Rubin windfall. The Picasso mysteriously disappeared. A note was then found: it will not be returned until the Trustees promise in writing and in public never to hock it for bricks and mortar. It must be retained for the people of Queensland. Flustered protests, near denials. But indeed it was not until there was a formal assurance undertaken that the ‘thieves’ relented and the paperchase led them back to their treasure, wrapped in brown paper and sitting under a gumtree on Mount Coot-tha. Needless to say, none of this appears in the Gallery’s official publications. Mount Coot-tha, with its picnic spots and lookouts, is a nurturing ground for babies, secrets, TV aerials – and the end of a dream for Queensland art lovers. Major Rubin, understandably, gave no more art works to that gallery. I believe his estate made a fortune in the sale of his artworks at Sotheby’s.

The anger and sense of deprivation goes on and on. To walk through the Queensland Art Gallery’s collection is to see, not what a curiously odd job lot it is, but to realise how fully accomplished it might have been.

Perhaps we simply shared something of what was happening everywhere, in most of the capital cities of Australia during that decade? Perhaps we were

even at the conservative end of changes and new directions by decade's end? But what I still hold as vivid memories are those exhibitions at the Johnstone. For instance, I suddenly recall that I first saw Laurence Hope's paintings there. I still feel he is the 'lost' great artist of the Nolan era. And then those exhibitions by James Gleeson, long before he was to be completely reassessed and rediscovered and his virtuosity recognised. Brian Johnstone had a keen eye for enduring qualities in his artists.

The swirl of events and intellectual change by the end of the 1960s did send eddies against the fenced hillside world of the Johnstone Gallery. Brian had always been quite personal in his operations, and we gained by that personal contact network. But clearly he was unsympathetic to the new movements that developed – the Annandale Imitation Realists and the 'field' abstractionists and the new 'ugly' art styles.

The last of the newer artists he included for exhibition was Keith Looby.

That show was not a success. I recall talking to Brian about recent developments. I had gained a certain credence because of my book on Charles Blackman. Brian expressed to me what he was to carry into effect shortly after: because he could not find a point of sympathy with the work then emerging and claiming dominance in Australian art, he felt it would be more honest for him, as a gallery proprietor and negotiator for his clients, to cease operations in this field.

It was a brave decision. It came at a time when his gallery was not only the most esteemed commercial gallery in Queensland, but one of the most prestigious in Australia. There was no lack of artists, and major artists, who at that stage would have been prepared to offer their next major exhibition to his gallery up at Cintra Street. But part of his philosophy in running a gallery was to keep abreast with things. He saw his gallery as a living thing. And all living things have their time.

The place itself remained. Brian and Marjorie continued to live in Cintra Street and on their walls they displayed the very pick of their collection, those works they themselves had acquired during the golden years.

And the garden remained. Some of it was to be made available so that Brisbane's Twelfth Night Theatre could re-site its auditorium when their city lease ran out. It became a sort of extension of the old magic garden, though better-brick walls and air-conditioned foyers were at a certain remove from the more relaxed Queensland environment in which the Johnstones had culled and cultivated their growing generations of Queensland art lovers. When the gallery closed it brought to an end the lovely convention of Sunday morning openings and children playing and exploring there.

When Brian died, in 1994, everyone wondered what would happen to the collection. I think in my heart of hearts I would have wished it to the Queensland Art Gallery – after all – not because of their merit but because of their obtuseness and the general benefit, finally, for Queenslanders.

There was a fairly serious thought that it might have gone to the collection of Griffith University, which had shown itself more open to art achievement and experiment than, say, the University of Queensland art department. None of these things happened. In his Will, Brian determined that the collection should be offered for public auction. It realised something over one million dollars. There were bargains galore: it happened at the worst moment of the economic downturn. Again, I was not there. I wonder if there was anyone from the Queensland Art Gallery?

But that is the thing about art: it is always new. It is never really yours to own, but it can take hold of you, and not let go, even for decades.

Thomas Shapcott's most recent novel is *Spirit Wrestlers* (Wakefield Press, 2004).

THE FIGHT

MAX OFTEN STOOD and watched the boys fighting, getting into the rough and tumble of it all in a playful and friendly way. They wrestled each other to the ground and heaved their bodies into the dust so that it flew into their mouths and eyes. She watched them when it escalated into a real fight and each boy had to prove to the other that he was right and better and was gonna get the other boy for sure! She stood and chanted with the other children, swinging her fists as one of the boys involved blindly swung his. Her heart pounded and she knew she was confused about the elation she felt, unsure of why it was wrong but knowing it just the same.

Max watched, and waited, and knew some day it would be Max and a boy going at it, and she would win, would get that boy and throw him to the ground and pummel him and toss him.

She just didn't know how. None of the boys at school would fight her, they knew they would get a strap if they did – it was drummed into them, boys did not fight girls and that was that.

When the family moved in next door, Max and her brother Tom went to investigate. There were kids there alright, and two of them looked about the same age as Max and Tom.

"Hey!" Tom called out, and Max, seeing them look around, immediately jammed her hands in her jeans pockets and tried to look uninterested. The two boys smiled and waved and ran toward them.

It was Tom who spoke, "Are you going to live there now?"

The boys turned back and looked at their new house as if seeing it for the first time, "Yeah," the older one said.

"Oh right-e-o," said Tom, and kicked his foot into his other. "This is Max," he said nodding toward his sister, "and I'm Tom. We live here."

They all looked at the brick building with the house number nailed to the chimney. Creeper had grown all over one side and was threatening to cover the lounge room window.

The older boy scratched at a scab on his knee, while the younger one stared at Tom and Max, and said, "That's Ray, and my name's Jill."

"But that's a girl's name!" Max blurted out.

"So?" said Jill. "Anyway, I am a girl." She too shoved her hands in her jeans pockets and tried to turn away from them all, but couldn't. They all stared at Ray picking at his scab.

"She's a girl too," said Tom and nodded at his sister.

"Shut up Tom!" Max had been enjoying pretending she was a boy and now he had blown it for her. She looked at Jill again and smiled.

"Want to have a fight?" Max said, excitedly.

"Alright," said Jill, rolling up her sleeves. "But I've gotta warn you, I'm good!"

HIGHWAY OF DEATH

LONDON, WINTER 1990-1991

They're bombing Iraq back to the Stone Age, bouncing rubble with million-dollar missiles, but life in London goes on. You've been lucky to get this scrap of work, a month of classes teaching Euro-yuppies intermediate English, so you'd better tear yourself away from the TV screen. No more hours, days, weeks, of sprawling on your joke of a futon-cum-sofa, watching the live satellite feeds that narrate the first great victory of the age of digital empire. No more wandering about the flat in the ad breaks, pining because Christina has dumped you. It's time to get back into the classroom and teach subjunctives, conditionals, and the finer points of how to socialise in a foreign language.

The first few days of classes go smoothly and for hours at a time you manage to forget all about the war. They go so smoothly, in fact, that the director offers you some extra one-on-one tutoring. There are about a dozen teachers at the school. They're mainly women around your age, in the their mid-to late-twenties. One of them, a prim blonde in a twin-set, spends every morning tea break checking the health of her British Telecom shares in *The Times*. At the other end of the political spectrum is a not-so-recent Oxford graduate, bubbly but earnest, who still can't understand why the world is such a terribly unjust place. There are a couple of blokes, a gay New Zealander who's lived in London for five years but still ruthlessly clips his vowels, and the

Head Teacher, Ken from Middlesex, married, two children, a good shepherd to his flock of teachers. All in all, it's a relaxed place to work. After weeks of unemployment, of near total isolation, it's a relief to be amongst people again, to be making money, to be doing something that's even semi-useful.

You find it hard working in town. There's the Christina factor: it's hard being reminded of her presence in just about every cafe and cinema. But there's also a less sentimental reason. Outside are the music stores, the bookshops, the clothes stores. You haven't bought anything for what feels like years, there's a bit of cash coming your way, so you know you're highly susceptible to impulse buying. You manage to be very disciplined, you don't go out in your lunch break, you don't linger on your way home, but it's a constant struggle. The school is on the third floor of a building right on Tottenham Court Road, and even though it doesn't have a view of the street, you can still feel the energy of the crowds that spill along the footpath, caught up in that strangely muted frenzy of consumption peculiar to London. But while you manage to shut out the consumer heaven that surrounds you, it still makes its presence felt. There's always a student with a department store carrier bag sitting beside their chair, bulging with some new treasure from John Lewis, Selfridges, The Body Shop, or some Covent Garden clothesboutique. One day the New Zealander comes

back from lunch with a new Sony Discman that he shows off to the staff room. You're amazed at how jealous you are. The sight of its sleek shell of matt black plastic, the silver and gold earbuds that come with it, fill you with a kind of nagging rage that you immediately direct towards its owner. Why should he have it? What makes him so deserving? You know these are stupid, childish thoughts, but from that moment on you make sure that no one sees your battered Walkman, your tacky, bargain-basement, Music for Pleasure cassette tapes.

And then there are the women. It's a bit of a shock, being surrounded by so many women. Suddenly they're everywhere, in the stairwells and corridors, in the staffroom and your classroom. They're young, they're educated, they're attractive and stylish, and before too long you know who's single and who isn't. You're on your best behaviour: you stick to your job and make sure you ruffle no feathers. You get along well with just about everyone and it only takes a few innocuous female smiles for you to start thinking about what it might feel like to be with someone again. It's dizzying, this thrill of the possibility of tenderness, of love. It sends a tremor right through the layers of tension and bitterness and hurt that have suffocated you for months now.

But the idea of asking any of them out is inconceivable. It's not just because you'll be going soon. It's because it would mean being unfaithful to Christina. It's then that you realise you have no intention of forgetting Christina. None at all. The reminder of what love can be: it's what your love can be with Christina again. Before you know it, your mind is made up. When you get back to Brisbane, you'll try again. You'll say sorry and tell her you love her. You'll demand that she says she doesn't love you anymore. Can she say it? Go on, say it, say you don't love me anymore. There. You can't. That settles it. Nothing can stand in the way of true love. You'll be Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*. By sheer force of will, you'll win back your Elaine.

On Wednesday night, after dinner, you sit down and do some financial calculations. In about four

weeks or so you'll have enough cash for the flight back to Brisbane.

That decides it. Now there's no turning back. You go downstairs, give in your notice to Frank and Karen, and suddenly it's real. You're leaving London. You're going home.

THE ALLIED ONSLAUGHT continues. In some initial engagements Iraqi tank brigades come roaring out of the burning oil smoke and fight with the ferocity promised by Saddam. But with no air support, a fractured command, and tanks with only half the range of their Allied counterparts, they are usually destroyed even before they see the enemy. A news report shows an American officer displaying a Russian-made slide rule of oak and imitation ivory. "This is what they use to get artillery range," he says incredulously. "This is what they're pitting against AWACS." Some rare images from the battlefield follow. An Iraqi tank, charging through the desert, is immobilised by a white flash that blows its turret clean off. Stopped dead in its tracks, the tank is immediately veiled by a pall of black smoke. It starts rocking gently back and forth on the spot, then suddenly faster and faster, until once again it stops. Sparks begin to gush out of the hole where the turret once was: they erupt into a column of burning red flame that leaps into the sky. "The Iraqi armour can't withstand the concentrated impact of our artillery fire," the British officer continues in voice-over. "The new Multiple Launcher Rockets, or MLRs, are proving to be very effective. They allow us to cover enemy positions with bomblets over a very wide area. On the other hand, the Iraqi shells aren't really up to the job of getting through our tank armour. They've managed a few hits, but the damage has been remarkably minimal. We've suffered very few tank losses to date."

Buoyed by the light resistance, the Allies step up the campaign. Their troops and tanks pour into Kuwait and Iraq. They turn night into day, fill the air with a hail of burning metal. They carpet bomb, precision bomb, launch waves of cruise missiles and bunker busters. They use bulldozers to bury Iraqi

troops alive in their trenches. Ground forces obliterate the army units defending Kuwait; sometimes it takes hours, sometimes only minutes. No chemical, biological or nuclear threat emerges. Whole Iraqi divisions run away, and enemy prisoners of war climb to seventy thousand.

After just over two days of fighting Saddam accepts the inevitable. He orders the withdrawal of his armies from Kuwait.

It's clear the Americans have engineered a stunning victory. So stunning, in fact, they aren't quite sure what to do with it. The United Nations resolutions only authorise them to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait. But with barely a few dozen casualties to date, and a brutal dictator and his million-strong army on its knees before them, it's tempting to go further. The momentum of victory seems unstoppable. After more than six months of planning and exercises, every US soldier is pumped up and ready to get their hands dirty. Their mission is to cut off the enemy and kill it. Yet on their radar screens they watch a mass of green pixels swarm north out of Kuwait: the retreating Iraqi army. It seems wrong, just plain wrong. These are thugs, looters, murderers, rapists. No one argues the point: the stories of Iraqi atrocities in Kuwait have raised the Ba'athists to the same level as the Nazis. They can't be allowed to leave, weaponry intact, ready to fight another day. It's an armed retreat, reasons Schwarzkopf. They're fair game. Let's go after them.

The Jahra highway, leading to Basra, is the Iraqi army's main escape route from Kuwait. Saddam's order to withdraw causes a frenzy of activity. The Iraqis use every means conceivable of getting out. They steal any vehicle they can find: motorcycles, sports cars, school buses, trucks, even front-end loaders and mowers. Most of them are piled high with booty: the contents of Kuwait's shopping malls, superstores and luxury boutiques. The retreat is pure chaos. The fleeing army creates an immense convoy so swollen with weapons and plunder it can barely move. The Allies watch it from their drones, their helicopters, their satellites. It's begging to be bombed.

The Allies soon oblige. Such a lucrative, target-rich

area is irresistible. First the Allies bomb the head of the convoy, to immobilise it. Then they bomb the rear, to prevent others from escaping. Then they attack the convoy itself. In news bulletins full of incomplete information, you learn that enormous Allied firepower is being directed on the paralysed convoy.

It's at this point that a major change in the tone of the news reporting takes place. Finally fed up with the tight control of information by the US military, with the whole game of censorship dressed up as national interest, the media actually starts reporting the war. Were the retreating Iraqi troops all that heavily armed? Could army units so dispersed really be a significant threat? Weren't they waving white flags in surrender? Weren't there thousands of civilians amongst the soldiers, some of them kidnapped Kuwaitis? And hadn't Saddam already ordered a withdrawal? Sound bites from US pilots taking part in the attacks don't help matters: one says it's like a "turkey shoot", another like "shooting fish in a barrel". Their tone isn't exactly regretful. Cheek-to-jowl with reports of bloodless Allied victories, are those of the senseless massacre of Iraqi troops. The victors are in danger of looking like murderers even more brutal than the ones they have so demonised.

When you leave work on Wednesday afternoon, your first pay cheque in your hot little hand, you see the word MASSACRE on the poster outside the local newsagent. You don't pay much attention to it; your mind is on other things. They've forwarded you a full week's pay, and there's more than you'd calculated; you're in a hurry to get to the nearby bank branch that will cash it immediately. You know this is a mistake. Your pulse is racing slightly, you're showing all the signs of splurging out on something stupid and setting back all your plans. And you know exactly what that something stupid is. It's been eating away at you, the New Zealander's CD player. All during lunchtime he sits there, earbuds gleaming, grooving away to the latest tunes as he prepares the afternoon lesson. Outside in the high street there's hi-fi shop after hi-fi shop, their windows stuffed full of Walkmans and Discmans. You know you can't afford it. You know that if you get a CD player, you'll

need CDs, and CDs cost a fortune; it's certain ruin. But it couldn't hurt just to look, could it? Just to see how much one costs? There might even be one on special. And wouldn't it be wrong to pass up a bargain, given that you'll buy one eventually anyway? You cash your cheque and head towards the nearest electrical store. The narrow footpaths of Tottenham Court Road are swollen with people on their way home from work, window shopping, killing time before they hit the pubs, restaurants, cinemas. Their winter overcoats are bumper to bumper as you try to make your way through the crowd, so you skirt over into the gutter whenever there's a break in the traffic. You reach a store. In the corner of your eye, rising above the high-street facades, you glimpse the British Telecom Tower, its crown bristling with antennae and satellite dishes. You're surprised it's still intact. Shouldn't such a communications asset have been taken out long ago? You tell yourself to forget about the war for five minutes, and enter the store.

You pass through the automated doors into the relative quiet of the showroom. The shelves and display stands are stacked with gadgets: VCRs, stereo minisystems, audio components in brushed aluminium. A young salesman is talking a customer through the features of a high-end pair of headphones, emphasising the velvet ear cushions, the gold-plated plug. You take all this in only briefly. Your attention has been immediately drawn to a Sony widescreen television standing in the middle of the floor space, one of the new generation with deeper blacks and sharper colours that have recently come onto the market. Without even thinking you come to a stop in front of it.

The sound has been turned down. Filling the screen is an aerial shot of a stretch of desert highway, no doubt filmed from a low-flying helicopter. It's a cloudy day. Both the highway itself and the surrounding desert are littered with the smouldering carcasses of what seems like dozens, if not hundreds, of vehicles. The camera flies over enormous trucks lying strewn in heaps, some on their backs with their wheels in the air, others with the long rectangle of the cargo hold twisted one way, the skull-like cabin

the other. It flies over craters blasted out of the bitumen, their ragged edges surrounded by mounds of twisted metal. The camera zooms out a little. Further out on the desert flanking the highway you see military transports, their canvas covers burnt away, sometimes leaving the ribbing, sometimes only a scorched flatbed covered in smoking black shapes. Further out again are the remains of sedans, station wagons and Land Rovers lying either slumped into the sand, on their sides or their backs. Spilling out of their open doors and boots are boxes and cartons and other shapeless piles that may be clothes, it's impossible to tell from this height. The helicopter flies on and on, the camera slowly zooms out, revealing carnage that stretches for miles ahead, trails for miles behind.

A small crowd gathers around you in front of the television. You stand there watching, transfixed. The helicopter sequence ends. Suddenly you are on the ground, right in the thick of it. You all go together into the slaughter. The shots change frequently, indicating heavy editing. That's all that's left of the dead, these cuts from one image to the next. The camera studies the scene. It soon gets bored with vehicles riddled with bullet holes, with shattered axles and engines spilling from under bonnets like entrails. It turns its attention to the loot, begins to pick out ghoulish contrasts. There seems to be no lack of them. The top half of a washing machine, its bottom half torn away, rests on the sand next to a gleaming mortar shell, seemingly unspent. A car door, its paint blistered off, its window a drip of molten silicon, forms the backdrop to a carton of Marlboro, a bottle of Chanel N°5, and a large-scale model of a black racing car. A blackened, mangled heap of metal, the long gun barrel that rises up out of it indicating it used to be an artillery gun, has a large double mattress leaning against it, more or less intact. And on it goes. It soon becomes apparent that there's virtually nothing the Iraqis haven't tried to steal: power tools, air-conditioning units, entire racks of women's dresses and men's suits, cartons of washing powder, computers, stereos, VCRs, cots, prams, toys. Everywhere there are televi-

sions. The editor of the report has saved these for last. The shots are so clear you can read the brand names: Panasonic, Sharp, NEC, and of course Sony, everywhere there are Sonys. Some of the televisions have their screens blown out, others are in perfect condition, lying there in the desert as if they were waiting to be turned on.

The crowd around you has grown so large that a salesman comes over. He takes one look at the screen, then discreetly walks away. A few seconds later the channel changes. The desert highway is replaced by a young woman on the studio set of a kitchen. She's wearing a tight, low-cut top. She beams and talks and shreds carrots. You feel a small shock go through the crowd, as if you've all just woken up from a deep trance. Everyone quickly disperses, and the buying mood immediately fills the store again. The man standing next to you, however, lingers a moment. He's probably in his mid-fifties, judging from his long grey beard. "Bloody disgrace," he mutters, half to you, half to the woman on the widescreen TV who leans forward to peep under a saucepan lid, at the same time offering you a generous helping of cleavage.

You turn around and walk straight out of the store. Now doesn't seem the time to get a Discman.

Later that night you watch a report with a war correspondent who has managed to slip through Allied checkpoints and get a look at the Highway of Death, as it is now officially known. No footage is shown; you only hear his voice. The accompanying image is a studio portrait of him dressed in a smart grey suit, his black hair carefully groomed, a sophisticated cell-phone held up to his pale, blandly handsome face.

"I reached the highway a day or so after the attacks, although some of the debris is still smoking. To say it is a scene of monumental devastation is an understatement. The ferocity of the attacks has been truly formidable. I'm not sure what munitions have been used, although some British marines thought it might be better to ask what munitions *hadn't* been used. There's talk that depleted uranium ordnance has been used, judging from the intensity of heat

generated by some blasts, but that can't be verified. Some of the bodies I have seen have simply been carbonised. Just reduced to black charcoal, some of them shrunk by about a quarter of their normal size. These, though, were probably the lucky ones: they would have enjoyed extremely quick deaths. More horrific, in a way, are the kinds of wounds caused by flying metal and debris, and of course the hot metal shards of the cluster bombs. The mutilation of bodies, their dismemberment, is simply horrific. I saw literally dozens of body parts strewn all about the desert. There are dogs about, and I saw a pack of them fighting over some human remains. Also, you have to be very careful where you step around here. Not all the bomblets explode, and they're as lethal as landmines if you step on them. Some British forces are here trying to clean up, getting rid of unexploded ordnance and covering bodies until they're told what to do next. But getting this lot cleaned up will be a very big job indeed.

"A US marine I spoke to told me that the very ferocity of the attacks no doubt prevented a lot of deaths. He pointed out the numerous number of vehicles that hauled themselves straight off the road into the desert, and then the footprints that lead further off. Obviously, once they saw what they were in for, most people just ran for it.

"What is also interesting is how the looters themselves are being looted. There's a truly bewildering array of stuff here; I've seen boxes of everything from toothpaste to CDs. Some of it has been taken, but I think the growing presence of Allied troops has put some stop to it. But it's clear that Bedouin tribesmen had at some point been working the road for at least some hours. You notice that some of the dead soldiers have their pockets turned inside out; that's their wallet and whatever else gone. Some of the vehicles are missing headlights, batteries, seats; these can all be used to make tents more habitable. A good number of vehicles have had the gas siphoned out.

"It's difficult to know what to feel. Some of these men were torturers, they mutilated their Kuwaiti victims, hung them up on meat hooks, they slowly

electrocuted them to death. Their death squads gang-raped women and girls, and terrorised the population with summary executions. But then, it's probably fair to say that others didn't want to be there at all. Some of these men lying dead here were brutal murderers, and many will think that they have only got what they deserved. And others were conscripts who no doubt thought this was all terribly wrong, and were the husbands and fathers of the women and children who have died in the Allied bombing, in horrific tragedies like the Amiriyah shelter. At this stage all I can really say is that I am overwhelmed by the evil of this place. The pure, unadulterated evil of it. I'm now in a British encampment some hundreds of metres away from it. Most of the troops I'm with are young men, and it has left its mark on them, there's no doubt about that. They're pretty much all shaken up by it, even if some of them might not want to admit or show it. There's no doubt the evil of it gets to everyone who sees it. I don't think it will ever leave me."

The correspondent's report finishes. It's 1 a.m. It's time you went to bed. You have to get up and face the crowds in the tube, the students in the classroom. You've put in a good week so far; you don't want to blow it. You're about to turn off the TV, but you hesitate. Just one more segment, you tell yourself. Just one more segment before you go to sleep.

In the next report you're taken north of Kuwait, into Iraqi territory. The Americans are pursuing the retreating Republican Guard. They want to cut it off

and destroy it before it can escape. In this particular news bulletin they're hunting it down with squadrons of Apache attack helicopters armed with Hellfire missiles and the most powerful Gatling gun ever created. Your TV screen fills with an Apache's video monitor: you see what the pilot sees. It's the ghostly blue you can now identify immediately, the deep, luminous blue of total surveillance, of target, lock on and kill. All around the perimeter of the screen white numbers rise and fall in rapid sequence, monitoring altitude, distance, air pressure, god knows what. You're flying low over desert sands. It's night. A tiny white figure appears, a thermal imprint of an Iraqi soldier. The ant-sized soldier starts to run, but there's nowhere to hide. On the screen two square white brackets appear. They frame the target, give a pulse of light to signal he's locked on. A burst of machine gun fire, registering as puffs of white, sprays the ground at his feet. The tiny figure flings itself to the ground, waits for the dust to settle, gets up, runs again, straight out of the frame formed by the square white brackets. They swiftly glide across the screen and lock on to him again. The light pulses, the machine gun fires, he falls, waits, rises and runs again. The sequence repeats itself four, five, six times. He runs, stumbles, falls in a ring of machine gun fire, hauls himself up again.

You turn off the TV and go to bed. You're exhausted. You fall asleep immediately.

From 'Great Western Highway' (*Capital*, Volume One, Part Two).

Mindful forgetfulness
releases the wild into captivity.

FELICIA FLETCHER

You Are Here



YOU ARE HERE

claiming homeland
denying others
denying you ever claimed
 would fight
 kill
 in order
 to find yourself
safe inside these borders
 HERE
where the new century sells
 the old
where Nazis run
 over and over
in popular documentaries
where paedophiles are released
 to the papers
 YOU ARE HERE
between threat and entertainment
 so proudly over educated
 you think
the threat is someone else

NATHAN CURNOW

I think, therefore . . . ?

Like grass on dunes we cling.
No, we are the dunes;
with flimsy crust,
with grass and scrub,
we hope to hold
against the dry,
the drift from shifting winds.

But there is naught
to us but change,
loose heaps
of happenings.
Reds, greens, tree-shapes,
harmonies and blares,
stinks and fragrances,
tastes and touches
prod us.
These feel fair
or foul or just
so so.

The inner eye
twigs or not.
Ideas and wants
walk through or linger —
the treading crumbles
fragile dune-crust.
All registers
a while, then fades.

How is it then,
we say: **We** are?
Bodies age;
senses dull;
thoughts flitter;
feelings shift
like windblown sand;
and consciousness
candle like
flickers and dies.

There is no anchor;
naught holds;
dry sands tumble.
Dying blades and haulms —
they sway, they tremble.

MURRAY ALFREDSON

Waltzing with M.

Hear the sound?
Yes, the sound!
Come on Fi,
dance with me!

See the light!
Yes, the light!
Here and there,
ev'rywhere!

Look how nice!
Yes, so nice!
Friendly smile,
stay a while!

Easy life!
Yes, the life!
So much fun,
worries none!

At the beach!
Yes, the beach!
All is great,
hey there mate!

Feel the sun!
Yes, the sun!
Oh I'm hot,
you know what?!

We are free!
Yes, so —

Why did you stop the twirl?
Well, what do you expect?
I'd thought we both respect
the things that count, old girl.

I do. But can't you see?
No. Light, be nice, hot sun,
the beach, a life of fun
is all it takes, dear Fi.

Yes, to be controlled.

DIRK ZADRA

The Prince

Behind the walls of the fortress of paranoia,
the booby traps, barbed wire and ditches,
the Prince keeps watch for secret enemies
ready to scale the heights to reach his riches.

Daily he reinvents his armoury:
the telescopes for observation
the javelins and arrows of accusation
the tubs with the burning oil of condemnation.

At night, he checks the locks and bars again
and again and hurries down to count his treasure,
the sacks of coins, heirlooms and old knick-knacks:
this sacred rite is his only pleasure.

He keeps alert for possible auguries,
like meteors or birds falling from the sky,
flickering lights, a sudden gust of wind
or what the cards foretell, and wonders why

The cracks are widening beneath his feet
and voices whisper what should never be said,
while shadows fall, pooling silhouettes
and comic-book shapes of fear and dread.

At once jailer and prisoner, he shrinks
from the nightmare faces that loom behind him.
What if he loses his glasses, locks and keys?
What if the Other, the bogey-man, finds them?

GEOFFREY QUINLAN

The First Room

The students in the class were all Chilean,
exiles, silent, just arrived.
Though young, and with far less experience
of life – and death – than they,
I was the teacher, an authority,
and mine was the language they had come to learn.

Adjectives of nationality:

'Australian',

'French',

'American',

'...'

At the back, a slowly rising hand.

'Yes?'

'*North American.*'

'Oh . . . yes . . . yes . . . right. Exactly.'

At that moment,
across a street an ocean wide,
in a house I'd never seen before,
a switch clicked and a light came on
in just one room.

BOB MORROW

Heat

The lizard lies on hay
Beside the new white rose
Absorbing heat.
Indoors we use fans
As dogs use tongues
And somewhere someone elderly
Lies panting and neglected.
The day hangs by a thread
Dropped from the sun
We long for night.
The stars, finally, like sulky debutantes
Are pushed out by the moon.
The sea heaves with regularity
And dolphins frolic by the cliffs
Respite barely comes. The magazine
Comes out on time
But terrorists are hiding.
We long for coolness, peace
And something worthwhile to be said
Reward and recognition beckon
Emptiness and folly rise with heat.
Will and discipline and pacts
May save the day
Engorged with platitudes
The heat has killed the postman.

KATE LLEWELLYN

Tequila Sunrise

Our world sits firmly on these things:
Incessant manufacture of
Things that we do not need, nor should we,
And if we seem recalcitrant
They flood us with cute arguments

With which to saturate our minds, our
Very senses, until we feel
The need to buy a thingamajig
Or else to order several whatnots
(The latest electronic model),

Or book a languid holiday
Where nobody could want to go:
Some bamboo huts, a slice of beach
And the usual hideous hotel.
Hang on, hang on. Please realise

That full employment, or nearly full,
Is built entirely on the useless.
We have to keep our species quiet,
Giving some at least a chance to drink
The coloured cocktails of desire.

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

patience

a heavy patience

this grey

over our heads

a few drops

don't mean rain

a few drops

don't mean tears

RORY HARRIS

Villanelle for a pregnancy test

The line is drawn, gradually, in blue,
between what my life will be and what it was.
Hand on stomach, I imagine you.

You are a decision my body made: just a few
cells, a burl on my womb's wood. Ready or not,
the line is drawn, gradually, in blue.

I have not wanted to believe in you,
but my body believes what my brain cannot.
Hand on stomach, I imagine you,

and how my body is a way station, where you
come and I go. But where do our paths cross?
Hand on stomach, I imagine you.

The time is up. I used to think I knew
the difference between relief and loss,
but the line is drawn, gradually, in blue,
and makes a minus, not a cross. You are not true
and I am less than what I thought I was.
The line is drawn, finally, in blue.
Hand on stomach, I imagine you.

FRANCESCA HAIG

For Uncle Tom

You'd walk
through the bush from the farm
strolling then trekking
to the ocean
past
the wall made of middens
to where the sea ferns lapped
against pylons
and steam blasted from funnels
of tugs pulling ships
always ships
waiting
bringing and taking

at the Gully Line
where the hills fell
the swamps spread
water lying
still
and herons picked at
pampas grass
in Pambalong land

carpet snakes and lizards basked here

you delivered milk
on your horse and cart
through the town
squeich in water knee deep
this place where Reverend Threlkeld walked

recording and observing

fern seeds
fell
and
coal formed

and bodies blackened with coal dust
like the clean white sheets
hanging on the hoist
smelling of gas

swamps spread
water gushed into
mine shafts

flooding

now, ferns lap with each small splash
of wave against wood
grey and rotting
forever falling into sea

past Nobby's Head
dolphins dive
the sun, low in the sky,
the colour of persimmon

LOU SMITH

REAL LIFE?

SOME RECENT FICTION

- Jane Alison: *The Marriage of the Sea* (Text Publishing, \$22.95, ISBN 1920885412)
 Stephanie Bishop: *The Singing* (Brandl & Schlesinger, \$26.95, ISBN 1876040548)
 Greg Bogaerts: *Black Diamonds and Dust* (Vulgar Press, \$25, ISBN 095807951X)
 Steven Carroll: *The Gift of Speed* (HarperCollins, \$22.95, ISBN 0732278325)
 Joel Deane: *Another* (Interactive Press, \$24.95, ISBN 1876819251)
 Les Terry: *The Remarkable Resurrection of Lazaros X* (Simon & Schuster, \$29.95, ISBN 0731812336)
 Jane Downing: *The Lost Tribe* (Pandanus Books, \$29.95, ISBN 1740761146)
 Martin Edmond: *Chronicle of the Unsung* (Auckland University Press, \$39.95, ISBN 1869403118)
 Giti Thadani: *Moebius Trip: Digressions from India's Highways* (Spinifex, \$24.95, ISBN 1876756543)
 John Hough: *Integrity* (Taro Australia, \$22, ISBN 0975219405)
 Wayne Macauley: *Blueprints for a Barbed-Wire Canoe* (Black Pepper, \$24.95, ISBN 187604442X)
 Arnold Zable: *Scraps of Heaven* (Text Publishing, \$29.95, ISBN 1877008869)

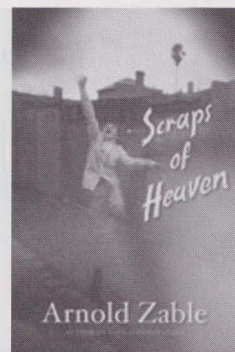
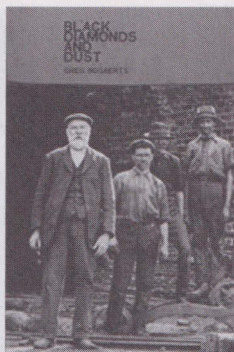
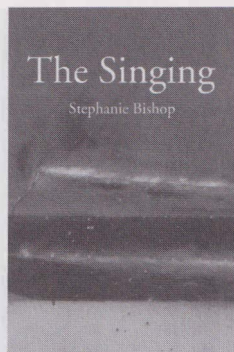
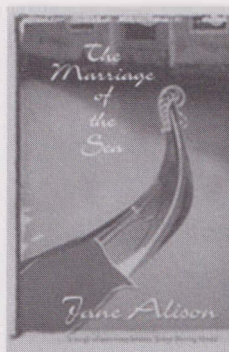
TWO DECADES AGO the literary end of the book business lived in fear that local writing would disappear under the weight of global publishing oligarchies and the brutal thrust of commercialisation. More recently, the government's refusal to exempt books from the GST produced angst and sorrow. Yet this collection of recent fiction and memoir titles sent to *Overland* for review shows that local writers continue to be published, most by a proliferation of independent local publishers. Companies with head offices abroad produced only two books in this collection.

Perhaps this collection signifies that a real revival of interest in literary fiction is taking place. But an upsurge in local publishing of literary fiction might also stem from a shift in its nature and meaning. Literary prose has seldom sold in great quantities or made money for anyone. However, today literary prose may be quite far down the road already taken by poetry, on the way to becoming a specialist interest, a sort of hobby for a self-selected elite that happens to bear a certain amount of cultural capital, the market

value of which is increasingly doubtful. Literary writers may be well known to one another and a circle of publishers, academics and critics, but few are known to or have any impact on the wider national community. Of course, that's how literary fiction began – as an aristocratic hobby – but since the sixteenth century in the West (and earlier in Northern Italy), it was carried to great heights by a strong surge of interest from the rapidly expanding middle classes. The middle classes are still there, in ever growing numbers, but their interest has waned.

Despite its presence in national and international cultures, writing and its associated activities are largely city- and state-centred. The fact that half of these titles sent to a Melbourne-based journal are by Melbourne writers surely says something about the continuing importance of local networks, even though it's true that Melbourne has always had a very active literary scene.

As literary fiction has risen in prestige but fallen in mass appeal over the last century, governments have stepped in to provide financial support. Of



the nine books here first published in Australia and by Australian authors, five received funds from the Australia Council. *Integrity*, which was not funded, is an angry, fantastical political thriller that spins off the *Tampa* incident. Apparently self-published, it is competently written but to my taste overdone. Jane Downing's *The Lost Tribe*, published out of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at ANU, is a vivid but rather old-fashioned historical romance with a grandmother/granddaughter double narrative. It could make a diverting telemovie, but its attempt to tackle racial and religious issues of colonialism in the South Pacific is desultory, and the Polynesians-as-the-Lost-Tribe-of-Israel theme unconvincing.

It might be argued that these novels' 'literary merit' in the Literature Board sense does not justify government funding, but that case would be hard to make for the books by Les Terry and Joel Deane. What the latter do share is a concern with people for whom social disadvantage and economic struggle are major preoccupations. However, this is also true of most of the funded novels (those by Bogaerts, Macauley and Zable and to some extent Carroll). On the other hand, the funded books do tend to offer a more optimistic or benign view of disadvantage than the bleak scenarios of Terry and Deane. It's hard to say whether any larger significance can be attached to these observations.

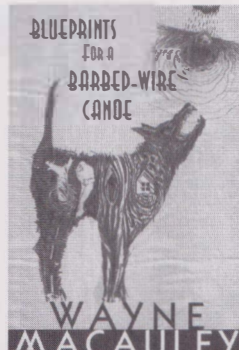
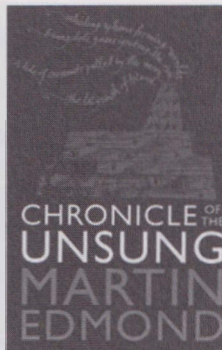
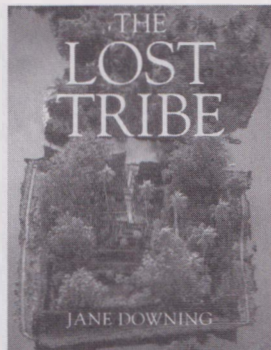
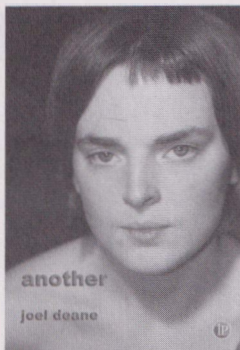
Of the Australian books, it's interesting that only those by Downing, Stephanie Bishop and Jane Alison are exclusively about 'middle-class', educated people. How curiously nineteenth century it is, that the men write about the rough lower orders and the women of the genteel folk! Yet the evidence for this archaic division of labour is very strong.

The social context of Bishop's impressive debut

is so sketchy that the milieu is scarcely relevant. The novel is a poetic, claustrophobic registration of love doomed by illness. The mechanical and sticky aspects of both love and illness are rigorously kept in the background. It reminds me of the music of the avant-garde composer Morton Feldman, all delicacy and stillness. It's gorgeous, but some readers (and listeners) can only take so much refinement.

Jane Alison was born in Australia but has lived in Germany and the United States. *The Marriage of the Sea* is a critically successful novel set in Venice and New Orleans, first published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Professionally written, it belongs to a genre of international fiction featuring characters who have their own personalities and ways of living but little or no history. Preoccupied with their relationships and/or devoted to art, they belong nowhere, inhabiting the exotic places they pass through like actors on a stage set.

The remaining Australian books are about underdogs of one kind or another. This no doubt reflects to some extent the kind of journal that *Overland* is, but it is also characteristic of Australian fiction, past and present. Only one of them, Greg Bogaerts' well-crafted *Black Diamonds and Dust*, is about working-class politics in the conventional sense. It is a coalmining saga set in Newcastle, NSW, at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet even here political struggle is not really the main focus. In tone it is not unlike Dorothy Hewett or Jack Lindsay or even Sholokov, but the story is resolved not by a triumph or defeat for the workers, but with the restoration of broken families and submission to the relentless flow of history. In this sense it takes the 'ist' back out of socialist realism. But at the same time it has none of the anger of Zola or Jack London, or Joel Deane for that matter: its overall tone is gentle, and



elegiac. It's a novel of nostalgia, not of protest – for what's the point of protesting what is past?

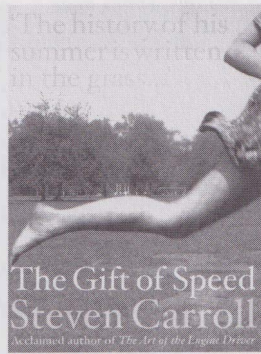
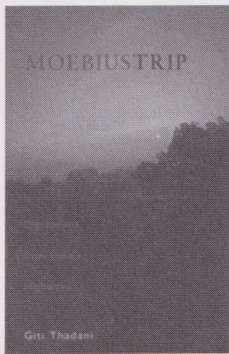
Les Terry's compelling memoir *The Remarkable Resurrection of Lazaros X* tells of growing up as a bastard in the slums of Brunswick, and, much later, discovering who his parents were. *Another* and *Scraps of Heaven* also feature boys growing up poor in Melbourne. *Another* is harsh, a gruelling depiction of family breakdown, petty crime, adolescent discontent and inner and outer scars. Its confronting stream of short sentences jerked out as if in pain, convincingly capture the mood of sullen confusion. But the style also has limitations, which are curiously similar to those of Stephanie Bishop's very different novel. Mirroring the interior consciousness of its unhappy young protagonists all too well, it leaves the reader little space to gain perspective or depth.

Steven Carroll's *The Gift of Speed* is also set in a Melbourne suburb, but not a notably impoverished one. This warm, sharp-eyed comedy of manners was short-listed for the 2005 Miles Franklin (it was beaten by Andrew McGahan's *White Earth*). Wayne Macauley's *Blueprints for a Barbed-Wire Canoe* is an eccentric parable about a prematurely constructed housing estate abandoned by the vagaries of property development. The estate, which comes to be called, sardonically and Biblically, "Ur" after most of the letters have faded from a gateway sign, could even be the same estate, a few years down the track, that is called "Another" in Deane's novel. Macauley commands a rich and flexible style, ranging easily through satire, intensity and reflection. There is nothing in this exemplary suburban Gothic tale to place it specifically in Melbourne, or anywhere, but there is something undeniably 'Melbourne' about its ironic brew of community, weirdness and failure.

The Melbourne novels all bear testimony to the power of that city's suburbia, but vary greatly in their responses to it, from the horror and futility conveyed by Terry and Deane to the mixed but basically celebratory nostalgia of Carroll and Zable. What is it that is so compelling about the Melbourne suburbs? Arnold Zable probably captures it best in *Scraps of Heaven*, an evocative yarn deeply imbued with a sense of place and the distinctive human panorama inherent in that place.

Even more striking than their attachment to place is the attachment of these books to the past. Overwhelmingly, they look back. *The Singing and Barbed-Wire Canoe* are retrospective narratives, *Lazaros* is an autobiographical memoir of the 1950s and 1960s, *Speed* and *Scraps* are set in the same period, *The Lost Tribe* and *Black Diamonds* in the nineteenth century. Only the sad adolescents of *Another* and the intrepid detectives of *Integrity* are caught up in stories that move forwards, into a future not already known and assimilated.

It is relevant to this retrospective consciousness that most of these books are about young people growing up. *Another*, and to some extent *Lazaros*, represent growing up less as a process of completion or growing *into* what has been given, than as a disruption, a growing *away* from and *out of* a starting point towards some other, hopefully better, state of mind or place. Life, real life, is somewhere else, yet it is on the unsatisfactory origins that these stories dwell, not the real life somewhere else. That might support Peter Pierce's contentious thesis in *The Country of Lost Children* that the Australian imagination is plagued by anxieties of belonging – what Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra in *Dark Side of The Dream* call Australia's obsession with legitimacy: someone I know likes to call it the country's "bastard complex".



However, most of these books take a less transgressive, more optimistic position on belonging. They imply that satisfaction is best achieved not by rejecting and leaving but by appreciating and maintaining family and community life. *The Lost Tribe* and *Lazaros* depict fulfilment in discovering more about one's ancestors. Dissonant notes in this untidy but cosy harmony are sounded by Deane's bitterness, Macauley's satire, and Bishop's lyrical threnody.

Two of these books are not written by Australians. Martin Edmond's *Chronicle of the Unsung* is a brilliant memoir published by Auckland University Press. In a book-length segue it recalls and elaborates episodes of, drugs, travel, communes, and relationships, conjuring with the meaning of marginality. Imagine W.G. Sebald turned vagabond hippy. Come to think of it, Edmond's people are reminiscent of Alison's characters, except that they are unable to afford accommodation that is as comfortable. The book is of course a rehash – in more than one sense – of the old poet-as-outsider rigmarole, which may have started with Villon or even Zhuangzi, and has certainly been running hot since Rimbaud. All the same, *The Unsung* is an excellent exposition of this theme, memorable and engaging on every page.

Giti Thadani is the odd woman out in this company. She is not Australian in any sense, nor was *Moebius Trip* first published in Australia, but by Penguin India. It is a sinuous twist on the road genre, an account of driving around India in a jeep seeking out images of Kali, the ferocious Mother Goddess who is often depicted wearing a necklace of skulls and dancing on the prone body of her consort, the God Shiva. Thadani is a scholar, art historian, visual artist and spokeswoman for gay

rights, which may be why Spinifex has picked up her memoir. Her opinions are alternately enlightening and irritating, but always interesting and provocative, like her description of a famous building:

The Taj Mahal is a monument of no vitality – a white elephant that, far from celebrating love, was founded on a culture of violent excess . . . Absolute symmetry is the Taj's signature, a symmetry for which every kind of monolithic ideology strives.

Not many people can maintain such negative Kali energy in the presence of the thing itself. The Moguls were particularly gruesome, but similar things can be said about any great construction – the Parthenon, the Vatican, the Sydney Opera House. Still, I have a feeling that of all these books, this is the one I will become most fond of. It is about rediscovering the past but avoids nostalgia, and is discontent with the present without imagining that the solution lies in escape. It feels like real life.

Paul Gillen is a senior lecturer in Social Inquiry in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.



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WANG HUI

THE HISTORIAN AS SOCIAL CRITIC IN CHINA

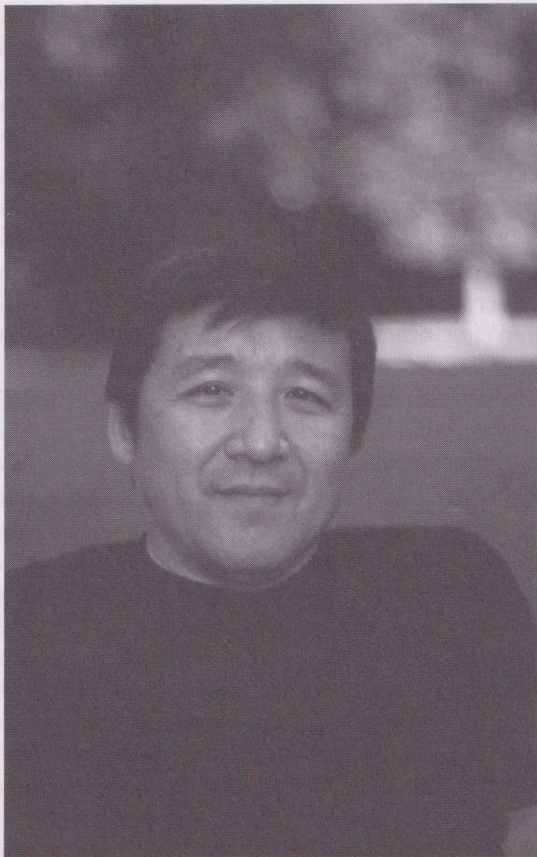
WANG HUI, Professor of Humanities at Tsinghua University in Beijing, is a prominent Chinese historian who is generally better known in the English-speaking academy for his critical engagement with social problems in contemporary China. Wang has sought to inhabit the dual role of historian and social critic since he began his career as a literary historian at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in the late 1980s. He remained at the Academy throughout the 1990s but travelled extensively. In 2002, he relocated to Tsinghua, one of China's most prestigious universities. To date, Wang has attended conferences and/or undertaken research in numerous countries including Australia, Austria, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Indonesia, India, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Poland, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey and the United States. He is a leading voice in international Chinese intellectual circles and has spent time in both Taiwan and Hong Kong.

In the late 1990s, Wang became a controversial figure in the mainland Chinese intellectual scene. This unsolicited notoriety was the result of a lengthy essay he published in 1997 entitled, 'The State of Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity'. Wang had written this essay four years earlier but was unable to find a journal prepared to risk publishing it until the leading Hainan-based journal *Tianya* (*Frontiers*) brought the essay to light in 1997. The essay constitutes Wang's indictment of the parlous state of Chinese critical inquiry at a time when social inequalities had greatly sharpened as a consequence of China's market reforms. The authoritarian nature of one-party rule in China

places critical intellectuals like Wang Hui at a distinct disadvantage. Despite China's undeniable economic achievements since the 1980s, critics of the *status quo* remain nonetheless always at risk of being silenced through the banning of their publications. Depending on the state's perception of the 'offence' an intellectual has committed, the penalties might include loss of employment and institutional affiliation and, in the case of 'offences' perceived to pose a threat to the so-called national interest, a prison term as well.

One might wonder what Wang Hui has to offer to intellectual life in Australia given his unwavering focus on things Chinese, not to mention the political constraints under which he works, constraints which often confine him to offering his social critique in a somewhat oblique theoretical idiom. In my view, what Wang Hui has to say about China is of significance to us for two reasons. Firstly his work provides an opportunity for Australians to become more familiar with complex intellectual debates in China and thus to acquire a more nuanced understanding of the enormous social changes that China has undergone since Deng Xiaoping redirected the party-state to embark on a path to economic reform in the late 1970s. Secondly, Wang's insistence on socially responsible governance as a fundamental requirement to the success of China's market economy has a relevance that extends well beyond China. Indeed the question of a state's role in the provision of public services such as education, health care and pensions has become a crucial topic of debate everywhere.

Wang is a staunch critic of neoliberalism (but not of the market economy *per se*). In a substantial



In a substantial analysis (published overseas) of the events that occurred in Beijing in the months leading up to the catastrophic events of 4 June 1989, Wang identifies the post-Maoist state's turn towards neoliberal economic reform as the prime cause of the socio-economic inequalities that fuelled the protest movement.

analysis (published overseas) of the events that occurred in Beijing in the months leading up to the catastrophic events of 4 June 1989, Wang identifies the post-Maoist state's turn towards neoliberal economic reform as the prime cause of the socio-economic inequalities that fuelled the protest movement. In his analysis, arguably the most incisive to date on the topic by a mainland Chinese intellectual, Wang describes neoliberalism as "a dominating discursive formation and ideology that has no capacity to describe actual social and economic relations, but neither is it unconnected to actual social and economic relations". To emphasise the need for resistance to the lures of neoliberal thinking, Wang urges that we view it "as an ideology imbricated with national policy, the practical thought of the intellectuals as well as with the values of the media". He also reminds us that "it uses concepts concerned with 'transition' and 'development' to patch up its internal contradictions".¹ Readers interested in the burgeoning views over the adverse consequences of globalisation will find much to engage their attention in Wang's writings.

Indeed, wherever we may happen to live, we find ourselves being subjected to neoliberal doctrines of social advancement through market competition on a global scale. Thus the neoliberal argument that economic globalisation delivers the kind of progress that everyone needs is one with which we are all familiar. Yet we constantly grapple with the new uncertainties and inequities that have emerged and are emerging out of this same highly uneven process of globalisation. Disagreements over globalisation (whether anti-globalist or between differing models of globalisation), and the related issue of privatisation of state-owned entities, thrive in Australia's public culture as they do in democratic countries throughout the world. Participants in public debate and protest such as union officials and members, workers, university students and academics, and members of local communities, regularly express their concerns about the deleterious effects on social equity and communal wellbeing of policies that are too narrowly based on the model of the neoliberal 'free market'. Meanwhile, the business sector and government continue to advocate the necessity of global competition in facilitating the capacity of the market to constantly adjust and regulate itself towards optimal performance. Since China's admission into the WTO in 2000, the Australian news media,

like their counterparts elsewhere in the Western world, have intensified their focus on economic, social and political developments in China. The increasing focus on China's high rate of economic growth is an issue chiefly associated with concerns over triggering a 'race to the bottom' in the global competition for trade and manufacturing, given the enormous supply of cheap labour available in the world's most populous country, together with concerns over official corruption and the authoritarian nature of party-state rule. In brief, there is a growing sense of unease among Australians about the unpredictable prospects of a less than transparent China playing an increasingly dominant role in this future global economy.

These are concerns shared by mainland Chinese intellectuals such as Wang Hui but unlike their counterparts in Australia who can publish dissenting views without direct official intervention, Chinese intellectuals tend to phrase their critical engagement in subtler terms calculated not to exceed the ever-fluctuating, state-imposed parameters of permissible speech. Despite the deliberately oblique way in which Wang Hui issued his *J'accuse* of China's market reforms in his seminal 1997 essay, mainland Chinese readers were left in little doubt that he was calling for resistance to the blandishments of the 'free market' rhetoric that had come to dominate official and public discourses in China. Among other things, Wang argues, "the fact that economic and cultural democracy are inseparable from political democracy . . . also demonstrates that the hope that the market will somehow automatically lead to equity, justice and democracy – whether internationally or domestically – is just another kind of utopianism".² Wang's intention was to alert his readers to the utopianism he perceived in the intellectual activism of the 1980s that had led, on the one hand, to an unquestioned embrace (among officials and intellectuals alike) of Western-derived market principles as *the* solution to China's economic backwardness, while fostering, on the other hand, a collective aspiration to democracy on the part of concerned Chinese citizens. This culminated in the student-led protest movement of 1989 before it was so tragically purged on 'June Fourth' (or '*liu si*', a temporal term that renders the event symbolically significant).

Published eight years after 1989, Wang's indictment of "the state of contemporary Chinese thought" was welcomed by some and attacked by

others. China underwent an accelerated pace of economic reform in the early to mid 1990s, despite the tightened ideological controls exercised by the party-state in the aftermath of 4 June 1989. This was a time of critical reflection for China's elite intellectuals, many of whom, like Wang Hui, had participated in or supported the 1989 protest movement, and who were now also faced with the problem of redefining a social role for themselves under increased state scrutiny.

Wang observes that the 1990s was a time of growing division among Chinese intellectuals, which stood in contrast to the "partial unanimity of aims" between officials and intellectuals during the more optimistic 1980s. He argues that whereas a shared desire on the part of officials and intellectuals alike to achieve national prosperity had produced a form of intellectual activism in the 1980s that largely accorded with the party-state's agenda for economic reforms, by the 1990s, a bifurcation had emerged. There were now, on the one hand, 'conservative' intellectuals who continued to produce an ideology of technocratic modernisation on behalf of the party-state, and, on the other hand, 'radical' intellectuals who had become dissenters of party-state politics, who promoted a human rights movement in China and called for Western-style democratisation.³ Reading this division as an outcome of market expansion under ongoing authoritarian rule, Wang draws attention to the need for alternative models of modernisation that could more effectively address the problem of acute socio-economic inequalities in China. He is keen in this regard to explore ways of enhancing the prospects for broader participation in policy-drafting and implementation, constitutive of a form of social democracy that is based in what he calls "the value system of socialism", which he is at pains to distinguish from the 'state violence' of existing socialism.

Wang's interest in defending socialist principles of economic democracy, especially in terms of resisting the monopoly power of transnational corporations through the promotion of small-scale local cooperative ventures, supervised and organised on democratic principles, has led him to be labelled as a leading figure of the 'New Left' in China. He advocates that the state should play a central role in the provision of social protection, and, in his capacity as joint chief editor (with Huang Ping) of China's leading academic journal *Reading* (*Dushu*), he has

What is important to note here is that in his numerous publications in Chinese and English, Wang consistently attempts to salvage a thread of commitment to social justice from within the socialist idiom of the party-state's rhetoric.

sought to disseminate a range of critical views on topics including the implications of China's further integration into the global economy, and the types of constitutional and political reforms China would require to secure both social wellbeing and sustainable economic growth. In a 2003 interview, Wang commented that, "As early as 1996, *Dushu* had invited a group of sociologists to discuss rural, peasant, and agricultural problems, understood as an inter-related complex". When he observes that "awareness of the crisis in the countryside only became an acute public issue around the time when the Sino-American agricultural agreement was signed in 2000",⁴ he implies that state censorship served only to exacerbate this crisis when it silenced those who had sought to criticise the adverse impact on China's peasantry of ill-considered agricultural policies.

What is important to note here is that in his numerous publications in Chinese and English, Wang consistently attempts to salvage a thread of commitment to social justice from within the socialist idiom of the party-state's rhetoric. Despite the constraints of censorship, he continues to publish critical essays (sometimes necessarily outside China) aimed at alerting readers to the neoliberal connotations of the official discourse on economic reform. Indeed, in the interview mentioned above, Wang claims that China "cannot be described as socialist any longer, and the state itself has changed a lot". He continues:

Today the state is itself a part of the market system. In some ways it functions very well in that capacity – it makes mistakes, of course, but it is now a key factor in the dynamic of marketisation.⁵

Wang's explicit preference for a socialist conception of democracy is the reason that his critics first labelled him a 'New Left' thinker in the late 1990s. His critics are generally intellectuals who regard themselves as 'liberals', who argue that further expansion of China's market economy would, in the long term, enhance the prospects of democracy through the emergence and growth of a civil society sufficiently

robust to withstand the unwelcome interventions of the state. What we must also note is that in the context of the post-Maoist 1980s and 1990s, the term 'New Left' carried a distinctly negative connotation due to its resonance with the 'Leftism' of the Cultural Revolution, a period which the party-state itself had officially designated as "a catastrophic decade". By contrast, the term 'liberalism', as the Shanghai-based historian Xu Jilin observes, "had achieved a cultural cachet previously enjoyed by such terms as democracy and science, even a certain inviolability".⁶ This reflects the complexity of Wang's critical engagement with China's market reforms: in an authoritarian environment where the party-state now relies on the *economic* discourse of neoliberalism on the one hand while continuing to defend its *political* legitimacy in a socialist idiom on the other, 'liberal' and 'New Left' intellectuals find themselves equally at risk of giving offense to the party-state.⁷

In this context, it is worth noting that whereas the 'New Left' was a negatively inflected term in the late 1990s, more recently under the leadership of President Hu Jintao, it has come to acquire the kind of status that 'liberalism' enjoyed (and still enjoys) in the public culture of post-Maoist China. In an effort to demonstrate that state policies are sensitive to the adverse consequences of economic reform, the government has begun publicly to echo the rhetoric of socially responsible governance first popularised by so-called 'New Left' intellectuals in the 1990s, and it has arguably been forced to do so by the rising incidence of protests from the rural and urban poor over such issues as unpaid wages and pensions, land seizure, industrial waste dumping and pollution.⁸ But so far, this new turn in the party-state's rhetoric has not produced the kind of policy reform that envisages an inclusive democracy that intellectuals such as Wang Hui have sought to promote. On the contrary, this recent official rhetoric of responsible governance has been accompanied by increased censorship of dissenting views.

Wang Hui's willingness to assume the role of

society's conscience is part of an enduring tradition of Chinese scholarship that can be traced back to the centuries-old Confucian dictum of "assuming personal responsibility for all under Heaven" (*yi tianxia wei jiren*). This ingrained sense of the social relevance of scholarship came to be redefined in terms of nation-building in the early twentieth-century discourse of pioneering modern intellectuals such as Lu Xun (whom Wang regards as his favourite exemplar). Indeed, the very ferocity of present-day debates between 'liberal' and 'New Left' intellectuals over the proper way ahead for China is indicative of the significance accorded to the public role of intellectuals, but this public intellectual role has now become complicated by a growing perception among the intellectuals themselves that, in the era of market competition, the publication of 'selfless' concerns can often mask 'selfish' interests of career advancement. Hence because of Wang's rapid rise to intellectual fame in China and internationally during the 1990s, his 'liberal' detractors have been quick to cast suspicion on his motivations. But whether one agrees or disagrees with Wang's socialist-inspired vision of a diverse global network of local cooperative ventures that would provide a viable non-capitalist alternative to globalisation, it is clear that he makes a significant contribution to Chinese critical inquiry through the emphasis he places on defending the interests of the disadvantaged majority in the turbulent process of China's economic reform.

Wang has also consistently sought to link his engagement with contemporary problems to his research on the historical evolution of modern ideas in China. In 2004, he published a four-volume work entitled *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, in which he interprets Chinese modernity as an essentially non-capitalist world-view that evolved over centuries of Confucian scholarship: one that he traces in particular to intellectual developments during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE). Wang argues that this autochthonous world-view fostered the rise of a nationalistic approach to modernisation in twentieth-century China. He claims that this Chinese approach marks a distinct departure from the paradigmatic Western capitalist model insofar as it emphasises the importance of collective wellbeing and social harmony in ways that anticipate and resonate with the communal principles of socialism.⁹ In his 1997 essay (mentioned earlier), Wang had already sought to dignify Mao Zedong Thought as

constitutive of "an anti-modern theory of modernisation" by showing that Mao's ideas shared much in common with the writings of an earlier generation of Chinese scholars and activists such as Kang Youwei (1858–1927), Zhang Taiyan (1869–1936) and Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925). In the complex environment of mainland Chinese public culture where the Cultural Revolution is often summarily dismissed as an 'aberration' but remains a largely prohibited topic of discussion, Wang's attempt to explore the unrealised critical potential of Mao's Thought as a form of resistance to capitalist modernisation was both innovative and daring.

Wang is interested in offering an account of Chinese modernity as inclusive of both a process of selective Westernisation as well as an evolving critique of Western imperialism and capitalism (undertaken by Chinese officials and intellectuals since the Opium Wars). In both his scholarship and social critique, Wang consistently disavows the presumed universality of the Western capitalist model of development. He identifies the present-day global dominance of neoliberal thinking with this one-size-fits-all capitalist model of development and offers us his Sino-centred narrative of modern Chinese thought with the stated intention of not only recovering the uniqueness of Chinese scholarship against Eurocentric assumptions about China, but also to promote the possibility of non-capitalist and socially equitable alternatives to modernisation. Thus, he strongly defends the need for critical engagement with ideas of moment in China's public culture, while emphasising the need for both subtlety and clarity in promoting ideas of reform under authoritarian rule. As he puts it, "the principal task of the progressive forces in contemporary China is to prevent these critiques from developing in a conservative direction (which would include attempts to move back to the old system), and also to push strongly to urge the transformation of these elements into a driving force seeking broader democracy and freedom in both China and the world".¹⁰

Wang is highly influential among the growing numbers of socially engaged intellectuals and students in China who identify with what has come to be called 'New Left' thinking. This should come as no surprise since he is regarded by his supporters and critics alike as a contemporary Chinese pioneer of this mode of thinking, with its characteristic emphasis on grassroots social mobilisation towards greater

social security and equity in the process of China's rapid economic transition. In this regard, like many prominent intellectuals in China, Wang frequently advocates the importance of speaking out on behalf of the disadvantaged and the voiceless majority. As a leading historian well versed in traditional and modern Chinese scholarship as well as recent Euro-American critical theory, he is consistently attentive to both the demands of meticulous academic research and the need for practical solutions to contemporary social problems in China. For instance, in a recent visit to his hometown of Yangzhou in the low Yangtze valley of Jiangsu province, a city with a history that extends over some two thousand years, Wang undertook field research on the enormous difficulties faced by the workers of a state-owned textile company currently in the process of 'transition' towards privatisation.

In his academic research, Wang Hui's insistence on the need for critical rigour in the use of key concepts (whether of 'democracy', 'modernity', 'freedom', 'the market', 'society,' 'globalisation', etc.) has led him to pursue a conversation with the past with the general aim of allowing the words and actions of individuals long dead to 'speak' to the present, in the hope that such trans-historical conversations will help us to detect flaws and unexamined assumptions in our present-day habits of mind. This is a laudable project that resonates with the work of contemporary thinkers such as Ashis Nandy who are also committed to the work of reflecting on the past in the hope of producing better ways of imagining the future. As an historian, Wang interrogates the assumptions that shape our understanding of the past. As a social critic, he reminds us that these assumptions are not only ideological but also powerfully entrenched in the discourses of the government, the media and the academy. In Phillip Darby's essay on Nandy in the winter 2005 issue of *Overland*, Darby observes that one issue which remains seldom debated in Australia is the unexamined logic of development, a logic that underwrites much of Australia's approach to Asia, with the result that "development has been evacuated of its political content". If we wish to put substantive political content back into the discourse of development, then Wang Hui's writings, like Nandy's, are undeniably a valuable resource.¹¹

1. See Theodore Huters, ed., *Wang Hui: China's New Order: Society, Politics and Economy in Transition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003, p.43. This edited work

features two translated essays by Wang, 'The 1989 Social Movement and the Historical Roots of China's Neoliberalism' (first published in 2000), and 'Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity' (first published in 1997).

2. Huters, ed., *Wang Hui*, p.180.
3. Huters, ed., *Wang Hui*, p.161.
4. Wang Hui, 'The New Criticism' in Chaohua Wang, ed., *One China Many Paths*, Verso, London, 2004, p.81.
5. Wang, 'The New Criticism', pp.68-69.
6. Xu Jilin, 'The Fate of an Enlightenment - Twenty Years in the Chinese Intellectual Sphere (1978-1998)' translated by Geremie R. Barmé and Gloria Davies, in Edward Gu and Merle Goldman, eds, *Chinese Intellectuals between State and Market*, RoutledgeCurzon, London & New York, 2004, p.197.
7. The term 'liberalism' (*ziyouzhuyi*) is as overdetermined in Chinese as it is in English. Intellectuals who are committed to the *political* principles of liberalism are advocates of democracy (and thus run the risk of being censored) whilst others who understand liberalism to mean economic liberalism (or neoliberalism) alone are less concerned about the prospects for democracy in China. Commenting with some incredulity on this latter type of neoliberal thinking, Wang recounts that a Chinese liberal economist once told him that "Attacks on corruption are an attack on the market - we have to tolerate the one to develop the other" (Wang, 'The New Criticism', p.68). Since 2004, numerous commentaries posted on the Chinese internet have drawn attention to how the Party is now encouraging critiques of neoliberalism despite largely maintaining, in its capacity as the state, the model of neoliberal or 'free market' development it developed in the 1990s.
8. See, for instance, Jehangir S. Pocha, 'China's New Left' in *New Perspectives Quarterly* 22:2, <digitalnpq.org/archive/2005_spring/07_pocha.html>.
9. Wang Hui, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiangde xingqi*, vol.1, (Sanlian shudian, Beijing, 2004). This four-volume work constitutes Wang's most important and substantial contribution to research on Chinese intellectual history to date. An English translation of this work is currently under consideration. A substantial and insightful review of this work by Viren Murthy, entitled, 'A Tale of Two Modernities: Wang Hui's Genealogy of Modern Chinese Thought' will be published in the April 2006 issue of *Modern Intellectual History*.
10. Huters, ed., *Wang Hui*, p.45.
11. Other publications in English by Wang Hui include: 'Fire at the Castle Gate' in *New Left Review* 6, Nov-Dec 2000, pp.69-99; 'On Scientism and Social Theory in Modern Chinese Thought' in Gloria Davies, ed., *Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2001, pp.135-156; 'China: Unequal Shares' in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2002; 'Reclaiming Asia from the West: Rethinking Global History' in *Japan Focus* at <japanfocus.org/article.asp?id=226>, 2005.

Gloria Davies teaches Chinese Studies at Monash University. She is editor of *Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry* (2001) and co-editor (with Chris Nyland) of *Globalisation in the Asian Region: Impacts and Consequences* (2004). She has a forthcoming book entitled *Worrying About China*.

China Ascendant

MATTHEW LAMB

Paul Monk: *Thunder from the Silent Zone: rethinking China*
(Scribe, \$35, ISBN 1920769374)

It is rare for a work of political analysis to have me running to the video store. But Paul Monk's take on the two Chinese films, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* (2000) – in which the first is shown to be a work of communist propaganda, while the second is a subversive retelling of the same historical story – had me racing to Trash Video, over in Brisbane's West End, faster than Bob Brown being expelled from parliament before China's Communist President Hu Jintao could address the House.

What hooked me, however, was not this film critique, but the analysis presented in the first part of the book. The first chapter evaluates the perspective represented by Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' hypothesis, in which the emerging power of China is seen as an imminent threat to the dominance of Western civilisation, led by the United States. The second chapter evaluates the perspective represented by Michael Mann and Niall Ferguson and the hypothesis of 'Imperial Overstretch', in which the United States is considered on the verge of collapse because of its many, often unjustifiable and unsustainable interventions and occupations around the world. And China is the emerging superpower that, it is said, will fill this coming void.

"The problem with much of the conventional wisdom on the subject," Monk states, "is that it is based on little more than linear extrapolations, decades into the future, of raw and unexamined recent growth rates." Monk refers to this "simplistic and overawed" way of thinking as the Linear Ascent Model (LAM). And in the third chapter he criticises various uses of this model, from those who claim that China will imminently supersede the United

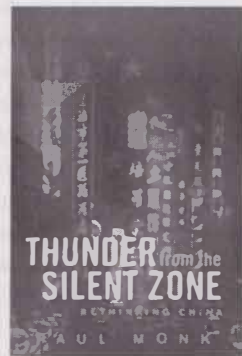
States on the world stage to those who think it is a 'paper tiger' on the verge of collapse.

Monk manages to reorient the debate about China away from the fate of the United States. He globalises the debate and then brings the focus down to examining what practical role Australia can play. It is worth reading the book for the first part alone; but it is the remainder of the book, in which Monk applies the clear-sightedness won in the first part, which makes this an essential work.

The final two parts of the book discuss Chinese culture and the modern world, and democracy and human rights (or the lack thereof) in China. But these essential discussions can only be measured against the critical assessment, regarding the question of China and Taiwan, which is the centrepiece of the book.

"In a number of ways," Monk states, "the future of Taiwan will tell the story of the future of China." Will China eventually recognise the sovereignty of Taiwan as an independent democratic state? Or will it use force to assert its own perceived sovereignty over Taiwan? The potential geopolitical ramifications of the latter strategy – especially considering Taiwan's growing relationship with the United States and Japan – are obvious. Monk makes a cogent case for not accepting this outcome as inevitable; and he suggests ways to create a paradigm shift that will allow China to peacefully recognise Taiwan as an independent democratic state. Moreover, he argues how China can do this as the first essential step toward its own democratisation.

Matthew Lamb is a freelance writer, living, studying and working in Brisbane.



MOTHERLOAD

Leslie Cannold: *What, no baby? Why women are losing the freedom to mother and how they can get it back* (Curtin University Press, \$29.95, ISBN 1920731881)

Virginia Haussegger: *Wonder Woman: The myth of 'having it all'* (Allen & Unwin, \$26.95, ISBN 1741144108)

Anne Manne: *Motherhood: how should we care for our children?* (Allen & Unwin, \$29.95, ISBN 1741143799)

IN HER RECENT book, *Motherhood: How should we care for our children?*, Anne Manne writes that it's sometimes possible to "observe a precise moment and place when one age gives way to another". The books reviewed here, including Manne's, suggest the dire need for new thinking about and policy on parenting and the related fertility decline in Australia.

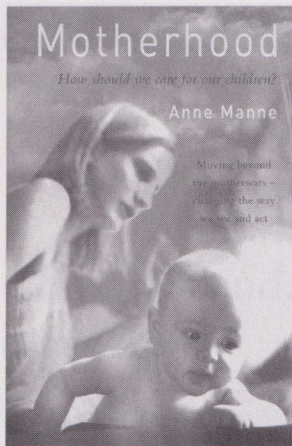
Virginia Haussegger's article, 'The sins of our feminist mothers', published on the *Age* opinion page in 2002, marks a defining moment in this social conversation. In this piece, Haussegger, an ABC journalist and news presenter, declared the ire she felt about her childlessness, attributing it to the feminist lie that she could 'have it all'. Lamenting that "none of our purple-clad, feminist mothers thought to tell us the truth about the biological clock", she announced her anger about being "daft enough to believe that female fulfilment came with a leather briefcase". The *Age* counted Haussegger's article as "the opinion piece published in recent years that has generated more response than all others".

Wonder Woman: The myth of 'having it all' is the follow-up book, written by Haussegger in order to fill what she perceives to be a gap in the market. She writes:

Why aren't we talking about the issues that are central to the lives of women in their twenties, thirties and forties? Issues of fertility and procrastination; of choice and chance; ambition and career; of finding love in seemingly loveless times . . . of coping a gob full of patriarchy in the workplace . . . of questioning feminism and its unintended outcomes and of contemplating our failure in the quest to 'have it all'.

Containing chapters on the difficulties of modern coupling, IVF and women who are 'childless by choice', *Wonder Woman* wades into sensitive and hitherto typically private discussions. It thus gives voice to what Haussegger calls the 'silent army' of women who think they're alone but who actually represent the face of declining fertility in Australian society.

And yet *Wonder Woman* is a confusing read, not least because it seems Haussegger herself has not resolved the question of how to understand involuntary childlessness, let alone the issue of 'choice'. The absence of a clear argument is evidenced most clearly in her gradual dropping – without, it seems, quite realising that she has done so – her own argument that feminism is to blame. For instance,



WONDER WOMAN

The myth of 'having it all'



VIRGINIA HAUSSEGER



the book begins with some low stabs at what she calls feminism's "have-it-all mantra", moves to the claim that it is fundamental to ask ourselves what role feminism has played in bringing us to where we are now, and ends with the poorly substantiated conclusion that we must "collectively demand a better deal". The trouble is *Wonder Woman* never ascertains from whom and for what. Consequently Haussegger's rather muddled exploration of some of the factors contributing to declining fertility in Australia is barely more convincing than her simplistic feminism-blaming argument.

Contrastingly, Leslie Cannold's *What, no baby? Why women are losing the freedom to mother and how they can get it back*, maintains a clear direction and argument throughout. In a helpful preface, Cannold, a well-known academic working in the area of applied philosophy and public ethics, outlines what the book will and won't be. Directly addressing Haussegger's claim to have been misled by feminism she writes: "It isn't feminism, but the unrelentingly sexist world that the women's movement tried, but in some cases, failed to change that is the source of the obstacles women are encountering on their way to motherhood." Unlike Haussegger, Cannold sticks to this intellectual premise as she sets about depicting what she sees as the three main reasons for circumstantial childlessness: societal ideals about 'good mothers', a lack of willing men and the unfriendliness of workplaces.

Paradoxically then, given their apparent oppositionality, she and Haussegger cover very similar terrain – though Cannold's discussion of involuntary childlessness is more thoughtful and better struc-

tured than Haussegger's. Drawing on interviews with Australian and American women and a wide range of international and Australian research, she provides considerable insight into the significant barriers between women and motherhood, including, for instance, a discussion of the increasing discrepancy between tertiary-educated women and their less-educated male counterparts.

Finally, Cannold suggests the urgent need to reshape our work lives and expectations in order to address the problem of declining fertility. *What, no baby?* is sometimes clumsy and repetitive and Cannold's informal and overly familiar way of addressing readers, grating, but her consistent arguments ensure the book makes an important contribution to debate about childlessness and parenting in the contemporary era.

The need to reshape our work lives – including our epoch's peculiar obsession with work – is also at issue in Anne Manne's *Motherhood*. Indeed, the question of having time – time for children, walks in the country, to do our own chores – lies at the heart of this passionate and carefully argued book. Easily the best written of the three discussed here, *Motherhood* was the outcome of Manne's thinking, reading and listening over some fifteen years. It is thus a testament to the author's own hunch that a "varied life, in which hard work is balanced by the humble, deep and pure pleasure of everyday life" may improve the quality of one's work, as well as one's life.

Deriving considerable power from Manne's elegant writing, *Motherhood* is also characterised by a scholarly depth absent from both Haussegger and Cannold's books. Divided into three parts,

'Feminism and the problem of motherhood', 'Taking children seriously' and a third on motherhood in the new capitalist era, the book covers a wide range of arguments, including debates about feminism, child development and the rise of capitalism. It does this, however, with such a lightness of touch that it is easy to engage in the potted history of feminism contained in the first part or the survey of the literature on infant-mother attachment in the second.

Intellectually easy at least. As a mother with two children in part-time care, I found Manne's fair-minded but ultimately deeply critical discussion of the effects of childcare, painful reading. And yet as she argues, it is morally wrong to dismiss findings about the negative effects of childcare on the basis that such findings make women feel guilty and are designed to force them back into the traditional roles as homemakers. What is needed, Manne argues, is a way of thinking, a 'maternal feminism' that neither oppresses women by excluding their needs, nor oppresses children, who are after all unable to speak for themselves – no matter how much capitalism has tried to reinvent them as newly independent, resilient and invulnerable. Making clear how convenient feminism can be to capitalism, *Motherhood* demonstrates that children are being sacrificed to the demands of contemporary capitalism which requires the lives, minds and full pockets of two breadwinners and a host of carers – rather than parents – to raise them.

In the concluding chapter Manne argues that the fertility crisis constitutes an opportunity to change social policy for the better. Like Cannold, she recommends shifting to some of the policies now in practice in Sweden and France: reduced working hours for parents with children under 8, longer parental leave entitlements, the choice between a paid childcare place and a parenting payment. Despite a strong preference for familial care she is balanced in her portrayal of future options for caring for our children, outlining for example, some of the ways formal childcare could be improved.

Illuminating and important as the book is, however, it is flawed as a result of Manne's tendency to overemphasise capitalism's devaluation of motherhood. Where Cannold examines our society's idealisation of motherhood, Manne seems almost to present herself as its sole defender, as though the majority of mothers have given in to the pull of work and the desire for 'McChildren', delivered

by Caesarean, bottle-fed and handed over to the child-care centre at six weeks old. This not only creates a false impression (about a third of women stay home full-time and another third are 'adaptive', balancing work and family over their children's pre-school years), it also means that Manne, who stayed at home until her children were in school, seems sometimes to speak from a high horse. What's more, by failing to grapple adequately with the reality that capitalism's denigration of motherhood coexists with older and still oppressive, gender-biased beliefs about 'good mothers', Manne risks being shouted down by feminists who might otherwise have been persuaded by her iconoclastic, but also compassionate and well-justified arguments. Consequently, the book's claim to move us "beyond the motherwars" seems a trifle premature. Rather, discussion about the parenting (and non-parenting) of today – with its far-reaching implications for the people and nation we will become – has only just begun.

Ceridwen Spark is researching family and transnational adoption at Monash University.

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Empathy and Vanity

DANIEL ROSS

Maria Tumarkin: *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy* (MUP, \$34.95, ISBN 0522851770)

Maria Tumarkin has visited a number of locations scarred by tragedy: Shanksville, Pennsylvania, where the ‘fourth’ plane came down on September 11; the site of the 2002 Bali bombs; the theatre in Moscow besieged by Chechen separatists; Port Arthur; Sarajevo, among others. This quest is presented as a search for significance, an attempt to weigh the gravitas of each location, to comprehend what such places have to tell us, beyond cliché but equally beyond any omniscient ‘grand theorising’. With her concept of ‘traumascapes’, Tumarkin intends to capture something of the infinite ambiguity and interpretability of places that seem left to endlessly mourn a haunting pain that resists all exorcism.

Tumarkin confesses her abhorrence for tourism, but there is an inescapable touristic voyeurism about her project. She proceeds doggedly from one traumascapescape to another, suffering intellectual crises and emotional distress, at each one feeling her way into the situation. These empathic attempts can at times appear contrived, but this may be less a failing of the author than of the project: Tumarkin, like well-meaning tourists everywhere, forces herself to feel something in places she is only visiting, passing through, on the way to the next spot on the itinerary.

An even more common feature of tourism than voyeurism, however, is the narcissistic need tourists have to appear at the centre of all their holiday snaps, intended as proof they have been to more interesting places than have those friends they force to endure their display. Tumarkin evinces a similar need to portray herself at the centre of the traumascapes she paints, signaled first of all by the incessant use of the first person pronoun. Readers of *Traumascapes* are, like the friends and relatives of conventional travelers, forced to sit through the aftermath of the tour, the record of places visited, the tales of people encountered, the discoveries of cultural difference, and accounts of moments that are, almost inevitably, terribly *meaningful*.

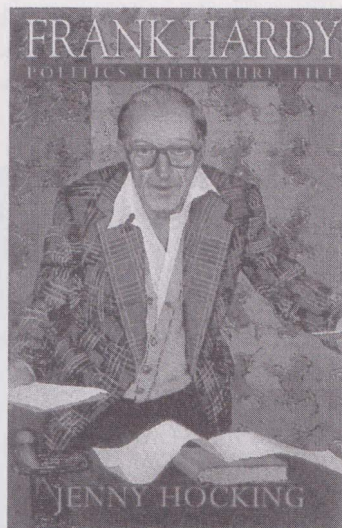
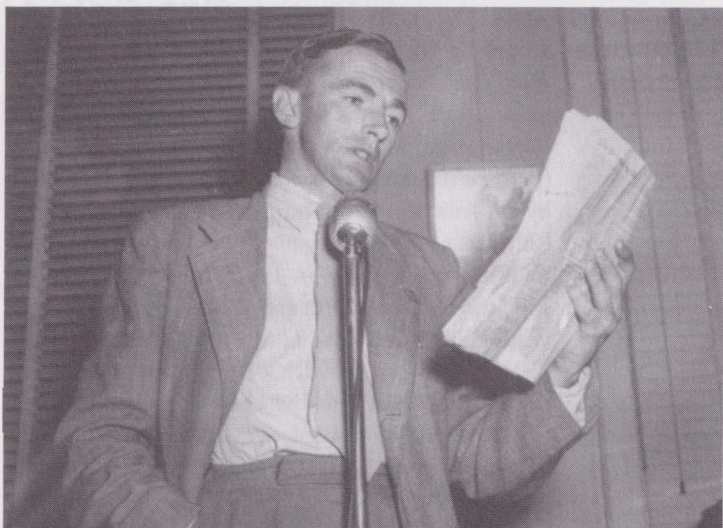
The tourist has the advantage over the author, of course, that nobody really expects them to comprehend very much about the places they have

been. In Tumarkin’s case, however, and especially because of the nature of her chosen locations, the reader expects some real work of interpretation. In *Traumascapes*, however, this work rarely gets going before the narrative zigzags away into another personal tale, or another description of yet another ‘site’ suffused with pathos. This disappointment is reinforced by another stylistic flaw: the overuse of questions without answers. There is virtue in this curtailment of explanation – we are permitted to marvel at the complexity of the things themselves and their resistance to our intellectual efforts – yet the feeling remains that there must be more to say, leaving the reader somewhat frustrated.

This is compounded by inconsistencies within the jumble of ideas laid before us: we are initially offered a quote begging us not to come to Sarajevo in search of messages for humanity; next Tumarkin tells us she has not gone there in search of such messages; finally we are informed that the Sarajevans resisted the siege “for us”, for Europe and for the rest of the world, in order that “now we know it’s possible”. The fate of Flight 93 that crashed into a Pennsylvanian field is interpreted from a similarly and explicitly sacrificial perspective: its significance lies in the fact that the passengers and crew “had a part to play in choosing the time and place of their death”. Confronted with the possibility that memorials may in fact contribute to forgetting rather than remembering, her positive counter-example is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, but no attention is paid to the fact this lists only the names of all the *American* dead. Such interpretations are utterly questionable, but they also reflect Tumarkin’s need to do precisely what she claims to want to avoid – to find messages for humanity, messages that, because she constantly cuts short her analysis, are often conventional, if not indeed predictably sentimental.

We are in the end left with Tumarkin’s concluding claim that she was transformed by her project. She went to all these places, stood at them, and was compelled to write and to crave writing. Rather than being impressed or moved by this assertion, unfortunately, the reader is made unintentionally uncomfortable: a set of traumascapes proffered as ‘Landscapes with suffering’ appear upon closer inspection to resemble a series of lovingly crafted self-portraits that might have been titled ‘Tourist with typewriter’.

Daniel Ross is the author of *Violent Democracy* (CUP, 2004).



A Contrarian Life

JEFF SPARROW

Jenny Hocking: *Frank Hardy: Politics, Literature, Life* (Lothian, \$39.95, ISBN 0734408366)

I know you'd share my feelings about the Iraq slaughter: in all the millions of words printed about that famous victory, how many about the thousands of Iraqi women and children killed and maimed? And now, in the aftermath of tens of thousands starving and freezing to death, and that fucking Bush washing his hands like a latter-day Pontius Pilate (who'd be a saint by comparison) . . .

The words belong to Frank Hardy and, though they refer to another war and an earlier Bush, there's something still slightly eerie in their immediacy, as if the crackly old 78 you found in the attic suddenly filled your speakers with hip-hop beats.

Jenny Hocking's biography of Hardy carries the subtitle *Politics, Literature, Life*. Its achievement lies in tracing the relationship between all three elements, without reducing its subject to any one of them.

Hocking reminds us that Hardy, too often remembered only for *Power Without Glory*, actually published nine other full-length books, twelve short-story collections and six plays. He was a multi-talented writer with a multimedia career: a Logic-winning script writer (he used the award

ceremony to taunt Nine's proprietor Frank Packer) who regularly worked the other side of the camera on the ABC game show *Would You Believe?*, he also wrote a long-running column for the *Australasian Post*, bested Tex 'Tall Tale' Tyrell at the Australian Yarn Spinning Championship, hosted a radio show for 3AK and penned a pop song ('Sydney Town') that entered the top ten in 1965.

It is not quite the corpus you'd expect from a drab social realist, and it suggests a correspondingly contrarian life. Hocking covers the familiar details of Hardy's development: his radicalisation during the Depression, his decision to become a writer after serving in an Army Education unit with Vane Lindesay and Ambrose Dyson, and of course the *Power Without Glory* case, about which she exhumes some startling new material relating to Hardy's composite characters.

But she also delights in the incongruities of his later years, such as his spectacularly unlikely affair with the Greek singer Nana Mouskouri or his 1986 arrest during a reading in a pub for unpaid parking fines. On that occasion, a group of drinkers rescued him from the divvy van, with Doc Neeson from the oz-rock band The Angels opening the door and saying, 'Step out, comrade!' While the Tactical Response Group tried to quell the developing riot, two working-class legends enjoyed a quiet beer in the back bar.

Perhaps most interestingly, Hocking's book shows how closely Hardy's major texts related to

concrete political interventions. *Power Without Glory*, of course, was planned by the Communist Party to shatter the prestige of the ALP powerbroker John Wren, a task in which it succeeded beyond all expectations. His *But the Dead are Many* reflected the internal struggle taking place within the CPA over the nature of Stalinism, while *The Unlucky Australians* brought, with considerable sensitivity, the burgeoning land-rights struggle to mainstream attention. As Hocking notes, “where [Hardy] differed from less sophisticated political writers was in his determination to render his own role highly visible to his readers, and to stress throughout the primacy of Aboriginal agency”.

In his life, Hardy was neglected by the literary establishment, shunned by universities and writers’ festivals, and denied government funding on explicitly political grounds. The animosity continues, in some quarters at least, to pursue him beyond the grave, with Gerard Henderson recently condemning Hocking’s study as a hagiography and denouncing the Australia Council for giving her the money to

write it. One doesn’t expect much from Henderson (as Hardy’s comrades might have said, from each according to his ability) but the claim that *Frank Hardy: Politics, Literature, Life* glosses over the question of Stalin is particularly mendacious, since Hocking explicitly identifies *But the Dead are Many* (perhaps the most self-lacerating *mea culpa* produced by any Australian communist) as Hardy’s most critically acclaimed novel.

What really sticks in the craw of the Hendersons today (just as it enraged their counterparts of years gone by) is that Hardy’s radicalism survived his disenchantment with official communism and that, rather than join the chorus line of well-paid ex-leftists, he continued haranguing street corners on behalf of the Unemployed Workers Union until well into the 1990s.

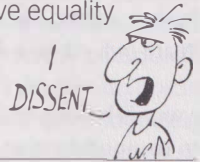
Even among progressives, Hardy remains unfairly neglected. Hopefully, Hocking’s fine biography will inspire a new generation to re-examine his work.

Jeff Sparrow is an author and *Overland*’s reviews editor.

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A New Life for Shaw

MICHAEL WILDING

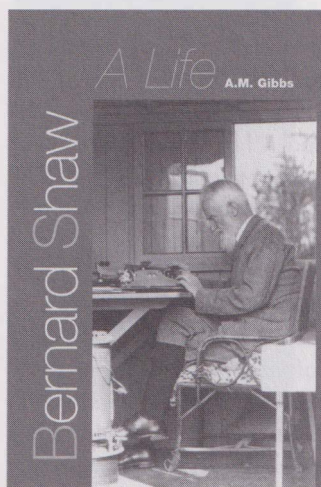
A.M. Gibbs: *Bernard Shaw: A Life* (UNSW Press, \$59.95, ISBN 0868408190)

In the canon of socialist writers, before postmodern theory attempted to abolish both canons and socialism, George Bernard Shaw was one of the major figures. A.M. Gibbs's substantial new biography meticulously explores Shaw's career from his voluminous connections in the world of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century radicalism through to his enshrinement as an icon of the modern theatre.

Shaw was born in Ireland into a middle-class Protestant family. A number of his uncles and cousins emigrated to Australia – one, Charles MacMahon Shaw became secretary and manager of the Metropolitan Golf Club in Melbourne and wrote a memoir of the family, *Bernard's Brethren* (1939). Another cousin, Mrs Cashel Hoey, married to the London agent-general for Victoria, edited the text of Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* for its English edition.

Shaw settled in London in 1876 and established himself as a music and theatre critic and book reviewer. At the same time he immersed himself in radical politics, initially with H.M. Hyndman's Marxist revolutionary Socialist Democratic Federation, but soon transferring to the more ameliorative and gradualist Fabian Society, serving on its executive committee from 1885–1911, and editing and contributing to *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889). The Fabians were the respectable upper-middle-class face of socialism. Its members were frequently public-school masters, academics, and the rebellious and socially concerned offspring of landed and establishment families. Needless to say, their policies were refreshingly radical compared with the current agenda of twenty-first-century Australian and British labour parties. Shaw rapidly established himself as an effective and popular public speaker and debater, espousing equality of income, the abolition of private property, and women's rights. With less success he wrote five novels. And he began writing the first of his fifty plays.

He was already a successful journalist and polemicist before his theatrical career took off. His first play did not receive public performance until he was 35. But from then on, though he continued



to write politically, with such notable works as *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism* (1925), it was as a dramatist that he became best known. His fame was international: indeed for years, as he pointed out, he made more money from Central European and American productions than

from British. The British critics continually claimed that he wrote dialogues, conversations, but not well-rounded plays.

The nineteenth-century theatre, much like the theatre today, was essentially middle-class low-brow entertainment. Romance, melodrama, comedy and farce were the staples. Shaw retained the comedy, but introduced ideas. With the support of William Archer and Harley Granville Barker, and the precedent of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov, he introduced thought, debate and controversy into the British drama. The times were right. The emergence of the 'new woman', university educated for the first time, demanding the vote and sexual freedom, participating actively and effectively in political debate, was an increasingly vocal social phenomenon of the late Victorian and Edwardian era. Shaw knew many of the participants and recognised the importance of the issues along with a whole range of current radical preoccupations. He also recognised their dramatic potential. His plays dealt with the emerging feminism, votes for women (*Press Cuttings*), militarism (*Arms and the Man*), prostitution (*Mrs Warren's Profession*), class demarcations (*Pygmalion*), armaments manufacture (*Major Barbara*), the situation of Ireland (*John Bull's Other Island*) and the vacuous irresponsibility of the leisured class (*Heartbreak House*).

“First, O sex-obsessed Biographer, get it into your mind that you can learn nothing about your biographees from their sex histories,” Shaw wrote in his autobiographical *Sixteen Self Sketches*. Professor Gibbs dutifully quotes the passage, but remains undeterred from offering a comprehensive survey of Shaw’s amorous involvements. There were many relationships, not necessarily sexually consummated. Marx’s daughter Eleanor, William Morris’s daughter May, the socialist and Theosophist Annie Besant, the actresses Ellen Terry and Mrs Patrick Campbell all appreciated his charm. At the age of 42 Shaw married the wealthy Irish heiress and Fabian, Charlotte Payne-Townshend, but the philanderings are traced well into his seventies.

Shaw was never afraid to be controversial. Indeed, he rather relished it. But he took his stands on principle, even at the risk of unpopularity. His polemic opposing Britain’s involvement in the First World War, *Common Sense About the War* (1914), was a bravely outspoken intervention and lost him many friends. His momentary admiration for Mussolini remains somewhat problematic, but Mussolini had

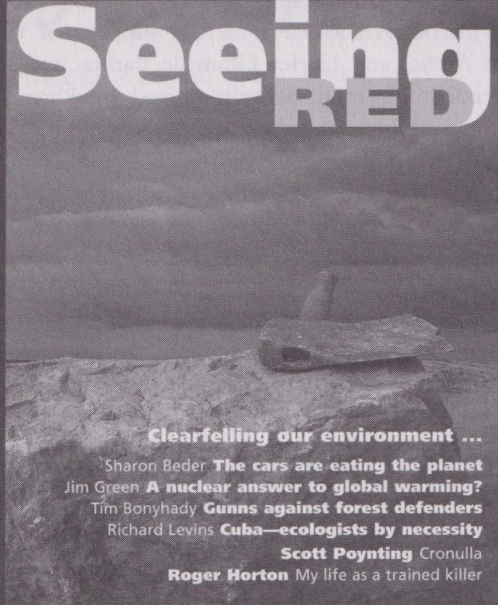
his socialist antecedents. He stuck to and proclaimed his vegetarianism – another strand of radicalism, shared with Percy Bysshe Shelley and Jack Lindsay. And he coined some memorable aphorisms, notably ‘Those that can, do; those that can’t, teach’, and ‘Life wasn’t meant to be easy’, which Malcolm Fraser notoriously borrowed.

The tone of *Bernard Shaw: A Life* is consistently restrained and scholarly, but there is nonetheless a committed agenda. Gibbs is concerned to refute the “reductive, trivialising and condescending” approach taken by Michael Holroyd in his 1988 biography. He is not primarily concerned to explore the complexities and contradictions of Shaw’s socialism. For that the curious reader needs to turn to two seminal works of Marxist literary criticism, Christopher Caudwell’s essay in *Studies in a Dying Culture* (1938) and Alick West’s *A Good Man Fallen Among Fabians*.

Michael Wilding is a Sydney writer. Michael Wilding’s latest book is *Wild Amazement* (Central Queensland University Press, 2006).

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Labor in Vain? Losing & Lament in Howard's Decade

NICK DYRENFURTH

Annabel Crabb: *Losing It: The Inside Story of the Labor Party in Opposition* (Picador, \$25, ISBN 0330422162)

Mark Latham: *The Latham Diaries* (MUP, \$39.95, ISBN 0522852157)

Wayne Swan: *Postcode: The Splintering of a Nation* (Pluto Press, \$26.95, ISBN 1864033606)

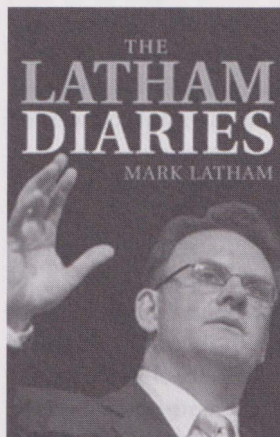
John Wanna and Paul Williams (eds): *Yes, Premier: Labor Leadership in Australia's States and Territories* (UNSW Press, \$39.95, ISBN 0868408409)

. . . the Labour Party, starting with a band of inspired Socialists, degenerated into a vast machine for capturing political power, but did not know how to use that power when attained except for the profit of individuals . . . Such is the history of all Labour organisations in Australia, and not because they are Australian, but because they are Labour.

Vere Gordon Childe, *How Labour Governs*

CHILDE'S LAMENT OF 1923 was not the first, but remains perhaps the most famous example in a tradition of accusing Labor of betrayal and timidity. As Don Rawson suggested in his 1966 *Labor in Vain*, "For better or worse [Labor] has already survived at least forty years of pronouncements that it has run its course. Such views are now more common than ever, and moreover there is more to be said for them than in the past".¹ Nowadays however, as the majority of the books under review here testify, idealistic regret within the Party has given way to an all-consuming desire for government. The old Labor axiom 'the ballot is the thing', modernised by Gough Whitlam's reproach to Party ideologues, that "only the impotent are pure", has morphed into Labor's sole *raison d'être*. This is clearly unsustainable.

Mark Latham's *Diaries* is a personalised version of Childe's critique. The *Diaries* were received last year in a chorus of criticism, and were condemned as bitter, hate filled and unproductive bile. In an astute review, John Button warned that it is for "mature readers", while acknowledging its clear faults.² Latham's *Diaries* are relentlessly hypocritical, bemoaning personal attacks and vacuous gossip while relentlessly launching such attacks and spreading such gossip. This is a self-absorbed and self-justifying work: "My commitment to the cause was destroyed by the bastardry of others". Yet Latham's angry



polemic and the howls of the self-interested media and political establishment mask the unpalatable reality that Latham has put his finger on many of Labor's modern problems.³ Most critics and Party members are aware of Labor's internal dysfunction and unrepresentative structures, created and perpetuated in part by the culture of ossified factionalism. (A culture which Latham both benefited from and helped to perpetuate during his own time in the Party. Like John Howard, Latham never really worked outside of organised politics.)

Beyond Latham's reflexive hypocrisy, self-aggrandisement and Third Way homilies, the *Diaries* are a refreshingly honest series of insider observations and off-beat epigrams: "Opposition politics feels like dog shit on the boot of democracy". Whatever the Left thought of his problematic anti-statist collectivism, Latham was the foremost Labor intellectual of his time. Faced with the seemingly unrelenting tide of economic globalisation and the atomisation of social life, he attempted to map out a modern, social-democratic program. His sense that the devolution of power should be the future of Left politics – "In my eyes, it didn't make sense for the Left to condemn McDonald's but to support Centrelink – both were large-scale organisations that treat people as clients, not citizens" – is not entirely mistaken. For a time in 2004 he roused the spirits of Australian progressives, mainly because, unlike his predecessor and successor, and *bête noire*, Kim Beazley, he abhorred the conservative oppositional strategy of "pissing on them and pissing off". He also brought something of the larrikin back into politics. When unionists demonstrated outside Parliament House in August 1996, Latham ruminated: "Part of me wanted to join in, to grab a sledge hammer and rip and tear against the Tories and their tin-pot Parlia-

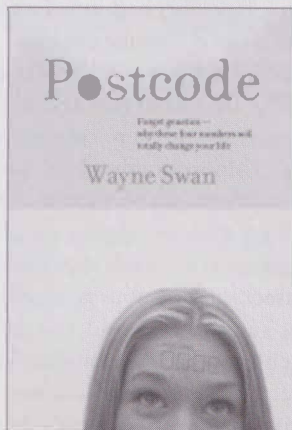
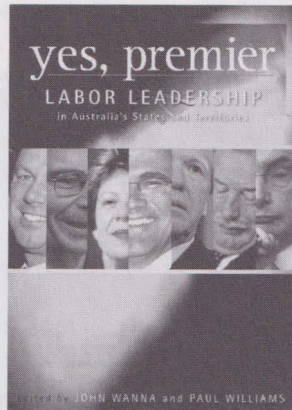
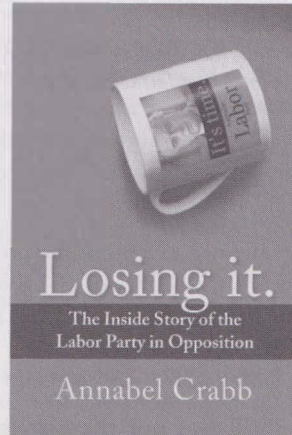
ment. But I walked away, all neat and respectable . . . I know how those blokes feel, and good on them for having a go. The shame is they have copped it in the media big time.” Whilst I don’t wish to fall back upon romanticism there is something in Latham’s working-class ‘code of honour’: as he insisted, the brutal tactics employed against a suicidal Labor MP Greg Wilton have no place in a social democratic or working-class organisation ostensibly concerned with compassion.

For all his strengths he was a poor modern politician: not for Latham Max Weber’s “strong and slow boring of hard boards”. As the *Diaries* testify he possesses a hopelessly black and white view of individuals. While sociable, he lacked social skills and people management: colleagues are described as “sewer rats”. It is truly remarkable that he led the ALP in such an age of sanitised anti-politics. In the end Latham couldn’t internally or externally resolve the deep contradictions of self and society, something which Howard, free of “existentialist angst”, does with ease.⁴ A hyper-narcissist, Latham cared deeply about our atomised and mutuality-free society, media voyeurism, public apathy and the dumbing down of political culture, and bemoaned the “dancing bears” of the Murdoch press. But he sold the diaries’ newspaper rights to the Murdoch “evil empire”. It is impossible to reconcile Latham’s social capital concerns with his attachment to economic rationalism. To most Left thinkers, neo-liberalism has perpetuated the decay of social capital. By the end of the book, a moderately apologetic Latham recants his “ladder of opportunity”: “One of my mistakes was to promote the importance of aspirational politics”.⁵

Ironically then the ‘third wayer’ Latham’s final analysis concurs with the socialist Childe: Labor is structurally and morally beyond redemption: “I no longer regard Labor as a viable force for social justice in this country. Its massive cultural and structural problems are insoluble. While the Labor machine is still capable of winning elections, it will not deliver on its original promise for a fair society.”

Latham’s rise and rapid demise did however create a mini-industry spurting pre-emptive biographies, profiles and political obituaries. Journalist Annabel Crabb’s *Losing It* falls somewhere in between these. Though it deals with the totality of Federal Labor’s decade of opposition, the spectre of Latham looms large, unbalancing the book. For better or worse it was Beazley and Simon Crean who led the Party

Where is the modern day Ian Turner, Brian Fitzpatrick or Jim Cairns? Labor desperately needs such radicals and idealists back in the fold, or the situation will deteriorate further.



for eight of its nine years in Opposition. In Crabb's opinion, "the Coalition have successfully appropriated all the good bits of the Hawke/Keating legacy, and left all the nasty bits for Labor. Labor has allowed it to happen". Labor has been left internally fixated and politically irrelevant. Crabb boldly asks: "Are we witnessing the strange death of Australian Labor?" Unfortunately there is no attempt to engage with this question let alone answer it. *Losing It* is really a loosely fitting series of comments written during Crabb's time as political reporter at the *Age*. While a readable chronicle, there is no solid core of political analysis, or even a clear purpose.

A prominent target of Latham's *Diaries* is the so called "rooster", Labor's Shadow Treasurer Wayne Swan, author (with significant assistance from political adviser Dennis Glover) of a new study of inequity and poverty: *Postcode*. Swan ably demonstrates how inequity and poverty now develop and function, and proposes some concrete solutions to these problems. But much of Swan's work is classic right-wing labourism, updated to the 'realities' of the neo-liberal age, the supposed need for governments to be "steering the boat, not rowing it". He advocates a passionate but unconvincing Americanism, warning us against the Howard Government's aversion to the American system of low wages and flimsy safety nets. "I believe in capitalism," declares Swan. "I celebrate the fact that today many Australians are becoming wealthy . . . We are a predominantly middle-class nation; we want the poor to rise and the wealthy to be respected." "I don't want a society in which people with \$20 million harbour side mansions look down on the homeless and low-paid," he says. "That's not the Australian way."

The obvious question that arises is how on earth has Swan managed to disconnect the logic of the American socio-economic and political systems, admiring American democracy while deploring the inequality that is also so characteristic of that nation? Swan fails to appreciate the incompatibility of a miraculous egalitarian culture free-floating alongside individualist economic policy. How can you deify upward social mobility and aspirational home ownership and expect people to behave in an egalitarian fashion? As Latham muses, "If people do not practice mutual trust and cooperation in their lives, they are not likely to support the redistributive functions of government. If they have no interest or experience in helping their neighbours, why

would they want the public sector to help people they have never met?"

Swan's text also represents an attempt to reinvent the sociological wheel. Class inequality and division are now re-branded as 'postcodes'. But historians and sociologists interested in class have always pointed to its identifiable geographic dimensions. Swan's use of the language of Australian egalitarianism – the 'fair go' and 'mateship' – is pleasing, but if Swan really wants to preserve or resuscitate Australian egalitarianism he will have to think far more deeply about the nature of a possible contemporary politico-cultural sea change.⁶

In stark contrast to the tone of the books by Latham, Crabb and Swan is the collection of essays examining the unprecedented success of state Labor parties: *Yes, Premier*. This timely publication asks "Why have the seemingly unelectable Labor parties of yesteryear now become so electorally dominant at the state and territory level?" The major fault of the collection is a lack of attention accorded to the practical benefits given to state Labor by the federal dominance of Howard. But the collection as a whole is an excellent chronicle of this phenomenon, featuring a chapter on each Premier or Chief Minister and their personal and political style. *Yes, Premier* is even-handed and comprehensive if slightly politically bland and stylistically homogenised. The editors do note, though, that "how Labor [these governments] are is a moot point". Managerial state politics perhaps offers more of a warning than an example for Federal Labor.

AS LONG AS capitalism remains as the dominant system of social relations then there will be a vital role for a social-democratic Labor Party. Labor should seek to 'civilise', sometimes challenge, and never merely 'manage' capitalism. Millions of ordinary Australians depend upon this. Perhaps the most often repeated leftist charge against Labor is that it fails to understand the problems associated with capitalistic hegemony, or power. Many in the Party do understand this problem. Indeed Latham's book is a virtual testament to such thinking: "What binds the ruling class together [is] the shared interests of the conservative parties, the commercial media and other parts of the business establishment in preserving the existing order and the concentration of power in their hands". The problem is that never in the Party's history have so few within it understood

or cared to challenge such systemic and structural factors. Where is the modern day Ian Turner, Brian Fitzpatrick or Jim Cairns? Labor desperately needs such radicals and idealists back in the fold, or the situation will deteriorate further.

If it is genuinely worried about its long-term viability, the ALP must publicly press the importance of collective (not to mention egalitarian) life and institutions: practically rebuilding forms of sociality and mutuality. Verity Burgmann, noting the lack of working-class experience of Labor MPs, argues for example that “the lingua franca of the contemporary Labor Party instills no anxiety in ruling-class circles”.⁷ As Guy Rundle, among others, contends, social atomisation has structurally undermined and de-legitimised class identity and collective action.⁸ Yet contra to Rundle’s fatalism, people can act within the political realm to promote sustainable, collective forms of social life.⁹ As part of this, and in spite of the experience of Latham, the Left *needs* a Labor Party intellectually able and willing to make significant cultural and political interventions in popular politics.

Remaking (indeed reclaiming) the traditional, often classed, symbols and languages of Australian egalitarianism may provide a fruitful site of regeneration. For Howard has not only appropriated but *transformed* key terms such as the ‘battler’, ‘mateship’ and the ‘fair go’.¹⁰ Howard’s discursive hijacking has in turn had important practical effects upon the collective desire to address inequality and poverty. Political discourse holds out the promise of not only consciously reflecting class, but of changing the self-identification and behaviour of the addressed.¹¹ In my mind it is no coincidence that the ACTU’s and to a lesser extent Labor’s industrial relations ‘success’ has rested upon a mobilisation of the popular and historically working-class Australian notion of the ‘fair go’. Unfortunately for ordinary Australians, it may be that Labor is waiting for the recession it, and we, have to have; and when it comes Labor will need more than catchy slogans.

1. D.W. Rawson, ‘Preface’, *Labor in Vain*, Longman, Croydon, 1966.
2. John Button, ‘Lessons for Labor’s Tories’, *Age*, 1 October 2005.
3. This is not to say he was the first to do so. Consider for example: Robert Catley and Bruce McFarlane, *From Twee-*

dedum to Tweedledee, Australian and New Zealand Book Company, Sydney, 1974; Andrew Scott, *Fading loyalties: the Australian Labor Party and the working class*, Pluto Press, Leichhardt, 1991, and *Running on empty: ‘modernising’ the British and Australian labour parties*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000, and most recently John Button, *Beyond Belief? What Future for Labor?*, Black Inc., 2002.

4. Paul Strangio, ‘Howard, a PM with no regrets’, *Age*, 21 July 2004.
5. On ‘Latham’s Ladder’ see Verity Burgmann’s excellent critique in *Arena Magazine* 69, February–March 2004, pp.28–30.
6. See Sean Scalmer, ‘Searching for the Aspirational’, *Overland* 180, Spring 2005, pp.5–9 and ‘The Battlers versus the Elites: the Australian Right’s Language of Class’, *Overland* 154, Autumn 1999, pp.9–13; and Nick Dyrenfurth ‘Battlers, refugees and the republic: John Howard’s language of citizenship’, *Journal of Australian Studies* 84, 2005, pp.183–196.
7. Verity Burgmann, ‘Moloch’s Little Mate: the Ruling Class and the Australian Labor Party’, in Nathan Hollier, ed., *Ruling Australia: the Power, Privilege and Politics of the New Ruling Class*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2004, p.63.
8. Guy Rundle, ‘The New World We’re In’, *Arena Papers* 3, October 2005.
9. Social life, even in its postmodern, atomised character contains deep continuities, or at least parallels, with the classed structures of the nineteenth century. When a working-class politics arose it did so in the context of the nineteenth-century period of imperially grounded economic globalisation and the propagation of bourgeois values of autonomous selfhood and familial life, often enough via mediating and abstracting forms of technology such as print media. Such hegemonic workings are strikingly similar to the atomising effects to ‘the social’ Rundle identifies from the processes of economic globalisation and individuating effects of mediated technologies such as television.
10. See Nick Dyrenfurth, ‘Howard, Hegemony and Values: the Left and the Problem of Mateship’, *Arena Magazine* 79, October–November 2005, pp.16–18.
11. See Verity Burgmann, ‘Language and the Labor Tradition’, in Tim Battin (ed.), *A Passion for Politics: Essays in Honour of Graham Maddox*, Pearson, Frenchs Forest, 2005; Sean Scalmer, ‘Experience and discourse: a map of recent theoretical approaches to labour and social history’, *Labour History* 70, May 1996, pp.156–168; and Nick Dyrenfurth, ‘Class, Language and Labor Tradition: towards the synthesis of discourse and experience’, in Greg Patmore, John Shields and Nicola Balnave, eds, *The Past is Before Us: the Ninth National Labour History Conference*, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Sydney, 2005, pp.125–134.

Nick Dyrenfurth is a PhD candidate and teaches in the School of Historical Studies at Monash University. A member of the ALP, he was co-organiser of the March 2006 conference ‘Relaxed and Comfortable: Challenging John Howard’s Australia’.

Inside Gerald Murnane's Fiction

PAUL GENONI

Gerald Murnane: *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs* (Giramondo, \$24.95, ISBN 192088209X)

In a career commencing with *Tamarisk Row* (1974) Melbourne fiction writer Gerald Murnane has crafted an uncompromising body of work. The intensely personal – indeed idiosyncratic – worldview and the stylistic challenges presented by Murnane's fiction have resulted in it being described in terms such as 'unique', 'singular' or 'obsessive'. There is some truth to these claims, although Murnane's reputation for being 'difficult' is certainly overstated and sadly he has never reached the size of audience warranted by the most intriguing body of work in contemporary Australian fiction. What he has acquired, however, is a dedicated readership and ongoing critical interest.

If Murnane has written – as he declared several years ago – his last fiction, then the publication of the essays collected in *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs* is an invaluable postscript to his career. Published between 1984 and 2003 these occasional pieces first appeared in various Australian literary journals, and despite the twenty-year span they form a remarkably coherent collection. What unites the essays is Murnane's interrogation of the craft of writing fiction, and of his own practice in particular. For although individual essays make reference to Adam Lindsay Gordon and Jack Kerouac in their titles, Murnane's real subject is himself. In particular he focuses on the complex web of images which have not only been at the core of his fiction, but which also seem to form the basis of his self-identity. As he writes, "What I call true fiction is fiction written by men and women not to tell stories of their lives but to describe the images in their minds".

The labyrinthine pattern of images which cascade through Murnane's fiction will be familiar to his readers, and many of those images – grasslands, plains, birds, libraries, colours, horse racing, maps, country houses – are revisited in these essays. Indeed some of the most illuminating pieces ('Some Books are to be Dropped into Wells, Others into Fish Ponds'; 'Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs' and 'Stream System') are those wherein Murnane audaciously demonstrates the patterns by which these images are forged and linked and crafted into fiction. When read

together these essays might suggest a defensiveness on Murnane's part – as if he must justify his compulsive use of certain images – but they also reveal his confidence in asserting the validity of these images as the only means he has of expressing his highly personal worldview. And if at times Murnane's fiction reads like a form of memoir, then his memoir begins to read like fiction. Indeed it is instructive that 'Stream System', presented here as an essay, was previously included in *Velvet Waters* (1990), a collection of short fiction.

All of this may seem to be somewhat self-absorbed – and it is – but that impression is also constantly contradicted. This is achieved by the overt honesty and intensity Murnane uses to examine the serious business of writing and reading fiction, and to his self-deprecating wit that works to foreclose any prospect of narcissism or pretension. As he observes, "My experience is that all art, including all music, aspires to the condition of horse racing".

As noted Murnane has declared that he will write no more fiction, a decision that is addressed in the essay 'The Breathing Author'. And although Murnane describes elsewhere several epiphanies that led him to writing fiction (catching a glimpse of Bendigo from an elevated position; discovering that horse racing was a rich metaphor for life's possibilities; reading Kerouac's *On the Road*), he is uncharacteristically coy in discussing the revelation that led him to stop writing. As so often, however, it comes down to the images: "I had discovered certain images and certain connections between images such as seemed to reveal to me that my thirty years of writing fiction had been nothing less than a search for just that sort of discovery". Australian fiction is greatly depleted by Murnane's decision, but there is some consolation if the earnest quest for revelation that dominates his writing has in some way been rewarded.

It is difficult to think of a body of non-fiction produced by a fiction writer that is more illuminating of that writer's work, or which offers more common sense advice on the writing and reading of 'true fiction'.

Paul Genoni is a Senior Lecturer in Information Studies at Curtin University and author of *Subverting the Empire: Explorers and Exploration in Australian Fiction* (Common Ground, 2004).

Embracing the Monster

JOE GRIXTI

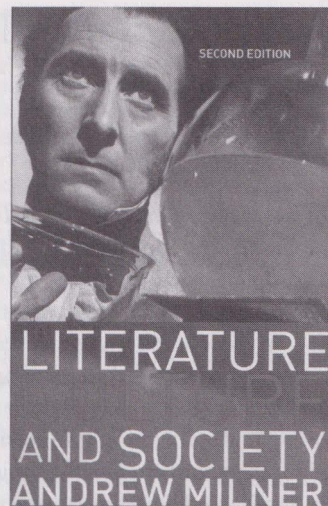
Andrew Milner: *Literature, Culture and Society* (Routledge, \$46, ISBN 0415307856)

Andrew Milner ends his substantially extended second edition of *Literature, Culture and Society* with a figurative conceit which presents the birth of cultural studies as “the tale of yet another Frankenstein monster”. “Inspired by the initial researches of Professors Williams and Hoggart,” Milner writes, “the young Stuart Hall laboured long and hard in his Birmingham workshop of filthy creation, stitching together bits of sociology and pieces of literary criticism with the thread of semiology, to produce the monster that is now cultural studies. Much of this is flawed, often hideous and loathsome. But, unlike the Western Canon, it’s alive, IT’S ALIVE!”

In some respects, Milner’s own book invites a similar assessment. Its theoretical discussion brings together a diverse range of often conflicting perspectives, and it argues for an approach to the study of literature which traditional university English departments would consider unorthodox. The book meticulously reviews and assesses alternative theoretical approaches, rejecting some elements and positions, while endorsing and appropriating others in the construction of the author’s preferred version of cultural studies – his own ‘monster creation’, as it were. In the context of the current status of cultural studies as an academic pursuit, and of the fairly broad range of competing texts recounting the discipline’s emergence and characteristics, the eclectic approach adopted and advocated by Milner does indeed come across as refreshingly lively.

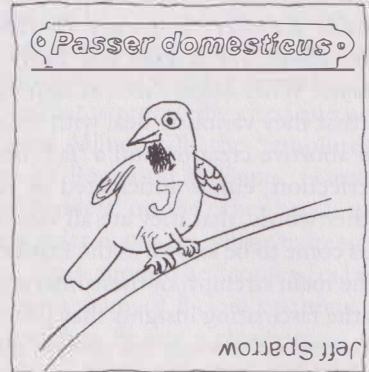
The book’s major virtue is its determined emphasis on shifting the central concerns of cultural

studies away from an exclusive focus on the semiotics of popular culture (which Milner sees as having dominated the discipline as it has grown in stature) to a re-establishment of its base in the connections between more traditional approaches to the study of literature, culture and society – in other words, in a reassessed amalgamation of literary studies and sociology. Milner’s own take on what the study of literature can and should be doing is presented as growing out of and in reaction to the very diverse theoretical approaches to textual analysis which he reviews – including liberal humanism, hermeneutics, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and world systems theory. One key influence that is repeatedly cited and acknowledged is what Milner calls the “absolutely exemplary” work of Raymond Williams. Harold Bloom and Tony Bennett, on the other hand, appear as theoretical polar opposites whose extremes are to be avoided. Thus, though he “confess[es] to some sympathy” with many of Bloom’s particular judgements, Milner sees Bloom’s glorification of “the Western Canon” as self-defeating and counterproductive, not only because of its blindness to contextual forces, but also because Bloom is so averse to the study of the popular that “he would rather that English wither on the vine than that it should ever be taught as part of cultural studies”. In a similar vein, Bennett’s insistence on the social constructedness of literature is endorsed, but his call “to substitute institutional for textual analysis, or perhaps to subsume the latter under the former” is rejected because it fails to recognise the value of



A Quiz: Do you recognize your Australian writers?

A visual exploration of our nomenclatura by Lofu Heimann



DONALD HORNE

1921–2005

TAKE HALF-A-DOZEN famous (or, in contemporary terms, ‘iconic’) Australians – Don Bradman, Kerry Packer, Slim Dusty, Judith Wright, Arthur Boyd, Patrick White.

Now separate them into those who were granted state funerals and those who weren’t. Easy, wasn’t it? Sport, entertainment and money have always rated higher than the arts in what John Howard still calls our culture.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, as long as we still recognise that the arts have value, even if we personally find other activities more appealing. But the trend over the past decade or so has been to stigmatise the arts as deviant, even subversive – verging on the unAustralian.

The more strident of the radio shock jocks and their counterparts in the print media now routinely use the word ‘intelligentsia’ as a sneering form of abuse; it is right up there with that other unanswerable insult, ‘elitist’. And of course the once-honourable concept of the public intellectual is included in the general denigration.

Last year the *Sydney Morning Herald* sought to rehabilitate the idea by asking a number of more or less prominent citizens to nominate their own lists of the top ten public intellectuals of Australia, from which a kind of national hit parade could be compiled. The results were unsurprising but a little disappointing; it seemed to me that at least some of the most mentioned names had become more polemicists than intellectuals.

In one sense they had been forced into that position: as the history-culture wars heated up, largely as a result of a self-serving campaign run by the Murdoch press, some of the participants felt they had to answer their demagogic critics in a similarly hectoring vein. The debates have become more personal and, as a result, less enlightening.

But there was a most honourable exception. Securely in the middle of the top ten sat Donald Horne, who could mount a fair claim to being the last genuine public intellectual – at least in the traditional sense.

It was not that Horne was afraid of robust debate, or that he hesitated to take a stand: he could be, and was, a devastating critic and a formidable opponent. But he was always rational and civilised about his engagements. While he loved argument for its own sake – he frequently played devil’s advocate, just to see how strong the counter arguments might be – he never allowed it to degenerate into a mere slanging match. For Horne, debates were contests of ideas, and let the best ideas win.

There were certainly areas where he would not compromise: on being appointed editor of the *Bulletin* his first act, famously, was to remove the time-honoured slogan “Australia for the white man” from the masthead – this, it should be recalled, at a time when the White Australia policy was still officially endorsed by all major parties. His republicanism became an article of faith, although he was unfailingly courteous to his monarchist opponents,



He himself was a kind of liberal conservative, a rightist progressive, and he rejoiced in the contradiction. One always felt that, like Groucho Marx, he would not have wanted to join any party that would have him as a member.

a courtesy which was not always returned.

But his views were generally eclectic and unpredictable. Both critics and admirers have characterised him as a born conservative who drifted to the Left as he grew older, but it is probably truer to say that he always embraced a belief in a decent and fair society in which the right to dissent was jealously protected. Horne was the constant; it was the society around him which moved.

He vigorously rejected John Howard's fatuous cliché about the things that united us being more important than the things that divided us: Horne gloried in diversity, in inclusiveness and acceptance. Though no Maoist, he could have echoed the chairman's dictum, "Let a thousand flowers bloom, let a thousand schools contend".

He was appalled by the so-called war on terror, both for its attack on civil liberties and for its divisiveness, and he loathed and despised Howard for exploiting it. I remember him lamenting the fact that after the first Bali bombing Howard had

not followed Queensland Premier Peter Beattie in publicly attending a mosque to make clear his unity with Islamic Australians. He dismissed the Prime Minister's belated statements about good Muslims having nothing to fear from his government as mere hypocrisy, given Howard's failure to condemn the ranting shock jocks who were his supporters.

To Horne, terrorists were merely criminals and should be treated as such; the idea of a war against terror seemed to him to be both dangerous and illogical – even insane. But then, as he cheerfully admitted, he had always found many aspects of Australia somewhat bizarre.

I first met Donald Horne when he was speaking at the National Press Club in Canberra in the 1970s. Our paths had occasionally crossed before then at social functions and at a notorious cricket match between the staff of the *Bulletin* and a pick-up team supposedly representing the English satirical magazine *Private Eye* – editor Will Rushton was in town and managed to recruit a team of layabouts, includ-

ing myself. Horne watched benevolently from the sidelines as the Packer brothers thrashed us all over the field and made a brief but unmemorable speech as we drowned our sorrows afterwards.

At that stage I had not actually read *The Lucky Country* (it was one of those books everyone talked about but few people had actually finished or understood) and was still unsure just where Horne stood in the political spectrum. He was clearly a genuine thinker, but the mere fact that he worked for the Packers, considered to be demons from the nethermost reaches of a fascist hell by all self-respecting lefties, was enough to put him on the suspect list.

By the time of the Press Club function I was less ambivalent. Horne was still a bit of a maverick, but he had aligned himself unequivocally with the forces of righteousness over the life and death of the Whitlam Government, and any Whitlamite was a friend of mine. His book, or rather manifesto, *The Death of the Lucky Country*, was not only talked about but devoured by the faithful (when the conservative Patrick Tennyson attempted a reply in *The Lucky Country Reborn* he was accused of both sophistry and plagiarism and provoked at least one public book-burning, of which the Voltairean Horne did not approve).

During question time I abandoned my usual aggressive approach and indicated my respect by addressing him as "Sir". Donald Horne, lifelong republican and egalitarian, was stopped in his tracks. "After the last few years I thought nothing could surprise me," he said. "But to be called 'Sir' by Mungo MacCallum . . ." Later we made our peace over a rather good bottle of claret.

At a time when most of the Left were in the throes of rage and despair, I was struck by his good-humoured optimism; he knew the world was often illogical and contrary, capable of vast stupidity and cruelty, but he also had an unquenchable belief in the underlying decency of humanity. You had to, he said towards the end of our session; otherwise what was the point?

He preserved this optimism into the Howard years. A couple of years ago we shared a platform at the Byron Bay Writers' Festival, from which we both discoursed on the horrors of the current regime, with

its deliberate and calculated use of racism as a political weapon. It would, Horne assured the desperate audience, pass; in the end people were too sensible to want to be governed by hate and fear for more than a few years.

A questioner referred to "the crusty old lefty", which I took as a crack at me; it turned out she was referring to Horne, who did not appreciate the label. He never took much notice of tags like Right and Left, and after the collapse of the soviets regarded them as at best meaningless and at worst misleading. He himself was a kind of liberal conservative, a rightist progressive, and he rejoiced in the contradiction. One always felt that, like Groucho Marx, he would not have wanted to join any party that would have him as a member.

But he was always a participant, never just an observer. A few years ago, when the abortive search for a new preamble to the constitution was under way, Horne submitted his version. Here it is:

A new nation, the Commonwealth of Australia, was born when six colonies under the British crown came together as a federation in 1901. That nation, now sovereign and independent, and strengthened by flows of immigrants from many nations, dedicates itself, a hundred years after its creation:

To the rule of law and to the equality under the law of all Australians;

To maintaining Australia as an active parliamentary democracy based on universal voting and freedom of opinion;

To upholding Australia as a liberal, tolerant society; To strengthening Australia as a society devoted to the wellbeing of its people;

To the belief that the ancestors of the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, as the original occupants, held a custodianship over the land, a custodianship that as Australians we have all come to share.

Thus Donald Horne's Australia – secular, inclusive, welcoming, and a pretty nice place to live. Sadly, the vision seemed to be receding when he died. And of course, he was not granted a state funeral.

Mungo MacCallum has been a social and political commentator for about forty years, nearly half of which were spent in the Canberra press gallery.

WITHER OUR LANGWIDGE?

LATE 2005 MARKED fifty years since Sidney J. Baker published his admirable work *The Australian Language*, “being an examination of the English language and English speech as used in Australia from convict days to the present, with special reference to the growth of indigenous idiom and its use by Australian writers”.

Sidney John Baker (1912–1976), is not as one might suppose Australian, but is a New Zealander from Wellington. He attended Wellington University and Victoria College, but never graduated.

During 1935 he worked as a journalist in Sydney, then London, and again in New Zealand before returning to Sydney during the Second World War to write for *ABC Weekly*. Baker was the author of two novels and was the biographer of Matthew Flinders. His interest in the English language, particularly its colloquialism, led to him producing:

- in 1941, *A Popular Dictionary of Australian Slang*
- in 1945, *The Australian Language*
- in 1953, *Australia Speaks*
- and in 1959, *The Drum*.

Since 1945, when *The Australian Language* was published, it is plain that our speech has changed. Many words have dropped out of common usage, speech mannerisms have altered, and, since 1956, television has continued to erode and replace local words with others of foreign culture. For instance, BLOKE has been pushed to the edge of extinction, losing ground steadily to GUY, a word stolen by America from England.

If we accept that the greater part of our ‘indig-

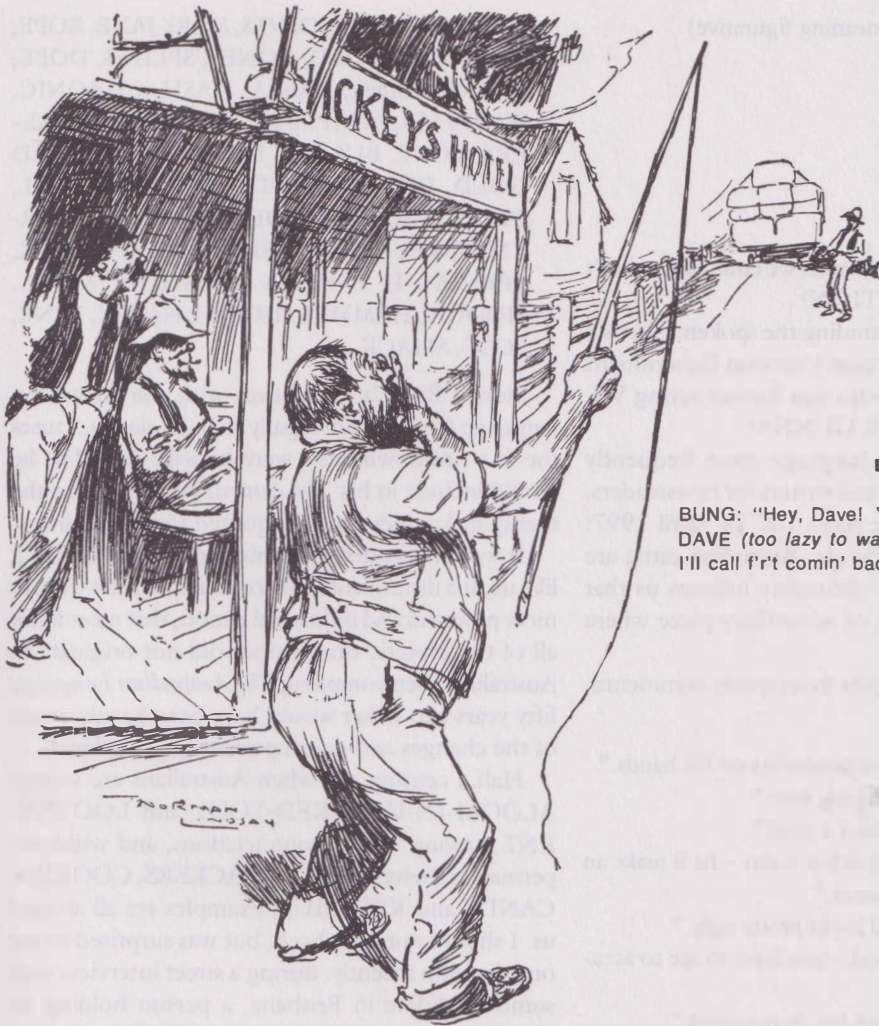
enous’ language, including slang, was bush-born, then it is not surprising that much of it has disappeared in the past half century, without being replaced by anything equivalent. Here are some of the many once-common expressions now virtually obsolete:

- BONZA meaning good or excellent
- DIG or DIGGER as a greeting
- BILLJIM and COBBER for ‘fine fellows’
- CHYACK, meaning to tease or gently jeer at
- A FAIR COW meaning an unpleasant person, event or circumstance
- TO TIZZ UP, meaning to dress smartly.

Some expressions have survived, however. DINKY DI seems to have died, but FAIR DINKUM lives on. MUG LAIR, meaning someone uncouth or vulgar, has gone, but LARRIKIN is still with us, usually pinned onto Labor party leaders.

Naturally, TREY for threepence, ZAC for sixpence, DEENER or BOB for shilling and QUID for one pound or twenty DEENERS, became obsolete overnight with the introduction of decimal currency to Australia in 1966. Curiously, no widespread slang, or nicknames, have evolved for the new coins or banknotes, with the single exception of BUCK for dollar, and that is a borrowed word, lacking originality or imagination.

It is a matter of some wonder how, in a very short time, a unique Australian vocabulary evolved, and how in an even shorter time it has changed – or why, for a reason hard to understand, words today contain ‘additives’, while others are truncated. Examples of the latter are:



EQUIPPED

BUNG: "Hey, Dave! Ye've left yer whip behind."
 DAVE (*too lazy to walk back*): "That's all right, Bill. I'll call f'r't comin' back. I got me langwidge."

- motor cars that have MAGS
- and AIR – whether air-bags or air-conditioning can be puzzling
- FREE AUTO, whatever that means (in fact the meaning is probably known only to some agency copywriter).

Other mutations are:

- THE GEE (the Melbourne Cricket Ground)
- THE PROM – Wilson's, we must presume
- TULLA for Melbourne's international airport
- THE GHAN as we call the transcontinental train named after the nineteenth-century Afghan camel drivers
- MOUNT DEE: again we presume this to be Mount Dandenong

- HER MAJ: Her Majesty's Theatre, and . . .
- THE ALL ORDS (listed in the FIN REVIEW)

The most recent such abbreviation to be heard on commercial television is MAYO which we can reasonably suspect, allowing that the four letters are heard promoting BURGERS, is mayonnaise dressing.

Perhaps the most puzzling characteristic of current Australian language is the totally unnecessary 'additives' onto words; all of the following, bar one, were created by politicians:

- exploit-ABILITY
- expect-ABILITY
- function-ALITY
- down-to-earth-NESS

- figur-AL (probably meaning figurative)
- expert-ISED
- constitution-ALITY
- persever-ATIVE
- spacious-NESS
- jurist-ICAL and . . .
- competitive-NESS.

With regard to this last example, we could ask, what's wrong with COMPETITION?

Also among those wounding the spoken word is a one-time school teacher cum Victorian Government politician of high rank who was forever saying WE WONNER AND WEAR GUNNA!

Those torturing the language most frequently are television presenters and writers for newscasters. This sample is from the ABC TV, 19 April 1997: "Because of mad cow disease, Australian cattle are filling the breech". The dictionary informs us that 'the breech' is that part of an artillery piece where the firing is done.

Here are some examples from sports commentators:

- "The coach has a lot of headaches on his hands."
- "He's just missed by a long way."
- "He almost nearly kicked a goal!"
- "The lad made a good debut today – he'll make an even better one next week."
- "That cut on the head looks pretty ugly."
- "This youngster is good – you have to see to actually behold!"
- "Jones is on the injured list, hernia-ated."

A degree of sophistication in today's Australian society could be a reason for the banishing of our slang. Although oddly, that stratum of what appears to be a growing population addicted to inhaling, injecting or swallowing toxic drugs have, at my recent count, eighty slang terms for their choice of addiction, or their FIX. These include:

CRACK, SPEED, X, DOWNERS, UPPERS, PEDS, CRYSTAL, WHIZZ, GOEY, ZIP, ICE, AMPHED, METH, OX BLOOD, MDMA, EVE, SHABU, COKE, FLAKE, SNOW, WHITE LADY, TOOT, WHITE GIRL, SCOTTY, ANGEL DUST, CECIL, FREE BASE, CRACK, C, POT, GRASS,

REEFERS, WEED, JOINTS, MARY JANE, ROPE, ACAPULCO GOLD, CONES, SPLIFFS, DOPE, SKUNK, BANG, GANJA, HASH, CHRONIC, WHIPPITS, SNAPPERS, POPPERS, PEARLERS, BOLT, BULLET, RUSH, CLIMAX, RED GOLD, DISCO BISCUITS, FANTASY, AMYL, TRIPS, TABS, PILLS, DEXIES, BLOW, CHARLIE, OKEY-DOKE, LSD, BLUNT, CRANK, SPECIAL K, ROHIES, MUSHIES, MULL, HOOCH, HAMMER, HORSE, HARRY, JUNK, SCAG, SMACK.

Sidney Baker's fascination with the Australian language (though principally with its slang), causes me to wonder whether, were he with us today, he would include in his *The Australian Language*, the eighty nicknames I've just quoted for illegal drugs.

It would of course cross his mind – since he lived, like us, at a time of cultural dominance by the world's most powerful and influential nation, that most if not all of the esoteric drug names did not originate in Australia. When compiling *The Australian Language* fifty years ago Baker would have been keenly aware of the changes and developments of his subject.

Half a century on, when Australians are saying: ALOOM-IN-UM, SKED-YOOL and LOOTEN-ENT, among other pronunciations, and when supermarket shelves offer us: CRACKERS, COOKIES, CANDY and KETCHUP, examples are all around us. I should not have been, but was surprised to see on television recently, during a street interview with some candidate in Brisbane, a person holding an election poster with the wording "He's rooting for you!" which sounds like the carnal indiscretions of certain Federal politicians we have all heard about.

Baker's conclusion, written in 1959, leaves us with this challenge:

No matter how doggedly attempts may be made to ignore Australianisms out of existence, they continually break through. The reason is that both the Australian character and the Australian language are strong enough and vital enough to survive in spite of all pressures that may seek to quench them.

Fifty years on, is this still the case?

Vane Lindesay is a Melbourne writer, designer and artist.

It would seem that the political Left has allowed the Right to steal the high ground of standards and connectedness to real life. How on earth can this happen? How can a government that helps set off the homicidal inferno of Iraq claim to be connected in any way with reality? How can a government that seeks to commodify workers claim any kind of moral or family values?

Malcolm Knox, Overland lecture 'The Case for Original Australian Fiction'

The 'Cruise Ship Australia' affair unfolded with some intriguing twists and paranoias. Williamson gave the Hamer lecture, published an abbreviated text on 12 October, and there was silence: until the Prime Minister's department contacted Williamson's agent for a full transcript on 15 October.

Brian Musgrove, 'David Williamson in the Dock'

When I have jostled with glass-tilting crowds at later openings, the relaxed style of Cintra Street is what comes back to me. Yes, of course there would have been pre-opening suppers and pre-pre-viewings, select buyers encouraged and the artist in waiting. There would have been carefully plotted assignations and meetings – we were never invited to this closeted world of the art cognescenti though we heard wondrous tales of Donald Friend being outrageous and salacious with the salad ingredients, and Margaret Olley, who was in her drinking period, going over the top. But the Sunday morning 'official' openings were for us, and that included the kids.

Thomas Shapcott, 'The Brian Johnstone Gallery'

The Opera House protest of 18 March 2003 is a story with more concentrated symbolic value than its main actors probably intended. The action itself was brave, swift and romantic; it was highly exhilarating, a great moment of political and emotional release. It was in the official reaction – a matter of immediate ruthless censorship, conviction for 'malicious damage' and protracted draconian punishment – that the affront to the state was manifest.

Sylvia Lawson, Overland lecture 'Desecration & Defacement'

In her recent book, *Motherhood: How should we care for our children?*, Anne Manne writes that it's sometimes possible to "observe a precise moment and place when one age gives way to another". The books reviewed here, including Manne's, suggest the dire need for new thinking about and policy on parenting and the related fertility decline in Australia.

Ceridwen Spark, 'Motherload'

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Mungo MacCallum, 'Donald Horne'

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