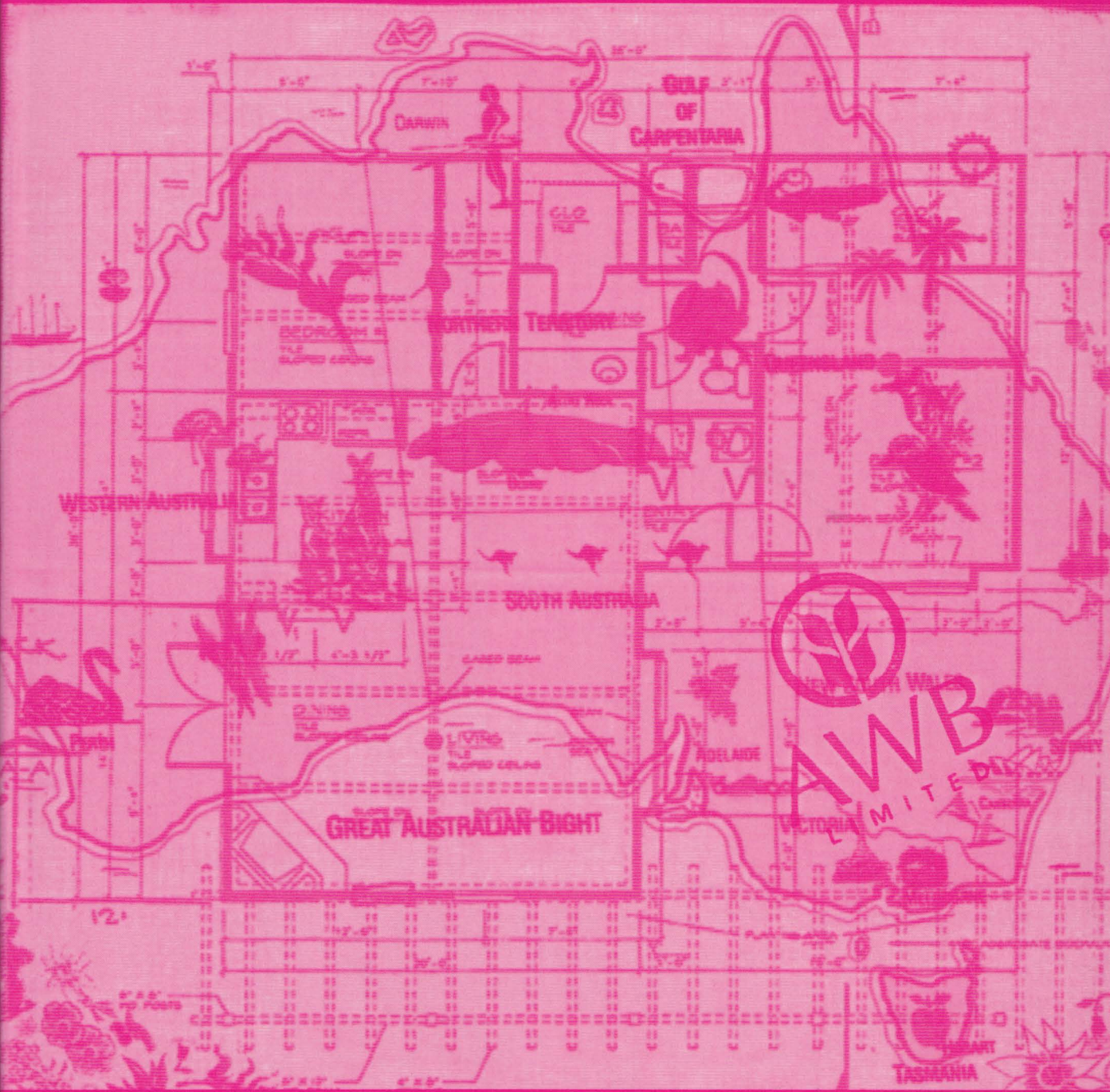


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THE NEW AUSTRALIAN UGLINESS

FEATURING NATASHA CICA ON THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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WINTER 2006

Temper democratic bias Australian

THE NEW AUSTRALIAN UGLINESS

FOR ROBIN BOYD, writing in 1960, Australian design and architecture were characterised by an “ugliness” arising primarily from the relative absence of any clear social plan for aesthetic development. The Australian experience, what might be called the overall ‘quality of life’ of people within the nation, was therefore, in Boyd’s view, sadly diminished. “Boyd’s overall critique”, states Natasha Cica in her *Overland* lecture, published in this issue, “exposed a number of important truths”. The “first” and perhaps most significant of these is “that democracy has an aesthetic aspect, and design has a democratic dimension”. Here Cica draws attention to the fact that the art of a particular society – and more broadly the aesthetic experience within that society – always reflects the particular structure of the society and the means by which it organises itself. The aesthetic experience within a profoundly undemocratic society is likely to be unfulfilling, at least for the majority, because the guiding aesthetic principles will be individually, rather than socially conceived.

Cica describes a new Australian ugliness, most evident in “the McMansionland of newer outer suburbia”, in which questions of cultural and aesthetic value tend to be reduced to market value: what matters is newness, bigness, expensiveness. This is a place of high consumption, high debt, relatively few social services and networks, and of individualistic aspiration. The basic features of the new Australian ugliness represent the fulfilment of Boyd’s fears regarding the social and cultural effects of a radically unplanned, individualist society. Put another way, Cica is describing the prevalence of “private affluence and public squalor”.

This phrase was made famous by John Kenneth Galbraith in his *The Affluent Society* (1958), a study of Western modernity contemporaneous with, though much more widely read and influential than Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness*. Galbraith argued that in modern society the achievement of an ideal quality of life for any person is not compatible with unrestricted freedom for every person. As he ex-

plained, a family might drive its “mauve and cerise, air-conditioned, power-steered and power-braked car” through run-down cities to picnic beside a polluted stream “and go on to spend the night in a park which is a menace to public health and morals”, where amid “the stench of decaying refuse, they may reflect vaguely on the curious unevenness of their blessings”. For Galbraith, as for Boyd, unrestricted individual freedom necessarily entails social deprivation, and so also cultural degradation.

The new, ugly, aspirational or radically individualist suburbia, the place where the reality of private affluence and public squalor is most evident, is also, Cica notes, the place where elections tend to get decided, the would-be heartland of both sides of politics. It is, for this reason, somewhat culturally sacrosanct. As Cica relates, to criticise this social and cultural reality is to be instantly branded ‘elitist’ by certain public figures and commentators, especially those on the Murdoch payroll.

Galbraith died on 29 April this year. When the obituaries appeared I was reminded of the time when an ABC Radio National program host asserted, in order to bring his panellists and the audience back to reality, that “Galbraith is dead”. This was at the 2002 ‘It’s Time Again’ conference at Old Parliament House in Canberra, held to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the election of the Whitlam government, a government strongly influenced by Galbraith’s Keynesian ideas. The mistake was understandable: Galbraith was at the time 94. But I wondered if the host’s perception was also influenced by the long-running, broad-based conservative campaign to suggest that the progressive, democratic, interventionist model of public policy, advanced by Galbraith and Whitlam, was a thing of the past.

In spite of this, Cica reveals a nostalgic enthusiasm for a social model in which rampant individualism does not rule supreme, an interest in an alternative social aesthetic, and a sceptical attitude towards the claims of the presently powerful, that this is as good as it gets: “Ah, modernism. Internationalism,

multilateralism. The United Nations. Truth. The public – schools, hospitals, broadcasting, service, space, sector, interest. Peace, beauty and justice for all – not just those who can pay a privatised provider. Quaint, naïve ideas driving unworkable, failed structures – no?”

In the Australian context the alternative form of society Cica is describing ended, dramatically and bitterly, with the dismissal of the Whitlam government. As Prime Minister John Howard stated recently, the breakdown of the Keynesian, welfare-state social model, in the mid-1970s, constitutes “the great intellectual turning point of our lifetimes”. Yet even Howard would probably admit that this was not *purely* an intellectual turning point. It was, rather, part of an ongoing political struggle. As Raewyn Connell points out in her comprehensive account of the political nature of contemporary Australian society, there has never been a popular demand for neoliberal public policy. Rather, she argues: “A shift in capitalist strategy began in the major world centres of capitalism, and became decisive in the decade 1975–1985. Its main elements were accelerated internationalisation of the economy . . . a shift towards market discipline of the labour force rather than social compromise . . . and an ideological offensive against the welfare state and economic regulation”. “This”, she summarises, “is neoliberalism”.

Interestingly, there are signs that this ‘great intellectual turning point’ may not be as final as its apologists and boosters frequently insist. Reports suggest for example that a majority of Australians would rather have had increased spending on social services and other means of building their quality of life than on the individual tax cuts offered by Treasurer Costello in the last federal budget. The advertising firm Grey Worldwide found in its recent Eye on Australia report, based on in-depth interviews with six-hundred adults, that more than half of their respondents believed their quality of life had declined over the past two decades, and that an increasing number of Australians believe their lives are becoming less “fun”. The report also found, not unrelatedly, a growing distrust of big business.

In different ways, Katherine Wilson, Mark Dober, Ian Syson and Patrick Wolfe shed light, in this issue, on the contemporary means by which Australian culture is now being made subject to the ugly desires of big business, and some possible modes of resistance.

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THE INCORRUPTIBLES

WHERE ARE THEY TODAY?

AUSTRIAN-BORN AUSTRALIAN architect Harry Seidler died in March this year aged 82. A few weeks later, his life and work were publicly commemorated in a memorial service in one of his best creations, the Theatre Royal in Sydney's modernist classic MLC Centre (1972–1978).

I didn't know Seidler, indeed I'd never even met him, and I'm no architect, but I attended the service. A key reason was the MLC Centre itself. That building used to house the law firm that gave me my first 'grown-up' job at the dead-end of the 1980s. This was still the era of the long business lunch, stretching well into the afternoon, and longer evening cocktails. City lawyers worked incredibly hard, but not quite so much like hungry rats on a multinational corporate wheel, overseen by human resource managers who think in-house MetroNap sleeping pods are the professional way forward.¹ One unusually clear memory from that hazy past law life is the first time I laid eyes on the cleanly curving Seidler staircase cutting across floors to connect more and less public parts of the office. Until that moment, I'd never been affected by a staircase. More importantly, I'd never realised you *could* be. More of that later.

Another reason I turned up to see off Seidler was that, serendipitously, a friend had taken me to visit Rose Seidler House for the first time just one week before the architect's death. This was the house that Seidler started building in 1948 for his parents, as a brand new, 25-year-old migrant. His chosen site was the suburban bushland of Turrumurra on Sydney's north shore, a very long way from the buzzier replica *kaffee klatschen* springing up in the city's eastern suburbs. Rose Seidler House broke accepted rules



Architect, Harry Seidler

in post-Second World War, still-British-oriented Australia – so much so that Seidler encountered initial difficulties attracting both builders and council approval for the dwelling. Eventually Seidler prevailed and the house proceeded. Like Seidler's work to come, the dwelling took strong cues from the creative cutting edge of European modernism as developed before the Second World War by Walter Gropius (director of the Bauhaus in the 1920s), under whom Seidler had studied at Harvard, and from his working relationships with Marcel Breuer in New York and Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil. The house featured sandstone, reinforced concrete, expanses of glass, stilts, a flat roof, and a sundeck emblazoned with a mural painted in stark primary colours. Interior furnishings formed part of the design whole. As Alice Spiegelman recounts in her 2001 biography of Seidler, *Almost Full Circle*:

“I wouldn't allow my poor mother to have anything in the house inconsistent with modernism,” he said. He convinced his parents to sell the furniture they had brought with them from Vienna, and he furnished their new home with Hardoy-chairs, and chairs designed by Eero Saarinen and Charles Eames. He wanted to create “visual tensions” with his interior design; smooth neutral plaster walls had their counterpoint in the rough texture of the sandstone fireplace. Strong accents of dark brown, red, yellow and blue stood out against the grey neutral background of the walls, the timber work, the carpets and bedspreads.

When it came to the cutlery, Rose put her foot down and insisted on a special place for her silver

set. Harry designed purpose-built kitchen drawers for it, and a traymobile, made to her specifications, held her favourite Art Deco teaset.²

In 2006 the look and feel of Rose Seidler House, as Spigelman describes it, is essentially unchanged. Now in public custodianship as part of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Seidler's gift to the nation, the dwelling looks as though it could have been built yesterday.

Could it really? That question motivated my own pilgrimage to Turramurra. Driving in a different direction, I would have landed on another planet entirely: the McMansionland of newer outer suburbia. In his new book *The Longest Decade*, Melbourne commentator and News Limited journalist George Megalogenis neatly describes that postmodern phenomenon as follows:

Remember the wog mansion? It used to be a put-down when I was growing up in Melbourne in the 1970s. Popular culture didn't know what to make of the faux Roman or Hellenic columns, the water features, and the giant olive tins in the backyard that were recycled as pots for the tomatoes. There was no grass to be seen, of course. We wogs equated cement with civilisation. Inside, there was the beige carpet and the plastic runners our mothers rolled over the top to preserve the pile in its full acrylic glory . . .

Today, the wog mansion has an Anglo imitator, the McMansion. It has the same configuration as its ethnic predecessor – four bedrooms, two garages and a pool room. Only it is more antiseptic. A television sits in every room, which means regular trips to Ikea to buy a TV stand for each. But no-one questions the tastes of the families who move into McMansions – 'Kath & Kim' notwithstanding – because they decide elections.³

A visit to the exponentially smaller, sparer and – it has to be said – more tasteful Rose Seidler house can arm you with resolve to do exactly that: question the tastes of the McMansionistas. *Taste* is an interesting word to associate with the blowsy McMansion market. It suggests a gargantuan, insatiable, unhealthy *appetite*. Dead give-aways are the chosen housing stock pushing its eaveless window faces to property limits; his-and-hers petrol guzzling 4WDs parked in the multiple garages; vast expanses of plasma in home theatre zones; over-resourced, increasingly obese and Ritalin-dependent children in their Game Boy/study

nooks; and the massive debt levels underpinning the whole folly. It also suggests there's such a thing as good taste, bad taste, and a variety of shades in between that would put a Porter's Paints colour chart to shame. Yet *taste* and what might inform it – *ideas, form, function* and *beauty* – are subjects with which home-and-renovation focused Australians are surprisingly uncomfortable. As Megalogenis reminds us, in recent years Australians have stampeded in their millions toward shows "devoted to the cult of bricks and mortar" like Channel Nine's *The Block*. But not to Alan Saunders' program *By Design* on Radio National on Saturday mornings.

In 1960, Australian architect and writer Robin Boyd wrote a powerful book called *The Australian Ugliness*. It was an extended attack on so-called featurism in Australia's urban environment: an approach to design as pastiche, characterised by conspicuous consumption, facades underpinned and unified by little or nothing of depth or integrity. This was part of an international trend, Boyd acknowledged, and arguably the precursor of what we now call postmodernism. *The Australian Ugliness* was also a head-on confrontation with the complacent cringe of Australians in the 1950s. Boyd decried the lack of self-confident expression by Australians of ideas, their relative comfort with derivative application of English or North American influences, and their fundamental dis-ease with their geographical position, built heritage and natural environment.

According to Boyd:

The basis of the Australian ugliness is an unwillingness to be committed on the level of ideas. In all the arts of living, in the shaping of all her artifacts, as in politics, Australia shuffles about vigorously in the middle – as she estimates the middle – of the road, picking up disconnected ideas wherever she finds them. If Australia wanted to build up her mental development to match her muscles she would have to begin by valuing her own ideas more highly, encouraging more of them and gradually building up a climate of confidence and self-reliance.⁴

And:

The art of shaping the human environment . . . is an intellectual, ethical and emotional exercise as well as a means of expression. It involves the same sort of possessive love with which people have always regarded their shelters. The Australian ugliness

begins with fear of reality, denial of the need for the everyday environment to reflect the heart of the human problem, satisfaction with veneer and cosmetic effects. It ends in betrayal of the element of love and a chill near the root of national self-respect.⁵

Boyd cuttingly characterised the look and perspective of the Australia of his time as dwelling, mentally as well as physically, in some version of *Mon Repos* in Hydrangea Crescent. In an earlier book, *Australia's Home* (1952), Boyd “[ushered] the reader down quiet and darkened streets, into a realm of genoa velvet, tomato sauce and cakes in the form of mushrooms and green frogs. Barry Humphries explored this world on the stage, and later in books where the frogs have been replaced by chocolate effigies of the funnel-web spider”.⁶ Boyd’s overall critique exposed a number of important truths. First, that democracy has an aesthetic aspect, and design has a democratic dimension. Secondly, that Australians’ collective failure to acknowledge this revealed an immature, defensive and unhealthy kind of nationalism.

As he probably anticipated, Boyd’s analysis was spurned by some local critics as ‘unpatriotic’. It’s not hard to imagine a similar contemporary response to any argument along Boyd’s lines. Consider reactions to Australian architect Glenn Murcutt’s criticism in recent years of McMansionist development. Delivering the National Trust Heritage lecture in 2004, Murcutt declaimed McMansions as displaying “a poverty of spirit and a barrenness of mind”. This earned him an extended backhander from Fairfax columnist Miranda Devine, accusing him of ‘elitist’ sniffiness,⁷ a perverse charge given the fact that houses in Kellyville, the heartland of Sydney’s McMansion belt, typically sell for \$700,000 plus. Who can even think about paying that without some combination of established wealth and an approach to megadebt as a ‘birthright’, and without sitting on the privileged side of the socio-economic divides and disparities that must have been exacerbated by negative gearing and the current Federal Government’s 1999 cuts to capital gains tax?⁸ Murcutt revisited his Mac-attack last year on ABC TV’s *7:30 Report*:

We’ve gone from about 150 square metres for a family living very, very well to about 206–207 square metres . . . the building occupies a huge area of the land, thereby making almost unusable the front and the back garden. The problem with the McMansion, as it’s typically called here and, I might say, in the

United States, is that it’s designed on a single block of land, a single building that has to have windows down the side, that is going to look onto windows of the properties next door, it’s not going to be oriented towards the climatic conditions, it doesn’t possess any prospect, it doesn’t possess any refuge as such. There are no places for kids to really discover life, discover danger. Everything is so safe. The buildings are huge. They have too many bathrooms, in my view. They don’t need them. It’s more a status symbol. The materials used are perfectly okay, except that when roofs are very dark, they absorb tremendous heat. Ecologically, they’re a failure because most of them will require air-conditioning. The planning strategies are appalling in most buildings. They are not really good enough, in my view, when we know what can be done.⁹

Murcutt also pointed through the chimera of McMansions to a wider cultural problem: “[applying] the statement made by the great Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, are we producing architecture or are we producing merchandise? I think on the whole we are producing merchandise, and that means that culturally we accept far less than we ought to accept”.¹⁰ In a recent newspaper feature on the so-called ‘archiphobia’ of contemporary Australians, Stephen Lacey, while apparently not unsympathetic to Murcutt’s complaints about the ‘visual illiteracy’ of Australians, delivered the following editorial comment on his critique: “Blah, blah blah. Who – apart from the few already converted listeners – was taking any notice?”¹¹

That road leads back to Harry Seidler. When Rose Seidler House rose on its Turrumurra stilts, people took an awful lot of notice. The home caused an instant sensation. Newspaper headlines screamed HOUSES WITH LEGS FRIGHTEN SYDNEY HOME SEEKERS. Fortunately this launched Seidler’s career, as a critical mass of locals decided they liked this shock of the new, establishing both Seidler’s professional name and his paying client base locally. Nonetheless, subsequent Seidler structures frequently jangled discordantly with the mainstream mindset of his adopted country. Despite the progressive and often provocative bent of the influential, left-leaning Evatt legal and political dynasty into which Seidler married in 1958 – Seidler’s wife Penelope is the daughter of Clive Evatt, niece of Herbert and sister of Elizabeth Evatt – Australia’s general dispo-

Boyd's overall critique exposed a number of important truths. First, that democracy has an aesthetic aspect, and design has a democratic dimension. Secondly, that Australians' collective failure to acknowledge this revealed an immature, defensive and unhealthy kind of nationalism.

sition in the decades following the Second World War was tenaciously more Hydrangea Crescent than Fallingwater, more beer-and-barbie than bowtie-and-martini. Accordingly many Seidler buildings were misunderstood in Australia and some harshly criticised. Most notoriously, Blues Point Tower in Sydney, at the time (1961) Australia's highest apartment block. The tower was intended to form part of a larger and integrated modernist redevelopment of the harbourside peninsula at McMahon's Point. The scheme was never fully realised, because North Sydney Council withdrew support for the proposal.

The Australian landscape painter Lloyd Rees was one admirer of Blues Point Tower, calling it a "lovely exclamation mark" at the end of the peninsula.¹² His response was exceptional. Spigelman's biography of Seidler observes that the "extreme hostility" towards Blues Point Tower – knee-jerk hostility which continues to an astonishing degree today – brought "frustration and aggravation to Seidler's life".¹³ Some of this emotion was channelled into Seidler's unsuccessful defamation action against cartoonist Peter Cook, who had lampooned this kind of tower and its maker in the now-defunct *National Times* in 1982. Seidler also engaged in pointed professional combat with anyone else who stood in the way of his idea of progressive architecture. As Elizabeth Farrelly wrote in her obituary of Seidler for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he "ranted endlessly against institutionalised mediocrity in its myriad forms – planners, bureaucrats, councils, conservationists, politicians, journalists, heritage and Australia in general".¹⁴ And postmodernists. Well before McMansions, Seidler was a longstanding and vocal opponent of postmodern buildings as akin to "the tantrums of a rich, spoilt child" and a manifestation of "ludicrous bad taste".¹⁵ Recognising the social dimension of urban development, including the vital importance of good social housing subsidised by government, and of town planning that fosters community spirit, he never approved of the kind of suburban sprawl that delivered the inhabitants of Western Sydney

"one of the worst physical environments in the developed world", where "[p]eople have to drive sixty kilometres before they can afford a piece of land and when they get there there's no shopping, there's no schools, there's nothing. It's a very barren life".¹⁶

Seidler also approved of capital gains tax, as a handbrake on unchecked, low quality urban development to which Australian politicians turned a very blind eye. He did not desist from unfavourable comparisons between Australian and European approaches to heritage, planning and building. In 1984 he commented:

Most European cities have undergone a process of 're-invention', often for centuries, where people demand decent living conditions, some of which are the best in the world. Here in Australia substandard planning and building is acceptable. What the developer, the decision maker is allowed is determined by the politician. The difference can only be bridged by education, exposure.¹⁷

And as late as 1998 Seidler swung a Keatingesque punch at the continuingly substandard condition of Australia's built environment, claiming: "[t]here's nobody and nothing here that sends the blood pressure up. It's a backwater, a provincial dump."

Some Australians may think it to our collective credit that Seidler's Companion of the Order of Australia was not revoked after those last comments. (By virtue of an anachronistic quirk of Australian law, of course, Seidler's Australian citizenship did technically disappear in the mid-1980s, when Austria granted Seidler citizenship to atone for historical wrongs, Seidler's Jewish family having fled Vienna as refugees from Nazism.) Others may wonder if in contemporary Australia someone like Seidler, who sends our blood pressure up without apology, by pushing an uncompromising and unfamiliar standard in any field of activity, would even make the short list for a gong like that in the first place. Even if (like Robin Boyd, but unlike Harry Seidler) they were fourth-generation Australian, emphatically grown here not

flown here, and Anglo-establishment to boot. Others may wonder why everyone's so damned scared these days of any equivalent of Seidler 'frightening Sydney home seekers' – of questioning bad taste and wrong directions, and advancing sustainable and practical alternatives, informed by real ideas and ideals.

The words *vision* and *principle* recurred many times in Seidler's memorial service. It was an elegant event featuring Bach and black velvet, and characterised by the "lustre and urbanity"¹⁸ that Harry Seidler and his wife Penelope brought to Sydney. Professional and personal tributes referred to Seidler "changing the shape of architecture in Australia forever", his "restless search for visual truths", his "potent and powerful perfectionism", his energy and determination, his intensity, his abhorrence of mediocrity, and his "apparent confidence" belying a "shy, retiring and very private" nature. As interesting was the observation that Seidler's publicly principled stance on his visionary buildings was not motivated by personal gain.¹⁹ Which is not to say Seidler didn't do all right for himself in Australia, as things turned out, in so far as that is measured by amassing material wealth, prestigious commissions and professional awards. It is rather to suggest that recognition and rewards of this kind, while not unimportant to Seidler, were not his primary focus and motivation.

So what was? A favourite Seidlerism was the Gustav Klimt Jugendstil slogan emblazoned on the Secession building in Vienna: "To every age its art, and to every art its freedom." His wartime experience as a refugee, including lengthy internment as an 'enemy alien' in England and Canada after leaving Europe, meant Seidler valued the exercise of freedom every bit as much as the pursuit of the ideas, form, function and beauty comprising the art of his architecture. Hence few things stopped Seidler expressing himself as he saw fit; hence, too, his frank admission of his "healthy disregard for politicians – and particularly bureaucrats", dating back to his time in internment. One mark of the man was that even though his own entry had lost to Danish architect Joern Utzon's in the Sydney Opera House competition, Seidler was an outspoken supporter of Utzon after his shameful sacking from the Sydney Opera House project in the 1960s. Seidler organised an international petition in support of Utzon completing the work, spoke at local 'Utzon in Charge' rallies, and exposed himself professionally by initiating legal proceedings to stop

the building proceeding until Utzon was restored, accusing the Royal Australian Institute of Architects of complicity in Utzon's fate.²⁰

In short, Seidler engaged with the democratic content of his aesthetic. There are obvious parallels with Boyd's prodigious output as an architectural *educator* as well as an architect. Boyd brought his modernism to a wider public audience through his writing, radio and television appearances, public speaking, campaigning and university lecturing. Boyd also spent seven years, from 1947, as the vigorous driving force – and rigorous quality controller – of the remarkable post-Second World War initiative of the Small Homes Service, which provided plans and specifications for small, inexpensive houses. These were designed by members of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, sold to homebuilders for a nominal charge, and publicised through Boyd's weekly column in the *Age* newspaper.²¹ What Boyd delivered to his Melbourne audiences, Seidler offered in not entirely dissimilar ways to Sydneysiders. As Alex Popov recently noted in *Architecture Australia* (an assessment corroborated from first-hand experience by the young architecture graduate seated next to me at the Seidler service):

A lesser known quality of Harry Seidler's which is common to those who are at ease with themselves, is the generosity of time, information and support he extended not only to students and architects but to countless others who called on his wisdom and opinion. Harry always found time to talk and to support, or, when encouragement alone was enough, to clear the fog of day and maintain the fight to produce outstanding work.

Until Harry Seidler came along, Sydney had no debate about architecture and design. Harry empowered architecture to become a respected voice in the urban debate and elevated it in the public mind from a profession to a philosophical force to be reckoned with.²²

Seidler's forceful guiding philosophy – like Boyd's, despite differences between their approach to its application – was modernist and internationalist, committed to building a better world after the horrors of the Second World War. The flavour of that forward-looking philosophy is well captured in this extract from Swiss architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret's ('Le Corbusier') manifesto for the planned design of the United Nations' Headquarters in New York:

Great disturbing events have occurred, their consequences are hard upon us, tolerating neither delay nor evasion. The crisis calls for men of courage and inspiration, strength and perseverance . . .

The United Nations will reap the mature harvest of our present day – the admirable and splendid harvest in thought and techniques of modernity: the United Nations will repudiate the now inadmissible errors. In the question of its city, waste will be abolished; this waste which gives the illusion of abundance to a society that it exhausts . . . The United Nations, in its Headquarters about to be realised, will propose an example based on these constructive postulates:

- Respect for the laws of nature
- The efficacious and positive solar day
- Harmonious performance of the four functions for which urbanism is responsible: Dwelling, Working, Culture of Body and Mind, Circulation²³

Ah, modernism. Internationalism, multilateralism. The United Nations. Truth. The public – schools, hospitals, broadcasting, service, space, sector, interest. Peace, beauty and justice for all – not just those who can pay a privatised provider. Quaint, naïve ideas driving unworkable, failed structures – no? Reserve your judgement and ask a question. If modernism in its many manifestations was doomed to fail, forever; and if the aspirational apex of civilisation really is megamalls, gated golfing communities, faux Victoria/Edwardiana/Georgiana/Federatiana, sanitised spa centres with forest-frog muzak, competitive corporate branding from pre-cradle ultrasound to post-pension prosperity – then why have the victors protested so much? Why did Miranda go for Murcutt’s jugular? Why are attacks by established commentators on contributors to Australian culture like Robert Connolly, Elliot Perlman, David Williamson, Stephen Sewell, Christos Tsiolkas, Marieke Hardy and Mark Davis, when these artists and intellectuals expose aspects of today’s Australian ugliness, so verbally violent and frequently *ad hominem*? And what’s going on when John Howard rips into post-modernism on school English curricula – the Prime Minister who engineered the fake affluence and real, spreading effluence of the McMansion set, so that their castle-homes are the ‘defining structure’ of his era?²⁴ It must be postmodern irony.

In the pomo world of twenty-first century Australia, most people don’t want to see the truths

behind their own facades. In the past few years we’ve seen a string of labour-intensive, older-style (dare I say modernist) exposés about matters of national interest like Tampa, Children Overboard, Woomera, the Pacific Solution and the WMD and AWB affairs, mainly screened on public broadcasters SBS or the ABC, or run in broadsheet newspapers or niche sites online. More accurately, most of us *haven’t* seen them. The numbers blob firmly with entertainment products like *The Block*, and now programs like *The Bachelor* and *Extreme Makeover*. Presumably the next stampede will be towards even more brain-absent content like Australian-based animation company Blue Rocket’s *Bang the Cat*, about as far away from Alan Saunders as you can get. Mainstream Australians today apparently want to be encastled, ensconced, entombed. They want to send each other farts on 3G mobile phones. They don’t want ‘hard’ news, except ‘good’ news about mortgage interest rates. They’ll dip into *The Latham Diaries*, sure, but mainly for the salacious detail of bitchy ‘crudity’ – not for the pressing democratic truths about structures, vision and principle.

But it doesn’t have to be like that, and it won’t be forever. Which is why Seidler has been a focus here. Partly because I’d rather walk down that curving MLC staircase – preferably in a truly elegant cocktail frock, possibly second-hand – than ride an escalator in Westfield Bondi Junction on the hunt for Kenzo yummy mummy baby accessories. Here I will happily admit to a fondness for walking an Ikea circuit at Homebush, and not just because of the *Kath & Kim* pistaking parody. As British entrepreneur and designer Sir Terence Conran has observed:

The people involved with modernism believed they could make a better world. It wasn’t just about producing nice objects, it was about producing them at a price that everybody could afford, not just the filthy rich, to paraphrase William Morris . . . The movement was too austere for British tastes at the beginning: it reminded us a little too much of the servants’ quarters, and of course we have always been cynical about new political ideas. In the early days of Habitat, I helped make the style reasonably palatable and brought it to a wider audience. Ikea has achieved today what I set out to achieve with Habitat. It’s the biggest furniture retailer in the world and if you are selective you can find very good products there at amazing prices. In its way,

Ikea is the Modernist dream come true.²⁵

Seidler is a chosen focus because he maintained *a* dream, which was *his* dream, which happened to be *that* dream (modernism). As the waters of corruption rose around Seidler – by corruption I mean disregard or contempt for the truth as he saw it and believed to be important – he held his line. Peter Murray put it succinctly in his introduction to *Towers in the City*: “With the tide of postmodernism waning and the growing reassessment of the Modernist view, Seidler will stand out as one who ignored the Sirens of Stylism and, Odysseus-like, held his course”.²⁶

Seidler was incorruptible. By this I don’t mean he was flawless, either temperamentally or professionally, nor perfect in that airbrushed way of socialist-realist icons. What I do mean is there was an immovable, uncompromising integrity, an honesty and a straightness, about what Seidler strived to do with his life. And that this striving was pre-eminently for something far beyond himself, and beyond his immediate family, and beyond material wellbeing and status. Which meant that he was often standing alone.

In all these respects he strongly resembled another man of his time and adopted place, Olegas Truchanas. Truchanas was born the same year as Seidler, 1923, in the city of Saiuliai in Lithuania. He also arrived in Australia in 1948, via a displaced-person’s camp in Germany. This had followed a period with the Lithuanian resistance fighting the Nazis and Soviets, then a short stint studying law at the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association University in Munich. Truchanas settled in Tasmania where he worked sixteen-hour shifts as a labourer at the Electrolytic Zinc Company in Hobart. To counter the harsh tedium of his day-and-night job, in his spare time he explored and photographed the then largely uncharted Tasmanian wilderness. He drew artistic and technical inspiration from Bavarian alpine photography he had encountered in Germany, and entered his work in European salon competitions.

Through his outdoors and photographic activities he met his Australian wife Melva Stocks, as well as a circle of Tasmanian watercolour painters including Max Angus, Elspeth Vaughan and Patricia Giles, with whom he subsequently collaborated to try to save Lake Pedder and its remarkable pink quartz beach from being flooded by a hydro-electric scheme. In 1971 Truchanas gave audio-visual presentations

in Hobart’s Town Hall to show people what they would lose if the scheme proceeded. This created a Seidler-ish sensation: locals flocked to hear his account of his journeys in the wilderness, featuring slide displays accompanied by the music of Sibelius and Delius.²⁷ Truchanas also delivered powerful speeches about saving Lake Pedder at these and similar events, posing unfamiliar, unsettling questions to his audience:

It is terribly important that we take interest in the future of our remaining wilderness, and in the future of our National Parks. Is there any reason why, given this interest, and given enlightened leadership, the idea of beauty could not become an accepted goal of national policy? Is there any reason why Tasmania should not be more beautiful on the day we leave it, than on the day we came?²⁸

Truchanas stood up in this very public way even though he was by this time an employee of the Hydro-Electric Commission that was to construct the dam, his wage supporting his wife and three young children.

Parallel to Seidler’s fight to keep Utzon in charge, the ‘Save Pedder’ campaign did not achieve its immediate objective. The lake was inundated. Determined to continue photographing his precious, disappearing wilderness, in early 1972 Truchanas drowned on a canoeing trip on the Gordon River. At his funeral, Max Angus proposed compiling a book of Truchanas’s photographs, to bring his work to a wider audience and help support his family. A committee of Truchanas’s friends (including the young photographer Peter Dombrovskis, to whom Truchanas was a mentor) met for several hours every Sunday night for three years to produce *The World of Olegas Truchanas*.²⁹ Despite beancounters’ predictions to the contrary and warnings of commercial realities, the published book became a sell-out success in many editions. It also stands as a key foundational document of what morphed into formalised green politics in Tasmania and wider Australia, key battles of which have included the successful fight to save the Franklin in the 1980s (in which Dombrovskis’s images played a key role)³⁰ and more recent attempts to halt logging in the Styx and at Recherche Bay.

There is much more to say about Truchanas, and about that circle of Tasmanian watercolour artists whose approach to art, wilderness and society influenced and was influenced by his European sensibility.

I won't do that here, but I will acknowledge that I have pinched the notion of incorruptibility – that defining quality shared by Seidler and Truchanas – from Max Angus's seminal biographical essay on Truchanas, published in *The World of Olegas Truchanas*.³¹ Interviewing Angus (now aged 92) last year, I asked him to explain more exactly what he meant. This was his answer:

I think it was once said, the greatest thing about a work of art is that which cannot be put into words. I'd say the same about Olegas. You can't put it into words any more than I have done there – the incorruptible man, who passes into legend.³²

Eternally gracious, Angus then handed me the key to understanding the legend and legacy of these incorruptible men, Seidler and Truchanas:

I think if you take the Australian as a type – the Anglo-Saxon or Celtic Australian – he's always *outside*. Olegas was *inside*.³³

This illuminates that link between Seidler and Truchanas. Both were European men, with all the baggage, charm and intensity which that label used to import. Both were refugees from the totalitarianism that destroyed Europe in the Second World War. Both worked from an essentially 'alien' perspective, a 'foreign' approach to culture as a core democratic activity. Both worked untiringly to transplant and translate what they saw as the best of that approach in their adopted home. Accordingly, both frequently struggled to be understood in Australia. Both advanced a principled vision – Seidler's of the built world to be created, Truchanas's of the natural world to be discovered and conserved. Neither was prepared to compromise the core of this vision, but both were pragmatic about its implementation, without losing a basic optimism about potential outcomes. (In this last respect they differed from native-born Boyd, whose disillusionment and exhaustion resulting from his own struggle to educate his masses became extreme.) Both Seidler and Truchanas also opened up dialogue with homegrown Australians about a sense of what is possible, expanding the Australian understanding of what could happen in this place. Both blow-ins made an invaluable and lasting contribution to our nation-building project, a crucial component of which must be our cultural life or *kulturleben*.³⁴

'Invaluable' and 'lasting' are very big words.

Will I live to eat and choke on them? Is Australian democracy, in the sense and shape that men like Seidler and Truchanas wanted us to approach and understand it, now hopelessly degraded, fatally faux? Where are the equivalents of Seidler and Truchanas today, in both public and private life? Where are the incorruptible men? The ones who'll call it like it is – not how a mishmash of focus groups, lobbyists, opportunists and rat cunning indicate will please most useful people in the shortest optimal term – and put themselves on the line accordingly?

I keep coming back to the bright shining line drawn by historian Manning Clark, whose own house in Canberra was designed by Robin Boyd. In his attempts to make sense of the relatively short sweep of Australian history since British colonisation in 1788, Clark drew a distinction between straiteners and enlargers. Writing optimistically a short time before the start of what Megalogenis has acutely labeled Australia's 'longest decade', Clark had this to say:

Australians have liberated themselves from the fate of being second-rate Europeans. Australians have begun to contribute to the never-ending conversation of humanity on the meaning of life, and the means of wisdom and understanding. So far no-one has described the phoenix bird which will arise from the ashes of an age of ruins. No-one has risked prophesying whether an age of ruins will be the prelude to the coming of the barbarians or to taking a seat at the great banquet of life. The life-deniers and the straiteners have been swept into the dustbin of human history. Now is the time for the life-affirmers and the enlargers to show whether they have anything to say, whether they have any food for the great hungers of humanity.³⁵

Despite what anyone may tell you, the hungers of humanity remain very real, and the difference between the straiteners and enlargers is not relative. There are also real differences in quality – and its indispensable handmaiden, sustainability – between the range of potential approaches to our built and natural environments, politics, people and profit. Without wishing to be flippant or sarcastic, it has to be said that some staircases are more equal than others. Similarly, some contemporary Australian behaviours in public and private life are selfish, shabby and stupid, and more of us need to say that as well.

Not so we can entrench ourselves further in

the assumed positions of what commentators call our culture wars. Battlers vs bludgers, boomers vs generations X/Y, families vs freaks and feminists, mushy multiculturalists vs masculine mates, Sydney vs the ra-ras – even, and this too has to be said in case you’ve misunderstood my own thrust, modernists vs postmodernists. Exchanges across all these branded barricades lately have become increasingly caricatured, personalised and destructive. Inside each camp, discussions have become increasingly sterile and self-congratulatory. In short, domestic dialogue and debate on the things that really matter has become an ugly mix of constipated and flaccid. Meanwhile visible cracks have started to appear in the so-called miracle of neo-liberal economics that’s been the paradigm of my adult times.

So what are we waiting for before we speak up? Tsunami-level cataclysm? Gilt edged invitations inscribed with IT’S SAFE AND EASY NOW – PROMOTION, MEGA-BONUS AND ORDER OF AUSTRALIA ENCLOSED? Tickets to hear Swiss-born, London-based public intellectual Alain de Botton stand in the lately re-Utzonised Sydney Opera House, to lecture us about status anxiety or the architecture of happiness?³⁶

I say this – just bring them on. Big, bold, generous Australian statements of substance. Ones that move us, and maybe even the rest of the world, like the curve of a Seidler staircase or the beach of Truchanas’s lost lake. Complete with truly lovely exclamation marks!

1. See ‘Stay in Touch’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 2006, reporting the arrival in Australia from London of office sleeping pods and quoting from a corporate press release: “MetroNaps will be launching their first store in Sydney CBD later in the year and are currently taking orders from HR managers and business owners wanting to lease the MetroNap pods for their workforce to attract and retain the best staff. Workers not lucky enough to have a sleeping pod in their office will be able to buy MetroNap passes to get some well deserved rest in-store.”
2. Alice Spigelman, *Almost Full Circle: Harry Seidler*, Brandt & Schlesinger, Sydney, 2001, p.178.
3. George Megalogenis, *The Longest Decade*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2006, p.254.
4. Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1960, p.179.
5. *ibid.*, p.251.
6. Conrad Hamann and Chris Hamann, ‘Anger and the New Order; Some Aspects of Robin Boyd’s Career’, in *Transition 38 Robin Boyd Special*, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Environmental Design & Construction, RMIT, Melbourne, 1992, p.25.
7. Miranda Devine, ‘Copping the blame in Kellyville’, *Sun-Herald*, 24 October 2004.

8. See further George Megalogenis, *The Longest Decade*, pp.254–260.
9. 7:30 Report, ABC TV, 17 February 2005.
10. *ibid.*
11. Stephen Lacey, ‘Archiphobia’, *Age*, 25 March 2006.
12. Comment recounted by Peter Hirst at the Harry Seidler memorial service, 6 April 2006.
13. Spigelman, *ibid.*, p.212.
14. Elizabeth Farrelly, ‘When Harry Met Sydney’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 March 2006.
15. Spigelman, *Almost Full Circle*, p.321.
16. *ibid.*
17. *ibid.*, p.328
18. In the words of Peter Watts, Director of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, speaking at Seidler’s memorial service.
19. *ibid.*
20. See Peter Myer, *Architecture Australia*, May/June 2006, p.50; Spigelman, *Almost Full Circle*, pp.238–244.
21. Neil Clerehan, ‘The Age RVIA Small Homes Service’ in *Transition 38 Robin Boyd Special*, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Environmental Design & Construction, RMIT, Melbourne, 1992, pp.58–61.
22. Alex Popov, *Architecture Australia*, May/June 2006, p.50.
23. Le Corbusier, *UN Headquarters*, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, New York, 1947, pp.14–15.
24. Megalogenis, *The Longest Decade*, p.259.
25. ‘Is Modernism Dangerous?’, *Observer*, 9 April 2006.
26. Harry Seidler and Associates, *Towers in the City*, EdizioniTecnò, undated.
27. Tim Bonyhady, ‘No Dams: The art of Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis’ in *The Europeans: Émigré artists in Australia 1930–1960*, pp.243–246, noting the local newspaper’s observation at the time that “something rare and strange” was happening in Hobart.
28. Olegas Truchanas, notes for speech to open the exhibition ‘Lake Pedder 1971’ at Sadler’s Court Gallery, 19 November 1971, collection of Melva Truchanas.
29. Max Angus, *The World of Olegas Truchanas*, Olegas Truchanas Publication Committee, Hobart, 1975.
30. Tim Bonyhady, ‘No Dams’, pp.247–253.
31. Max Angus, *The World of Olegas Truchanas*, p.55.
32. Max Angus, pers. comm., Hobart, 12 October 2005.
33. *ibid.*
34. See further Natasha Cica, ‘Our National Headspace – Great Minds, Imagining Australia in 25 Years’, *Age/Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 2006.
35. Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, 4th edn, Melbourne, Penguin Books, 1995, p.327.
36. See further Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety*, Penguin Books, 2005 and *The Architecture of Happiness*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2006. De Botton was invited to deliver the closing lecture of the 2006 Sydney Writers’ Festival on his most recent work.

Dr Natasha Cica is a Hobart-based writer and commentator. Some of the ideas developed in this lecture build on her opinion piece about Harry Seidler first published in April 2006 on tasmaniantimes.com and onlineopinion.com. au. Others draw on her research for a libretto for an opera with film about Olegas Truchanas, commissioned by IHOS Music Theatre & Opera, Hobart. She thanks Paul Johnston, Max Angus, Melva Truchanas, Elspeth Hope-Johnstone (née Vaughan) and Patricia Giles for their helpful conversations along the way.

GRASSROOTS VERSUS ASTROTURF

DISCREDITING DEMOCRACY

THERE'S A MAN in Canada who thinks I'm a terrorist. He was in Australia this time last year, presenting workshops around the country. They were titled, 'The best strategies to win against activists'. On his ad he called himself "Controversial Canadian PR consultant Ross Irvine".

But a text scan of media around the world revealed no controversy surrounding any bloke named Ross Irvine. Not until he arrived in Australia, where the *West Australian* dubbed him "Rambo Ross" and ABC Melbourne's Jon Faine called him "the anti-activist-activist".

Still, I booked into Irvine's Melbourne workshop. Held in a plush seminar room at a city business school, it cost A\$595 for four hours, payable to the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA).

In this workshop, I'd learn how to create bogus community groups, false statistics, and links with "far-right-wing nutso activists". I'd learn to conflate "activist" with "terrorist" and "security threat".

Controversial or not, Irvine had pulling power. Filing in to see him was a *Who's Who* of powerful industry and government flacks. David Gizard was there. He's adviser to the Federal Treasurer. Special Minister of State, Eric Abetz's adviser was there, too. And PRs from Rio Tinto, Shell, Dow Chemical, Avcare, the Victorian Farmers' Federation, Department of Primary Industries, Bayer, GrainCorp, Dairy Australia, Nufarm (distributes Monsanto herbicides) and Orica (industrial explosives).

There was Clayton Ford, a cheerful chap in a fluorescent tie from Diageo, parent of big-brand liquors. Why was *he* there? "There are teetotalers," Ford explained. "And objections to marketing alcohol to teenagers."

There was Tattersall's (gambling objection issues), the Port of Melbourne Corporation (channel-deepening issues) and people from PACIA (Plastics and Chemicals Industries Association). There were Socom staff, PRs for the insurance and building industries and local councils. And there was a young City of Darebin (local council) PR named Shannon Walker. "Development objections," he explained. "Tram stop advertising. That kind of thing."

Finally, there was Don D'Cruz from the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), wearing a gold tie-clasp and a stout suit, and smelling of cigarettes. Funded by many companies there, as well as federal government grants, his organisation lobbies against activities of non-profit bodies including the ABC and charitable NGOs (non-government organisations).

We'd all gathered to hear a man who claims that proportional representation is "a bizarre thing" and that "corporate responsibility is a weakness. Corporate responsibility is letting someone else set the agenda." We'd learn that sustainability is "an extremist position", that science's 'precautionary principal' is "extreme", and that maintaining biodiversity "turns back the evolutionary clock millions of years and eliminates humans from the face of the Earth! That's extreme!" Animal protection bodies, we'd learn, really want to "sever all contact between humans and animals!"

Dealing in absolutes (health advocates are in fact 'immoral!' Conservationists are really 'anticapitalist!'), when it comes to convictions, Irvine's a relativist. Challenged earlier that day on ABC Radio, he admitted, "There's a little bit of hyperbole in some of this. There's also a bit of fun."

You'd hope so for \$595. By the time we'd

registered and eaten our roasted eggplant pides, it was clear most of us knew each other. There were twenty-nine of us here, and too many Daves. As well as those from the Coalition camp, there was David Hawkins from the PRIA, a bouncy man who introduced Ross Irvine. Irvine's trip, he told the group, was funded by the IPA (the industry lobby group) and PACIA (the plastics and chemicals body). Irvine's background, we learned, was as a PR adviser for the biotech (GM) crop industry.

"Public Relations is war," Irvine announced, in his curly-r accent. He was wearing an elegant suit coat, a white shirt, and colourful tie. Trim, 50s, clean-shaven, with steel-rimmed spectacles and a pleasant, broad face, he flashed a boyish smile. "Don't be afraid to attack," he warned. "If you learn nothing else today, this is the message: 'Fight networks with networks'."

Activist networks, he said, include supporters of NGOs like Community Aid Abroad, the Conservation Foundation, consumer groups, organic farmers, health advocates, Greenpeace, church groups and 'civil society groups'. These groups *demand* transparency, accountability, democracy and disclosure from business. "If NGOs *demand* transparency," he asked, lapsing into a whisper, "should NGOs be transparent too?"

People were nodding. "Yet NGOs are largely unknown entities. And it's fair for business to *demand* transparency from NGOs." He repeated this many times, adding, "It's only fair. It's only balanced."

But then we learned that detailed NGO records are available for industry PRs to gather intelligence. "There's a lot of information they have to file," he said, projecting their strategies – available online – overhead. "Here are their salaries, here are their tax receipts, marketing, lobbying, that sort of thing . . . their board of governance." And then he shot us a conspiratorial sideways glance. "You might find," he said, "that this person on this NGO board – *might be on the board of another organisation!*"

To help us combat NGOs, Irvine referred us to the teachings of the Rand Corporation, a US national security think-tank. This was when 'activist' became confused with "terrorist", "criminal", "guerilla" and "security threat". Don't be fooled, he warned, when activists claim they're about third world hunger or the environment or public health. "If you're in business and you support biodiversity," he said, "beware of what you're *really* supporting



. . . look beyond their immediate intentions. Their goal is a much larger concept that business, media and politicians must address!"

Some of us questioned Irvine's generalisations. Why see activists as the 'enemy' (a word used many times today)? Can't industry engage with moderate activists? Some people agreed, others shook their heads. No, warned Irvine. Once you cave to one demand, they'll come up with "a whole bunch" of others. Which will eventually threaten capitalism itself. "You will really screw yourself in the end."

A mess of complaints followed. Legal threats aren't working against activists – look what happened to McDonald's. Tanya Pittard, from the Victorian Farmers' Federation, said that even when industry and government are victorious, activists have 'won' by forcing them to spend money. The Grand Prix organisers, she said, had to deal with Albert Park residents and "crazy little old ladies", spending "thousands of dollars combating their crap". Irvine said that in Ontario activists are winning also. "You can't smoke anywhere now . . . 'Public health' is becoming a banner to implement a lot of restrictions on people these days, like foods in the dispensers in schools. It's becoming a banner to do all sorts of things . . . things I personally find questionable."

It was starting to feel like therapy. The moustachioed PACIA man shared his issues with the group: "An activist group can go outside the private house of a CEO of a chemical company, roll up there and say, 'you're a baby-killer'. But if the same chemical company paid their workers to go outside the house of green activists and say, ah, 'you're a gay

lesbian who does naughty things to whales', ah – we couldn't do that." The City of Darebin's Communications Officer, Shannon Walker, corrected him. "'Gay lesbian' is a tautology," he said.

To combat the problem of activist letters in newspapers, Irvine urged PR folk to engage more people to write letters. "If there are three letters in there in one week saying, 'GM [foods] are good', the politicians think, 'hey, that's pretty neat'." Costello's people, sitting up the back, said nothing. They looked bored.

It's hard for companies, said Irvine, because activists recruit people like "climate-warming, tree-hugging, salmon-loving, gay-woman-loving maybe" geneticist Dr David Suzuki. (Suzuki has said, "Any politician or scientist who assures you that GM products are safe is either very stupid or lying.") What would Dr Suzuki know, asked Irvine – Suzuki studied *fruit flies!* A PR for the GM crop industry, Irvine told us that millions of people have consumed GM products for years "without a sniffle!"

There are in fact many documented cases of the adverse effects of consuming GM products. The most recent is the CSIRO pea case in Australia, and the most serious is the Eosinophilia-Myalgia Syndrome (EMS) case, in which around 5000 people across North America experienced a previously unknown disease, causing lifetime paralysis and fifty deaths. Showa Denko conceded a GM component of its product was responsible, and paid \$1.2 billion in compensation.

But agribusiness and biotech spin doctors were nodding. Activists have time and resources to do things that corporates don't, said one. Irvine agreed. "The smaller groups often get a tremendous amount of power and influence that they don't deserve . . . Quite frankly, business doesn't have the resources and capability that activists do."

Liza McDonald, Stakeholder Relations Manager for the Port of Melbourne Corporation, didn't agree. "You're presuming all activists are wrong. Sometimes they're not." Her frustrations, she said, stemmed from the Corporation spending \$12 million on an environmental impact statement, "and we didn't get the result that we wanted". Referring to the Corporation's contentious plans to undertake 'test' dredging, she said that unless you go ahead and channel-deepen, "you can't demonstrate entirely that nothing will go wrong".

To this, the PRIA's David Hawkins said, "The challenge, I think, from what Ross is saying, is . . .

we need to work out how we *can* break the law to do these things." (The Port of Melbourne Corporation is obliged under several State and Commonwealth Acts to assess environmental impact.)

To a complaint that chemical companies are legally obliged to consult with community, Irvine said: "This is a process that activists have put in place over years! What they've gradually done to the State!"

"What Ross is saying," added Hawkins, "is that we need to be activists too, expand our networks to actually change the legislation."

Quoting Margaret Thatcher, George W. Bush, Fox News, Rand and the IPA, he warned participants of "a very anti-business ethic going through society, I think it's going through the school system a whole bunch, too. I find that a little bit frightening, I think it's at the university level . . . boy, this sounds pretty bizarre and paranoid but I think there's a left-wing sort of thing."

This claim, hammered daily in newspapers around Australia, can be traced to IPA campaigns and those of US neocon think-tanks. "The wild claims of far-right groups like the IPA drag the spectrum of political debate to the right," says Monash University economist Tim Thornton. "What was once a moderate position is now depicted as ultra left-ist, while extremist propaganda seems reasonable, particularly when it's dressed up as fact." Referring to the ideology behind the *Draft Charities Bill*, imported wholesale from the US, he says: "Once these ideas were at the edge of sanity, now they're at the edge of policy."

At the end of Irvine's seminar, we split into groups for exercises. One was challenged to "assume the position of moral leadership", a lesson from Irvine's work with the biotech (GM crop) industry. When the GM crop industry faced health, environmental, economic, legal and social challenges, it mounted a higher moral ground campaign: GM crops will save third world children from malnutrition and starvation. The stratagem is to promote not with facts, said Irvine, but values. This, he claimed, is what activists do, and what industry must do better. "There are some real immoral people on the anti-biotech side," he said. "Activists say, 'let the kids starve'. That, to me, is totally immoral and amoral and everything. That, I'm sorry, that just brings out, I get really . . ." he inhaled and shook his head.

Another group was charged with finding ways to discredit activists. "Discredit the ideology and defeat

the terrorist,” advised Irvine. The group came up with: “Call them suicide bombers . . . make them all look like terrorists . . . tree-hugging, dope-smoking, bloody university graduate, anti-progress . . .” and “Spot the flake. Find someone who would represent the enemy but clearly doesn’t know what the issue is . . . find a 16-year-old” and “distract the activist with side issues . . . and make enemies within the enemy camp so they spend all their time fighting and that helps to deepen their disorganisation.”

Our group was charged with ‘empowering others’ to support a cause. The cause was the Port of Melbourne channel-deepening. Once we had determined who we will ‘empower’ (unions, farmers’ groups, retailers), the PRIA’s David Hawkins suggested marginalising the environmental argument. This could be done with what Bush flacks call ‘the fire hose method’ – bombarding the media with issues, information and press conferences so they don’t have the resources to interview alternative sources.

To the suggestion that the case for channel-deepening should be the voice of reason, Hawkins replied, “No, no, let’s be the voice of *un*reason. Let’s call them fruitcakes. Let’s call them nut – nutters. You know, let’s say they’re . . .”

“Environmental radicals,” suggested Darebin’s Shannon Walker.

“Exactly. You know . . . say they represent 0.1 per cent but they dominate, you know, let’s absolutely go for them.”

Our group discussed astroturfing. Named after a synthetic lawn, astroturfing is the creation of bogus community groups or independent authorities who endorse industry practice, recruit lesser-informed citizens, confuse the debate and make the real community groups appear extreme. The *Guardian* uncovered one case in which one of Monsanto’s public relations companies, Bivings Woodell, fabricated science ‘experts’ and online ‘scientific communities’ who successfully discredited genuine peer-reviewed science reports about the dangers of GM crops. Protest movements were also invented, including one at Johannesburg’s World Summit on Sustainable Development, widely reported as a demonstration by ‘third world’ farmers chanting “I don’t need white NGOs to speak for me”.

The University of Wollongong’s Professor Sharon Beder says ‘astroturf’ of this kind is rapidly propagating in Australia. “You need to know any particular issue very well to be able to distinguish the astroturf

from the genuine grassroots groups,” she says. “For example, in mental health there are several front groups funded by pharmaceutical companies but they have a great deal of public credibility. Unless you know the issue well, you wouldn’t be able to pick them.” Those alleged by academics to be front groups include the Forest Protection Society (funded by the logging industry), Green Fleet, the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) and Mothers Against Pollution, which campaigns against milk bottles and is funded by the Association of Liquid Paperboard Carton Manufacturers.

To arm the workshop’s pro-channel-deepening astroturf, it was suggested that research and statistics could be featured on its website. The PRIA’s David Hawkins responded:

No, that’s – you don’t need the research at all . . . you say, ‘50 per cent of the workforce will go if this doesn’t happen’ . . . You just say ‘we believe’ – we don’t know if it’s true or not – but we say ‘we believe’ . . . if they say, ‘can we have a look at your research?’ then we just run. We don’t answer, we just close down the website and open another.

In our group was Bernadette Basell, senior partner of KPPR, which represents the mobile phone industry. She didn’t share Hawkins’ approach, saying later that “misrepresentation and deception, such as astroturfing, is deplored by most in the public relations industry. Community groups usually have genuine concerns that need to be addressed.”

I later learned that Basell then alerted Hawkins to the possible motivations behind my line of questioning. Later still, Hawkins sent me an email to clarify what he’d said at the workshop. “It is totally unacceptable and unethical for any PR practitioner to pretend to represent another organisation that they do not represent or to fabricate a community group or identity,” he wrote.

His public relations company, Socom, a firm with mostly Labor and some Liberal government clients across Australia, has set up community groups, but there’s no evidence to suggest these are astroturf. It’s acceptable, Hawkins wrote, for PR firms “to assist members of a community set up a group”.

Yet the PRIA (of which Hawkins is Victorian director) has been accused on Crikey.com of being “a secretive organisation” with “questionable” political links. “The Institute purports to be a professional

body,” wrote one practitioner. “They are ill-equipped for the task. Individual members are themselves open to claims of dubious ethical behaviour.”

Shannon Walker summed up the PRIA workshop as “weird”, saying he didn’t learn anything he could use. Hawkins said “If Ross was to return to Australia I would definitely consider running another workshop”. Asked why he partook in the workshop, Costello’s adviser, David Gazard, declined to comment.

But government employees – be they federal or local – have no place in a forum that promotes ways to stop citizens participating in the democratic process, says economist Clive Hamilton. Hamilton heads the Australia Institute, a public policy research body funded by grants from philanthropic trusts and staffed by economists. (The Institute claims to be neither left nor right wing.) Given an audio recording of the workshop, Hamilton responded, “Why a government agency would attend a seminar like this is beyond comprehension. These agencies are owned by the public, yet by attending seminars to learn how to beat citizens’ groups by means fair or foul they are turning on their owners. Only an organisation that has wholly alienated itself from the public would even consider attending an event like this.”

Not all at the workshop agreed with Irvine’s methods (the Port of Melbourne Corporation’s Liza McDonald said later, “It would be a very terrible world if there weren’t activists”.) But the Australia Institute’s survey of 290 NGOs suggests the PRIA event is part of a wider campaign to silence dissent. Seventy-four per cent of NGO respondents believe they are being pressured to make their public statements conform with government policy. Ninety-two per cent said they disagree with the view that dissenting voices are valued by government as part of a robust democracy. Ninety per cent believe that dissenting organisations risk having their funding cut. “You toe the line or you risk getting defunded,” one respondent said. Another said: “It is clear from our funding contract with Government that it sees our role not as a peak body in a democratic society but as a mechanism to help the Government ‘get its message out’ and help the Government implement its policy objectives.”

This comes at a time when the federal government has slashed funds to larger NGOs but boosted funding for its own advocacy, spending more money than any Australian government in history on public

relations consultants. It is also a time when, depending on which statistics you believe, 30 to 90 per cent of news content is PR-driven.

At the workshop wrap-up, Irvine handed out his business card, ink-jet printed on flimsy stock, with a pedestrian logo – ‘?’ over ‘NGO’. He’s ‘President’ of ePublic Relations, a corporation with online marketing and ‘net-wars’ expertise, but its website design is amateur, with links that don’t work. Asked how to get around spamming laws, he has no idea. And ePublic Relations’ address in Guelph, Ontario, is a modest house in a suburban street, with, according to one source, “no indication of business activities”.

Some advocacy groups suggest that Irvine is SuperAstroturf, imported by industry front groups to seed a lawn of propaganda. “For some time right-wing think-tanks have been developing a campaign to discredit and undermine the work of NGOs,” says Hamilton. “The attack on their role in the democratic process is being taken up by conservative governments. The Howard Government is playing footsies with the IPA, which itself is associated with the far right in the USA.”

The IPA’s campaign to strip charitable NGOs of their tax exemption status if they engage in advocacy (or ‘activism’) is the essence of both Irvine’s workshop and the *Draft Charities Bill*. The Howard Government paid the IPA \$46,000 to develop ‘advice’ for this Bill because, it claims, NGOs have too much influence on government.

Tim Thornton calls these claims:

paranoid nonsense, an ideological obsession that sits badly with basic reasoning and observation. The evidence reveals that humanitarian and environment groups enjoy wide support among the electorate, but they actually have little influence on policy compared with business lobbies. Yet they have to be at least as accountable as these lobbies.

Clive Hamilton says the campaign to silence dissent and defund NGOs who criticise policy “would destroy many of them, and that’s what John Howard and Peter Costello want. It’s soup kitchens or nothing.”

A version of this article was first commissioned by an Australian broadsheet newspaper and then killed. Those wishing to obtain an electronic recording of the Ross Irvine workshop held in April 2005 can email requests to: <wilson.kath@optusnet.com.au>.

THE BRANDED LANDSCAPE

UNDERGROUND, at tourist information at Melbourne's Federation Square, can be seen an image Victoria has of itself. A branded image, for it is one being sold to would-be tourists. Our landscape is heavily implicated in this promotional effort – for it is the star attraction. On display are a huge variety of brochures and guides to a bewildering variety of regions, each branded with its own character. Images of vineyards and a cultivated aura of glamour and romance can be suggestive of the charms of France or Tuscany. Very unlike one of those pastoral paintings by Arthur Streeton or a scraggy hillside by Fred Williams showing at NGV Australia across the square.

The Victoria I know as an out of doors landscape painter is quite different to the representation at Tourism Victoria. Out in the landscape I am not infrequently battling the weather, the heat and the wind, and the flies. I still love it, mind you, though I am far more likely to be painting cows in a paddock than the more inviting landscape images which feature in the brochures.

Which makes me wonder – to what extent do Victorians and visitors see our landscape in the scenic and experiential terms conveyed by the tourist brochure? And to what extent might they take an interest in, and have an appreciation for, the more familiar and everyday looking landscapes of bush and paddock closer to home; landscapes which occupy the greater part of the settled land area of this state and the continent?

It was in pursuit of my investigation that I visited Tourism Victoria at Federation Square. It was packed with people and a score of staff answering the questions of prospective tourists. Over at NGV Australia

it seemed very quiet by comparison. I wondered whether a major modern landscape painter like Fred Williams, who is well represented at NGV Australia, might have a lot less impact on our culture's perceptions of landscape, that is on how we see landscape in terms of its meanings for us, than Tourism Victoria. We're often told artists like Fred Williams or Sidney Nolan have changed the way we see our landscape. But the 'we' referred to is probably not inclusive of the public when they are actually out touring the landscape, or thinking about where they want to go for a holiday.

It may be the case that our culture sees the landscape in ways that are in some significant respects not unlike their Australian and European forebears. While some major differences can be noted – artists and public in the nineteenth century were inclined to seek God in nature – it is also the case that for two hundred years now Europeans and Australians have demonstrated by their art, their writing, and by their travel a fondness for pleasing and dramatic scenery. In its more gentle and pastoral manifestations this scenery was once called the picturesque. In its more dramatic and spectacular manifestations (such as mountains, waterfalls, vivid sunsets) it was, and not infrequently still is, called the sublime. Whatever the aesthetic terminology used, there remains a continuing appreciation for seeing and experiencing these kinds of landscapes. This shared sensibility may underlie the enthusiasm people still have for the landscape painting of the nineteenth century (such as the record attendances to the 2004 French Impressionist exhibition at NGV International).

Scenery – raw material for the picturesque and the

sublime – features at Tourism Victoria. But there is more to the tourist brochure than inviting photos. Even allowing for the expected hype (after all Victoria is being ‘sold’) the text of these brochures can be impossibly clichéd. ‘Experience’ is a constant refrain, followed by a frequent smattering of ‘discover’, ‘indulge’, ‘explore’, and ‘world class’. The language is about doing, it is action oriented. It is not suggestive of the reflective or the thoughtful. The brochure on the Yarra Valley advises the would-be tourist that “The Yarra Valley is a world class, world renowned wine region” which offers the visitor “world class wine”. Other promotional slogans include “Victoria – the Place to Be” and “Melbourne. You’ll Never Want to Leave.”

The constantly recurrent use of ‘experience’ to describe our potential engagement with landscape strikes me as being emotive, as advertising is inclined to be. You are being advised that here is something you can hope to do, or be, in the future if you buy the advertised product (the ‘experience’). And this product is glamourised so that you might desire it. That is, the tourist brochure seeks to create in your mind an image of yourself as happier and more enviable if you undertake the ‘experience’ being promoted.

This encourages a way of relating to landscape which has perhaps too little to do with landscape and nature and too much to do with self and self image. This is a culture which, to paraphrase a recent review of landscape painting by *Age* art critic Robert Nelson, exploits our sense of what we want, but discourages a sense of discovery of what we have.

To the extent that branding has colonised ways of seeing the landscape, a sense of otherness about landscape becomes harder to sustain. By otherness I mean that nature can be seen to have an existence of its own, in some degree inaccessible to us. I am not talking mysticism here, just an appreciation of the fugitive qualities of nature and landscape.

Still, for every photo of a tourist icon, such as the Twelve Apostles, the cute and cuddly penguins at Phillip Island, and vineyards, there are photos of waterfalls in forests and other attractions which require more effort than rolling up and taking a photo. Our national parks and state forests are well represented in the brochures and many of the brochures cater to the needs, interests and budgets of the less well-heeled visitor, including families on budget holidays and those whose inclination is to ecotourism. However, when I asked Tourism at



David Frazer, *The Embrace*, c.2005. Courtesy of Dickerson Gallery.



David Frazer, *Lift Off*, 2001. Courtesy of Dickerson Gallery.



Ken Smith, *Landscape 8 (Martha Point, South Channel, to Blairgowrie)*, 2005. Courtesy of Flinders Lane Gallery.

Federation Square about a brochure on the Western Plains (I have an interest in the craters of the region – places like Mount Elephant, for example) I was told there was no brochure as this “was not a tourist region”.

If the tourist brochure, the family photo album, and the many coffee-table books on landscape photography to be found in bookshops are any guide, it may be that current ways of seeing the landscape in our culture are heavily represented in scenic photography. Maybe this isn't so surprising; English art writer Kenneth Clark said in his seminal *Landscape into Art* (1949) that everyone enjoys a good view. But in our age, in a world and culture increasingly corporatised, it may be that the way our culture views landscape is less innocent than it once was. Perhaps we can now talk about a branded landscape, that is, a landscape so heavily caught up in promotion and hype so as to attract the tourist dollar that it helps condition the way we perceive the land. Increasingly we view everything else in our culture (including each other) in commodified terms – why should our seeing of the land be exempt from this process?

To consider this possibility, reference to another seminal book, *No Logo*, by Canadian author Naomi Klein, provides a useful context. Published in 2000 *No Logo* has been translated into over twenty languages. Klein proposed that culture was under siege by branding. Branding wasn't just the marketing of things, it wasn't just advertising; advertising had been around for as long as anyone could remember. Instead branding was aspiring to become culture itself (including the way we see, how we think of ourselves and the world around us). It was becoming increasingly difficult to find time out from a branded world, though Klein noted in a brief reference to landscape that “national parks and nature reserves: these quasi-sacred spaces remind us that unbranded space is still possible”. True, but not as true as was once the case: here in Victoria it is now commonplace to pay a not insignificant ‘parking fee’ to visit some state reserves such as Hanging Rock or some popular sites in national parks, such as Cape Schank.

The idea behind branding was that people would buy a product, or a concept, or an experience, because they identified with and sought the image that the thing they wanted represented. The product, and hence the image, helped to identify to both themselves and others who you were, what you believed

in, and what you wanted to be. As Klein remarked in *No Logo*: “If brands are not (just) products but ideas, attitudes, values and experiences, why can't they be culture too?” Behind this phenomenon of cultural colonisation, were the vast resources of the global (mostly American) corporations. Yet in *No Logo* Klein also went to great lengths to detail the opposition building to branding and corporate culture. By her own writing and speaking engagements Klein continues to offer much support to this anti-branding movement.

The branding of landscape is more manifestly obvious as a phenomenon when the focus shifts from Victoria to Australia as a whole. A government-funded campaign called Brand Australia has been seeking to market the Australian landscape as a tourist destination to prospective overseas visitors for some years now. Their job seems all the more easy and convincing as they are catering to already pre-existing images of what makes Australia unique in the eyes of the world. These landscape images naturally include Uluru and Sydney Harbour, as well as the Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu, beautiful beaches, and various geologically spectacular sites in the outback.

Many of these sites can seem exotic to most Australians themselves, living as most do in large coastal cities far from the desert and northern regions of the continent. Yet it is also the case that more and more Australians identify their nation with these landscape images. The way most Australians view their landscape and the meanings they derive from it more or less coincides with the marketing campaign to sell Australia to tourists, both from within Australia and overseas. These landscape images feature in our Qantas television promotions. They feature in the profusion of coffee-table books of wilderness photography. They were featured in the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics. And the outback has featured in notable recent Australian movies, such as *Wolf Creek* and *The Proposition*, released in late 2005, as well as the earlier *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *Japanese Story*.

In addition, cultural studies have, when giving consideration to the cultural meanings of landscape, focused on the more exotic landscapes of Brand Australia. Symposiums, broadsheet newspaper surveys of ‘The Land’, and books of collected essays, even when focused on the pastoral industry, have tended to avoid discussing anywhere south of the Murray

Landscape painting . . . may or may not resonate with the market. But the investigation of culturally unbranded space presents the artist with an opportunity – for herein lies the possibility for an art which implicitly critiques the culture of branding.

River. Accounts of the pastoral industry prefer to focus on the juxtaposition of the Aborigine with the white pastoralist – and predictably the result is that Victoria is overlooked.

Of course, the great Australian desert, remote areas like the Kimberley and Kakadu (along with their ancient Aboriginal cultures), and the wilderness areas of Australia remain genuinely fascinating and inspiring. Many of our great painters, past and present, have derived inspiration from such environments and by representing these landscapes have added much to our developing sense of cultural identity. Uluru has been painted by artists as diverse as Lloyd Rees and Brett Whiteley, the teeming life of Lake Eyre in flood has been the subject of John Olsen's work, Fred Williams produced a remarkable series on the Pilbara of Western Australia, and William Robinson has become well known in recent years for his paintings of the Queensland rainforest. And there is the continuing vital contribution of the Aboriginal painters of the desert.

A focus on the painting of the remote and more exotic landscapes of Australia, in particular on the internationally known and iconic images of the outback and Sydney Harbour, coincides with Brand Australia's marketing. This is not to say the artists painting these subjects are thinking about landscape in branded terms. Far from it. The aim of any good painter of the landscape is to respond in ways unique and compelling. But it does seem that buyers and collectors (and the galleries competing for their business) are likely to hold the view, now pervasive in our culture, that Australia's identity is revealed by the 'unique' landscapes of exotic Australia. These are the landscapes that we, as a nation and people, have come to identify with. From the distance of the coastal cities they are possessed of romance and glamour.

By way of contrast, until the 1950s Australians mostly identified with the landscape of rural and pastoral Australia. Our landscape art featured wide plains and valleys, gum trees and sheep and cattle. Many notable artists were painting these themes, among them Hans Heysen and Arthur Streeton.

With the coming of Modernism in art and increased travel opportunities for Australians and international visitors, the interests of both artists and public shifted to desert and urban landscapes. In cultural terms pastoral Australia seemed to belong to the past.

Yet the land which inspired earlier generations of artists is still out there and rural Australia ought to be acknowledged in our contemporary art as an important part of our cultural landscape. To revisit this landscape, and continue to work within European derived artistic conventions, requires that the artist seek new interpretations which reflect contemporary realities.

One such reality might be to acknowledge our contemporary concern for ecological issues. From this perspective the rural landscape can be viewed, and represented, in new ways. For example, *The New Nature* (2003), a book by Australian biologist and writer Tim Low, argues that farm animals such as cattle and sheep, and introduced species, are a part of our ecosystem. They, like we, are impacting on everything else. So the painter can seek to draw the viewer into their world just as they are drawn into ours. A kind of shifting notion of reality and consciousness ensues.

Another reality might be to acknowledge that for all the sense of solitude which landscape can evoke, rural Australia is nevertheless integrated into the industrial economy (tourism, agribusiness, and world trade). Passive acceptance is not being implied here, and acknowledgement may take the form of critique – in my work I seek to empathise with the cows.

Ours is a predominantly European culture here in Victoria and it is only realistic to acknowledge a mix of the native and the European in what is characteristically a humanised and historicised landscape. There is the potential for poetry and mystery in exploring the sometimes fugitive quality that this mix can generate. Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly series is famous for having done just that.

It might also be acknowledged that no one kind of landscape can or should be expected to carry the burden of national identity, as Prime Minister

Robert Menzies once sought for the pastoral. And importantly, the contemporary landscape painter will probably want to bring to the work a sense of the times in which we live, and who knows where that will take them?

Landscape painting which celebrates the familiar and everyday may or may not resonate with the market – probably not if the work is seen to lack glamour. But the investigation of culturally unbranded space presents the artist with an opportunity – for herein lies the possibility for an art which implicitly critiques the culture of branding. An aesthetics not only of celebration, but also of resistance. An art which broadens and deepens the cultural identity we derive from ways we see the landscape.

There are some exceptional artists, based here in Melbourne, who are showing the way by making work which acknowledges an implied (or openly stated) human presence in the landscape – their own. For example, there is Mary Tonkin, who lives in heavily wooded country in the Dandenongs. Her oil paintings are made on site in the forest. The artist will work on stretched canvases and then, as the painting progresses over time, add more same-sized panels so that eventually the artist ends up with an enormous multi-panelled work in her studio. For the viewer the work evokes an embodied and organic-like sensation of seeing and feeling nature, in tandem with the artist's own experience of looking while painting. There is no capturing of any singular moment here, as can be obtained in a landscape photo. Nor does Tonkin's painting suggest the exotic. Rather, the work is about the lived experience of the artist in what is, for her, a familiar place.

Another artist who paints where he lives is Ken Smith. In Smith's small and intimate paintings made in the open air, the semi-suburban and semi-rural landscape of Mount Martha on the Mornington Peninsula combines with vistas of Port Phillip Bay to evoke a mood of stillness and delight in the familiar. The work celebrates being in the world as much as it is a celebration of looking and painting in the moment.

My friend Wayne Viney does not paint a specific geographical place. But by the way the artist's work references English romantics John Constable and J.M.W. Turner the artist acknowledges the continuing potency and relevance of the sublime. Relevant because it seems the sublime – a feeling of delight and awe – is no less a part of our response to landscape

today than it was one and two hundred years ago.

Admittedly it is difficult to feel much sense of the sublime (or the picturesque) when contemplating the vista of flat wheat, sheep, or cattle country (or any fairly featureless landscape). One of the few contemporary artists in Victoria to allow such unbranded landscapes into his work is David Frazer. The artist has painted views of his house and the surrounding country of paddocks and low-lying hills. This landscape also appears as the stage for imagined and whimsical works, mostly in printmaking, which give expression to the dreams and desires which are born of living in this landscape.

In making work about his own lived experience in this entirely unglamorous place Frazer's insights are genuinely personal. In *Lift Off* (2000) we are shown the artist standing on the roof of his house, as if acting out a desire to fly away and leave. Sure, this is home, but unfulfilled longings remain. In *The Embrace* (c.2005) Frazer reveals what he has found or is still looking for.

The states of being evoked by Frazer's work include joy, innocence, a lingering sense of strangeness about being in this landscape, loneliness, uncertainty, a sense of belonging and a sense of longing. The emotions and thoughts Frazer brings to the landscape are complex and even contradictory. They are just the sorts of responses which tend to be repressed when the landscape is used in a promotional way and when it is seen as a glamorous stage for self fulfillment.

Frazer's work acknowledges that as a predominantly European culture, in what in many ways is a distinctly non-European looking and functioning landscape, a sense of strangeness of the land can still linger. Our response can at times take on an almost existential quality and our mix of responses can provide a source for poetic exploration and inquiry. A sense of tension and uncertainty can be as much a response to our landscape, and to our sense of being, as celebration. Both are valid. Frazer's work offers a refreshing alternative to the tendency to view and promote Australia's identity in exotic and self-consciously branded terms.

For myself, like these artists, I am happy to paint Home Brand landscapes. Landscapes like the You Yangs, Lal Lal falls near Ballarat, or horses in a paddock.

Dr Mark Dober is a landscape painter.

LITERARY PUBLISHING IN A NUTSHELL

Alex Miller: *Prochownik's Dream* (Allen & Unwin, \$29.95, ISBN 1741142490)

Josephine Wilson: *Cusp* (UWAP, \$24.95, ISBN 1920694560)

Steven Lang: *An Accidental Terrorist* (UQP, \$22.95, ISBN 0702235202)

M.J. Hyland: *Carry Me Down* (Text, \$29.95, ISBN 1921145099)

TEN YEARS AGO, Edward Berridge said in that renowned literary (and soft-porn) magazine, *Black and White*, that Australian literature had become the preserve of enfeebled soft-left yuppies and their boring middle-class dramas. A number of critics (myself included) leapt to Ozlit's defence. Surely Berridge had only got half (if that) of the picture right? His ignorance of the history of literature in this country led him to recognise only one faction, one lineage, to the exclusion of other groupings, including his own. I went in hard because Berridge was asking for it, literally and figuratively.

Having read a good chunk (and published a small bite) of the Australian fiction published over the past decade my defences have wavered; though I am yet to be tempted to say: Come back Ed, all is forgiven! But having seen the latest Miles Franklin longlist (and the subsequent shortlist) I am tempted to approach him with the idea of our forming a militant Anti-Middle-Class-Ozlit-Organisation (AMCOO).

While the book trade is publishing a lot of middle-class tripe, books with energy and of significance are still being produced by both the mainstream trade and alternative publishers. The point is that in any random sample of contemporary Australian novels you are going to read a very uneven bunch.

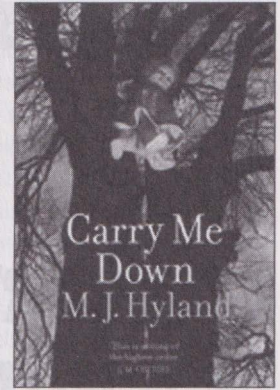
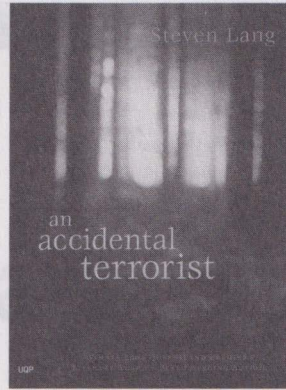
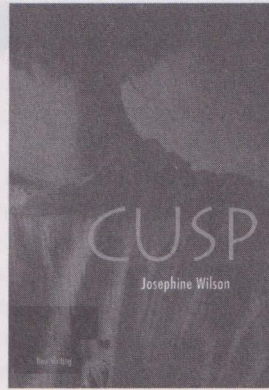
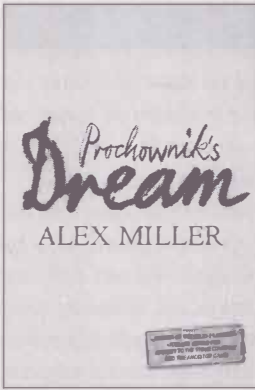
And so it is with this lot of books.

Alex Miller's *Prochownik's Dream* is vying for the position of the second-worst book I have ever read. So dreary and boring was this novel that I was unable to finish it (putting it down on page 123). Ordinarily this would mean that I would simply not review the book. But this kind of guff crosses my line in the sand. The story of an artist who has lost his spark but who finds it in the bosom of his best friend and mentor's wife repeats a narrative and story structure that must have been used . . . oh . . . about a billion times before in the history of human storytelling. Full of self-regarding middle-class twits, *Prochownik's Dream's* only glimmer of interest was in the annoyingly bitchy and unfair cameo presentation of a character based on the successful artist and *Overland* stalwart, Rick Amor.

With no other motive than casual malice: I can reveal that yes Virginia, the main character does root his best mate's wife. (I asked someone who had finished the book, wanting to know whether he'd put the cherry on the top of his cliché sundae.)

From here the only way is up.

Like *Prochownik's Dream*, Josephine Wilson's first novel, *Cusp* also beats a well-trodden narrative path: daughter escapes cloying mother's clutches, only to find herself inevitably drawn back into the fold so that they can achieve a higher level of under-



standing, sympathy and love. At first I was worried that this too was just one more middle-class drama – albeit with a feminist edge. The plot seemed also to promise a saccharine ending. If the book’s freshness and sparkle saved it from a position in the bin alongside Miller, its latter two-thirds won me over completely. Within the prison house of its structure the book reveals more and more treasures: laugh-aloud moments, slowly drawn pictures of growing self-awareness, allusions to the themes and moods of the great women’s novels of the 1960s and seventies, and a story-line that turns back on itself to reveal a powerful and surprising conclusion.

Steven Lang’s *Accidental Terrorist* is like a breath of fresh air. A contemporary political thriller set in the forests of southern NSW, it pits the forestry workers of Eden against green activists from around the district. This clash has an unexpectedly violent and bloody ending. Running through this tension is the story of Carl, an American Vietnam activist on the run from the spooks and a love triangle that develops between him, Jessica and Kelvin, the misfit central character. A mix of genre and literary fiction, this book will not necessarily please purists of either form but is nonetheless a terrific debut novel.

The last book in this group is something special. *Carry Me Down* is M.J. Hyland’s second novel. It is the story of John Egan, a boy in the rural Irish town of Gorey, who is unusually large for his age and obsessed with truth and the *Guinness Book of Records*. The book’s first-person narrative gives the reader immediate access to the workings of John’s mind and we are in turn delighted, enthralled and disturbed by his musings. Over the course of the novel, the first impressions of John’s endearing wackiness transform into suspicions that he is a boy

on the edge of madness and violence. Reminiscent but not derivative of that other Irish study in juvenile madness, Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy*, *Carry Me Down* is a book by a writer on the path to serious international recognition.

One thing that disturbs me greatly about *Carry Me Down*, however, is the absence of Australia. Indeed, this book will not win the 2007 Miles Franklin despite the possibility that it could well be the best novel published in Australia this year. Hyland was born in Ireland, but has spent most of her life in Australia. She was located in the literary scene in Melbourne as the editor/publisher of *Nocturnal Submissions* and she worked for a time as a story reader at *Meanjin*. Yet this book has not one whiff of Australian literature about it (though, it could be argued Hyland’s reference to a ‘soccer’ ball has an Australian provenance). This is not a criticism of Hyland because to me the book feels honestly conceived and has its own literary truth.

But is this the point to which we’ve come in Australian writing: you can only succeed internationally if you ignore, parody or fetishise your home? *Carry Me Down* could have been set in Australia. There is nothing necessarily Irish about it. John Egan could have lived in Ballarat or Bathurst or Toowoomba or Burnie or Port Augusta or Geraldton and the novel would have worked just as well. But would it have sold overseas?

Hyland’s excision of Australia from her palette points to a sickness at the heart of our literature. We have lost the literary-nationalist confidence and bravado that came with the baby boomers and their cultural revolution. We are also pandering to the gods of globalisation and economic rationalism. On the one hand we have big publishers reducing

their decision-making processes solely to economic considerations; on the other we have small publishers being suffocated by a lack of media and constricted by a refusal of the major book chains to take their fiction seriously. Only a few middle rank publishers (like Hyland's publisher Text, and Scribe) have the will and the capacity and the space to publish serious fiction well.

It's particularly strange that in this context calls to loosen the Miles Franklin's criteria are becoming louder. Most recently, Jane Sullivan in the *Age* has argued that all books written by Australians should be eligible instead of just those presenting 'Australian life in any of its phases' because the nature of Australian publishing is so different from the moment when the Prize was founded. Perhaps. It may well be the case that times have changed; it also remains the case that times can always change back! It strikes me that there's little enough economic motive to

write about Australian life already without removing one significant reward for so doing. And the simple fact is we cannot trust the contemporary Australian publishing industry to nurture and promote local culture.

Of the four books reviewed here, one is published by a corporate (Allen & Unwin), one by an independent (Text) and the other two by university presses. For all their freshness and brightness the latter two will fail to make a dent in the trade – for the reasons mentioned above and because their publicity and distribution machines are weak. The independent's will soar because of its sheer quality and through international recognition. The corporate's will put everyone who reads it to sleep. And there you have it: Australian literary publishing in a nutshell!

Ian Syson runs the Vulgar Press. Their most recent novel is *Subtopia* by A.L. McCann.

Canto of the Muscular Treasurer of Australia – Mr Costello

Chin up, wading out of 'piss Christ',
wading through mushy-culturalism,
I demanded tougher oaths,

more compact make-overs.
I buoyed the congregation,
I mined the vast emptiness,

I removed the clutter of forests
and deleted any over-particulars,
I annexed and annulled the twilight zone.

Welcoming four corners of earth
into the living room,
I vacuumed.

I strengthened big flashes
and warning signs, coaled
over the differences,

bet on the bloodiest of values.
And I called for the charter:
of what we are, what they can't be.

JOHN KINSELLA

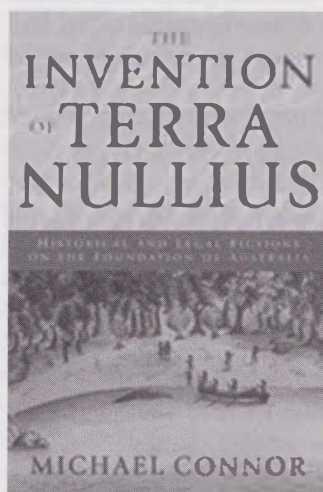
OPERATION SANDY TRACK

MICHAEL CONNOR AND THE WAR ON AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

MICHAEL CONNOR'S RECENT book, *The Invention of Terra Nullius*, is churlish, abusive, envious, contradictory, repetitive, amateurish, politically driven and unscrupulous.¹ It also makes a successful empirical point that other historians will overlook or dismiss at their cost. The childish provocations are not worth dignifying. They are best ignored. But Connor is right about the historical currency of the term *terra nullius*. Revisionist Australian historians began to use this term in the 1970s. The colonisers of Australia did not use it in the eighteenth century. This came as a surprise to me, an Australian historian. It should not have done so. I should have known better. I am not alone in this.

Connor demonstrates that the verbal formula *terra nullius* – which figured in the Mabo judgement and, accordingly, fed into the *Native Title Act* of December 1993 – is a twentieth-century neologism that was unknown to the original colonisers of Australia. On the face of it, this is an interesting historical curiosity, but there is no reason why it should be more than that – what, after all, is in a name? The important thing, we might say, is not the notational detail but its concrete historical referent. The world-view expressed by the term *terra nullius*, together with the historical activities that were premised on that view, exist independently of the term itself.

This is a simple enough proposition with many analogues. For instance, the fact that mid-nineteenth-century Englishmen did not happen to use the term 'imperialism' does not affect their status as imperialists *par excellence*. Correspondingly, the fact



that the colonisers of Australia did not use the term *terra nullius* cannot alter the fact that they treated Aborigines as people without rights whose land was simply there for the taking by whatever means should prove necessary. *Terra nullius* encapsulates that attitude as ably as the term 'imperialism' encapsulates the view that the sun should never set on one's possessions.

This, however, is not how Connor sees it. Rather, he wants to use the nomenclature of *terra nullius* as a tail with which to wag the whole dog of Australian colonial history. His actual target is not linguistics but land rights. Thus it is not surprising that Keith Windschuttle should choose to publish this book, which (with the help of the *Australian*) seems set to give the history wars another lease of life. More surprising – or, at least, disappointing – is the number of senior Australian historians who have left themselves vulnerable to this unworthy attack on Aboriginal rights.

Connor is aware of the issue of verbal reference. Indeed, his sensitivity to the damage it does to his argument can be gauged from the fact that he

reserves his most intemperate scuttlebutt for the personal vilification of those who raise it. This is hardly surprising, since the question of reference is the very point at which his book tries to make the move from debunking the term *terra nullius* to dismissing the practical injustice that it stands for. If he cannot make that move, then all he is left with is a genteel foray into etymology rather than the wholesale exercise in historical denial that is his overweening ambition.

On the face of it, Connor does not have much to go on. After all, if *terra nullius* is not a reasonable rendition of the cast of mind that enabled a whole continent to be seized from its owners over the course of a century or so, then what is? What difference could it possibly make to this violent history to argue that certain words used to refer to it in the 1980s were different from words used to refer to it in the 1780s? To argue this unarguable difference, Connor has two principal tactics, to which he resorts repeatedly throughout the book. The most striking feature of these two tactics – especially since his argument purports to be historical – is that neither of them has anything to do with the history of Australian settlement.

The first tactic, which we shall come to below, is to assert that the colonisation of Australia was done and dusted before the first settler even set foot on the continent. Well before the First Fleet arrived, Australia had already been annexed by the British government in the wake of Cook's 'discovery', which had involved the assertion of British possession of the continent. Since this procedure had taken place on paper, it had, by definition, been peaceful. On this basis, Australia was immaculately conceived in a documentary space whose defining characteristic was its exclusion of the actual history of colonial settlement.

Connor's second tactic involves the question of reference. Being confined to the realm of abstract semantics, this tactic is no more historical than the first one. Nonetheless, it masquerades as history by taking the form of an attack on historians. To this end, Connor is aided by a motley collection of straw men – amateur historians, non-historians, archaeologists, graduate students, cultural studies fruitcakes – who, in aggregate, have attached such a diverse range of meanings to the term *terra nullius* that the resultant semantic hodgepodge could not possibly have a single coherent real-world referent. Between

them, Connor's bunch of irregular "modern writers" certainly give him a field day:

Which idea did *terra nullius* express that was fundamental to British settlement? Land without sovereignty, without tenure, without a past, unpopulated, sparsely populated, uncultivated, 'waste and uncultivated', 'land of no people', without habitations, or even 'Captain Cook's law'? Was it the idea that the Aborigines were people who had 'ceased to exist', who were 'non-human savages' with 'heathen ways' and a 'less materialistic culture'? Was it really a fundamental idea of British settlement that New South Wales was a 'land where nothing exists'? . . . *terra nullius* cannot express a fundamental idea about British settlement because modern writers use it to represent so many very different, and often confusing and inaccurate, ideas.²

Connor goes on to claim that this plurality of reference means that *terra nullius* cannot have the status of a legal term, since legal terms have specific meanings in law.³ This claim is, of course, absurd – if it were true, then the greater part of the legal profession would be out of a job tomorrow. Nonetheless, the claim is important, since it illustrates how Connor's attack on historians is not only counterfeit history. More substantially, it provides a way into subverting Aboriginal land rights.

Connor's bizarre belief that a semantic critique of *terra nullius* can somehow dispel the reality that the term has been used to summarise is akin to a drunkard's belief that smashing the pub clock will stave off closing-time. He can hardly be unaware of the silliness of the argument. Thus it is only to be expected that he should clutch at ancillary historical straws wherever he can find them. Unfortunately, the work of a number of established Australian scholars contains oversights and inconsistencies that Connor can seize upon with the lewd glee that we have come to expect in the writings of Windschuttle. Here again, the idea that shooting the messenger can negate the message is involved. Nonetheless, Connor has been handed some easy targets, and this should not have happened. Why, for instance, did Ian Clark leave himself open to the charge that he had failed fully to acknowledge his reliance on questionable secondary sources to substantiate the occurrence of certain massacres in western Victoria, a charge that Connor can detail to the point of overkill on pages 156 to 158? Why did Heather Goodall claim that

Stephen Roberts' *The Squatting Age in Australia* did not mention Aborigines when Connor needed to go no further than the index to prove her wrong (pp.84–85)? Why did Greg Denning erroneously claim that Cook only claimed possession in one place when Connor could so easily cite others (p.245)?

Errors such as these are not particularly important. They certainly do not affect the historical truth of Aboriginal peoples' violent dispossession. All the same, they provide ammunition for a sleepless and unscrupulous campaign to discredit the historical grievances of Aboriginal people. Writers like Connor, Windschuttle and their ilk are not interested in a mannerly process of scholarly investigation. They are waging cultural warfare for Aboriginal land, an undertaking for which they can count on the support of prime ministers, pastoralists and mining companies. To this end, they pounce on any small thing they can find and make it as big as they can. This is just what Connor is seeking to do with *terra nullius*. The dating of the term's currency may be a small thing, but we historians nearly all got it wrong, and Connor will stop at nothing – personal vilification, quotation out of context, guilt by association – to milk this error for all it is worth.

role in his repudiation of Aboriginal land rights. For he specifies no practical content whatsoever for this high-sounding 'morality'. It is an utterly vacuous abstraction that he hopes to substitute for the concrete national obligation for material – in particular territorial – reparation. Connor cannot even bring himself to utter the word 'reconciliation' in full. The British government's acceptance of moral responsibility for Aborigines, he tells us, "was the beginning of a sandy track leading from Sydney Cove in 1788 into the present. That track, at times hardly visible, represents the humanistic impulse for understanding and conciliation".⁵ Presumably the sandy track became invisible because the winds of history were blowing. Needless to say, Aboriginal people long ago learned to duck for cover when white men started talking about humanistic impulses. Such talk was an invariable prelude to the loss of land, which was no less lost for disappearing under a rubric of sanctimoniousness than it was under one of greed.

Even if we were to accept the assertion of moral responsibility, it would only take the argument back a step, since it would beg questions such as where that responsibility was expressed and how far it has been discharged. Even Connor does not have the nerve

Connor proceeds from the contention that the term *terra nullius* is both recent and semantically overtaxed to the derived assertion that the racism that it signifies, a racism that enabled Aboriginal people to be dispossessed without agreement or compensation, did not exist.

Connor proceeds from the contention that the term *terra nullius* is both recent and semantically overtaxed to the derived assertion that the racism that it signifies, a racism that enabled Aboriginal people to be dispossessed without agreement or compensation, did not exist. Putting aside the relative novelty of the term 'racism' (which Connor, oddly, fails to note), this raises an obvious question: If the founding attitude was not racist, then what was it? Connor's answer is that "Britain entered Australia completely conscious of the presence of Aborigines and accepting a moral responsibility for taking possession".⁴ The reference to Britain's consciousness of Aboriginal presence is aimed at a pop version of *terra nullius*, which holds the term to mean that Australia was uninhabited. Connor uses it to smuggle in the moral responsibility, which performs a crucial

to pass off the extent to which his moral obligation has been discharged, so he contents himself with the sandy track. But the question of where that obligation was expressed takes us back to his avoidance of the history of colonial settlement in Australia. It also takes us beyond the case of this one inept book to some issues that concern Australian history-writing as a whole. Connor tells us that Britain's moral responsibility for Aboriginal people "is evident in the founding documents".⁶ He lists these documents on pages 272–273, the final one being the instructions that Arthur Phillip took with him on the First Fleet. As observed, therefore, Connor's colonisation of Australia is safely over before the violent history of settlement can even begin. In the relatively sparse references to the natives that are contained in these documents, Connor finds nothing untoward – in

particular, he finds no suggestion that a failure to cultivate or wear clothes on the part of the natives would entitle the settlers to property in their land. Rather, British sovereignty was simply asserted over the land and was independent of the natives' cultural characteristics. Thus colonisation was not motivated by *terra nullius*, either in name or notational equivalent. Aboriginal people were not invaded by a legal principle but by raw power ("Facing expropriation, did Aboriginals stand in front of guns, or conflicting international law text books?")⁷

Yes, that's right, raw power – or, as Connor himself puts it: "British settlement grew from political will and real power; if settlement came in conflict with the native people then power would prevail. The natives were not invisible, far from it, and they were to be repulsed if they opposed the new colony."⁸ Despite the confidence of this assertion (at the sight of which a palm must have hit the Windschuttle forehead), Connor nowhere provides any evidence that this is what the British said when Aboriginal people had been 'repulsed'. By his own lights, though, he does not need to provide any such evidence, since the only evidence that is admissible to him comes from before the First Fleet landed (or, at the latest, 1788) and the "repulsions" began. Thus he separates the peaceful paper process that he coyly terms "annexation" (which, he claims, does not trigger compensation) from a later period of "conflict", which, since it "appeared within the workings out of settlement, and perhaps of effective control" does not count as a motive for colonisation.⁹ In other words, everything is *ante hoc* – Connor is blind to the distinction between a motive and a rationalisation. When it came to rationalising the violence perpetrated against Aborigines, colonial settlers did not, on the whole, justify it as having happened because they had access to more power. Rather, they justified that violence *post hoc*, in terms which, by any other name, sound very like *terra nullius*. Indeed, Connor's own words will do. In a passage that is even inconsistent by his own highly inconsistent standards, he blithely informs us that "[t]he voices of the [white] men around the Sydney Cove camp fires in 1788 remain in the books they published. They saw the native use of sea and land and saw themselves as part of a movement to supplant that with agriculture and pastoralism and [nb!] ownership" (my emphasis).¹⁰

Settler-colonial invasion is an ongoing structure

not an event. It becomes institutionalised and keeps on happening. In contrast to colonies of dependency such as British India, or to the enslavement of African people in the Americas, settler colonisers do not prioritise the labour of the colonised. Rather, they seek to replace the natives on their land (which usually involves bringing their labour with them). Settler colonialism is premised not on the exploitation but on the elimination of the natives, which can take a variety of forms, including not only outright homicide but also more ostensibly benign policies such as assimilation, removal or reservation, which continue long after the frontier. The common end of these various policies is the elimination of the natives. Settler colonialism is not, therefore, a matter of race, though the idea of race certainly facilitates its operations. Rather, as a structural relationship, settler colonialism occurs where an alien group seeks to move in and replace natives on their land. This need not involve Europeans dominating people of colour (think, for instance, of Ireland, or of the Basque country). Settler-colonialism structures relationships that are otherwise as diverse as those between, say, Japanese and Ainu, Israelis and Palestinians, or Chinese and Tibetans. The point is not just that Australian history can be better understood in relation to other colonial experiences (though this in itself is valuable). The point is that settler colonialism is versatile and persistent. The logic of elimination continues to structure settler culture long after the dust has died down from the frontier. In the Australian case, for instance, the confinement of Aboriginal people to missions and reserves may have been advocated in terms that were considerably more benign than the homicidal rhetoric of the frontier, but it still vacated the confined peoples' countries for pastoral settlement. Subsequently, as was made clear in forums such as the Commonwealth government's Aboriginal welfare conference in 1937, the assimilation policy was designed to make Aboriginal people 'white' (whether culturally or genetically) – which is to say, to eliminate them.

Without this kind of basic sociological appreciation of what settler colonialism involves, the intimate relationship between issues such as the stolen generations and Aboriginal land rights may not be clear. Nor may the continuities in the history of Aboriginal/European relations in Australia. In consequence, a notional wall is erected which separates Euro-Australian prosperity from the

Aboriginal deprivation that enabled it. Those who oppose Aboriginal rights are well aware of this, and do not waste an opportunity to reinforce this wall – ‘We’ are not responsible for what was done in the past, etc. The point is, of course, that whether or not we are responsible, we remain the legatees and beneficiaries of that continuing past.

Guarding against the insertion of discontinuities into settler-colonial history is not always as simple as in the case of Connor’s truncation of Australian colonisation at a point when the First Fleet was still in Portsmouth. A more deceptive discontinuity can result from subtler versions of what might be called the legocentrism that informs Connor’s book: the idea that history is a matter of divining the intentions of the authors of prescriptive texts. As exemplified in the case of Connor’s founding documents, this idea freezes history at the point where the prescriptive statement was made. In this regard, Henry Reynolds’ *The Law of the Land* – a book which, being associated with the Mabo judgement, attracts Connor’s relentless excoriation – ironically shares ground with Connor.¹¹ *The Law of the Land* is an immeasurably more principled and scholarly work than Connor’s book and, in most respects, they do not belong in the same league at all. Nonetheless, in *The Law of the*

point at least, the fullness of Aboriginal/European history risks degenerating into the kind of extract-duelling that we normally associate with doorstep evangelists.

In acquiescing in the terms of the colonisers’ legal system, Reynolds forsook history for law. Though the discipline of history originally emerged from law, and though, in some ways, the two remain close, there is a fundamental difference between them: Where lawyers ask what the law is, historians ask – or, at least, should be asking – what the law does. This is particularly important in a colonial context where the invading group seeks to impose its own imported system of law on the colonised. Under these conditions, to use law-historian Robert Williams’ apt phrase, the imported law becomes a discourse of conquest.¹² A given society embarks on a war of aggression, whether declared or otherwise. Without provocation, it invades and violently dispossesses another society or group of societies. For historical purposes – as opposed to the prescriptive concerns of a lawyer – the invading society’s rule-book does not describe and classify this situation. Rather, the rule-book is itself part of the situation. Using it to describe the situation is like using a horoscope to describe the conflict between astrology and science.

The point is, of course, that whether or not we are responsible, we remain the legatees and beneficiaries of that continuing past.

Land, Reynolds leaves Aboriginal rights to stand or fall on the decision of the colonial umpire. This is a consequence of Reynolds basing his (pre-Mabo) argument against *terra nullius* on the evidence of some nineteenth-century British official correspondence, principally relating to the colonisation of South Australia, which evidenced an attitude that was at odds with the concept of *terra nullius*. Thus Reynolds’ rejection of the idea that Aborigines were without rights was not absolute or unqualified. Rather, Aborigines had rights because the British (actually, one in particular) had not said they were without rights in the 1830s and 1840s. It follows that, if the British had declared that Aboriginal people were without rights in the 1830s and 1840s, then Reynolds would not have had an argument in the present. Needless to say, Connor has little trouble in producing the requisite declarations. Potentially, therefore, on this

Our perspectives should not be confined to the stale polarity on offer in the history wars (pro- or anti-Henry Reynolds, pro- or anti-native title, etc.). Aboriginal rights are not a white creation. They do not stand or fall on Henry Reynolds or the *Native Title Act*. Criticising either or both need not entail a denial of Aboriginal rights. An ironic virtue of the pre-Mabo situation (whether you call it *terra nullius* or otherwise) is that Aboriginal people were not inveigled into treaties whereby they consented to their own dispossession. The reason for this was probably not so much theoretical as tactical: the British entered into treaties with North American Indian nations in order to maintain a patchwork of alliances against their French, Spanish, Dutch and Swedish colonial rivals. No comparable rivalry existed in Australia. Accordingly, for all its iniquity, at least Aborigines’ rightlessness prevented them

from surrendering anything. In this connection, the *Native Title Act* introduced a novel and extremely deleterious factor, the mechanism for extinguishing native title. Extinguishment had not been available under the preceding, more obviously oppressive regime, for the simple reason that you can't extinguish something that isn't already there. On this basis, soon after the *Native Title Act* had been passed, I argued that the legislation had not so much negated *terra nullius* as refurbished it for a new century – which, in 1994, I thought would be a republican one.¹³ I return to the point now in order to emphasise that Aboriginal rights are prior to, and persist independently of, all the Euro-Australian discourses of conquest – legislative, judicial, political, administrative and otherwise – that have sought to contain, domesticate or usurp Aboriginal initiatives. This independence categorically differentiates Aboriginal people from other minorities, whose consent is presupposed in migration. Aborigines are not another tile in the multicultural mosaic. The perennial 'Aboriginal problem' will not be solved by Australian governments unilaterally legislating for them. To say this is to ignore the narrow agenda of the history wars – from which, tellingly, Aboriginal scholars have been conspicuous by their absence.

So – to speak for a moment in-house, to my fellow historians – let us move on from the history wars. This is not to say that they have not been useful. Connor, Windschuttle and company have succeeded in exposing evidentiary and procedural weaknesses on the part of a number of Australian historians, and there should be no complaint about that. On the contrary, we can hope that their wake-up call will promote increased rigour and care on our part, so that Windschuttle's creation will turn on its creator and confound this remorseless attack on Aboriginal rights. But let us not succumb to the paranoid glancing over our shoulders that discourages the crafting of historical narratives and, in place of scholarly debate and the enrichment of knowledge, promotes the parasitical devouring of the work of others. Windschuttle and company do not craft their own narratives. Cuckoo-like, they lodge in other people's footnotes, following leads that others have found for them. Where others have sought to touch the living quick of the past, they grub for points to score. But it would be naïve to expect otherwise. Aboriginal history is not some

antiquarian backwater. On the contrary, the political stakes could not be higher. So we should not expect the hard men of white-Australian nationalism to sit on the historical sidelines. By the same token, nor should we allow them to set the agenda.

1. Michael Connor, *The Invention of Terra Nullius: Historical and Legal Fictions on the Founding of Australia*, Macleay Press, Paddington, 2005.
2. *ibid.*, pp.164–165.
3. *ibid.*, p.189.
4. *ibid.*, p.261.
5. *ibid.*, p.269.
6. *ibid.*, p.202.
7. *ibid.*, p.46.
8. *ibid.*, p.257.
9. *ibid.*, p.205.
10. *ibid.*, p.257.
11. Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1987.
12. Robert Williams Jr, *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest*, OUP, Oxford, 1990.
13. Patrick Wolfe, 'Nation and MiscegeNation: Discursive Continuity in the Post-Mabo Era', *Social Analysis* 34, 1994, pp.93–152.

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CHICAGO VALUES

THE NEOLIBERAL DREAM AND HOWARD GOVERNMENT POLITICS

AT THIS CONFERENCE we reflect on ten years of a national government notable for meanness of spirit, persistent lying, sucking up to the rich, brutality towards the weak, covert racism, manipulation of news, and electoral success. We are not here to lament this, but to try to understand it, and consider what can be done about it.

Let us start with the obvious. The Howard Government governs in the interests of the rich and powerful. Whenever it has the capacity to do so, it favours capitalists over workers, white people over black, men over women, and rich over poor. This is hardly surprising. Conservative governments have always acted on these splendid principles. Yet Howard is not simply a replay of Menzies, any more than Menzies was a replay of Bruce, Cook or Deakin.

Not too many people think of John Howard as an intellectual. One who does, however, is John Howard. He claims to come from “an intellectual tradition in politics” – one that understands the limits of government – and in recent speeches has taken on postmodernism, multiculturalism and historiography as well as declaring a “philosophical” position on redistribution.

On this point I agree with Mr Howard. There is a system of ideas and a cultural logic at work in his government, of which he is a competent interpreter. Examining this agenda tells us a lot about the government’s purposes and strengths and also its vulnerabilities.

NEOLIBERAL DREAMING

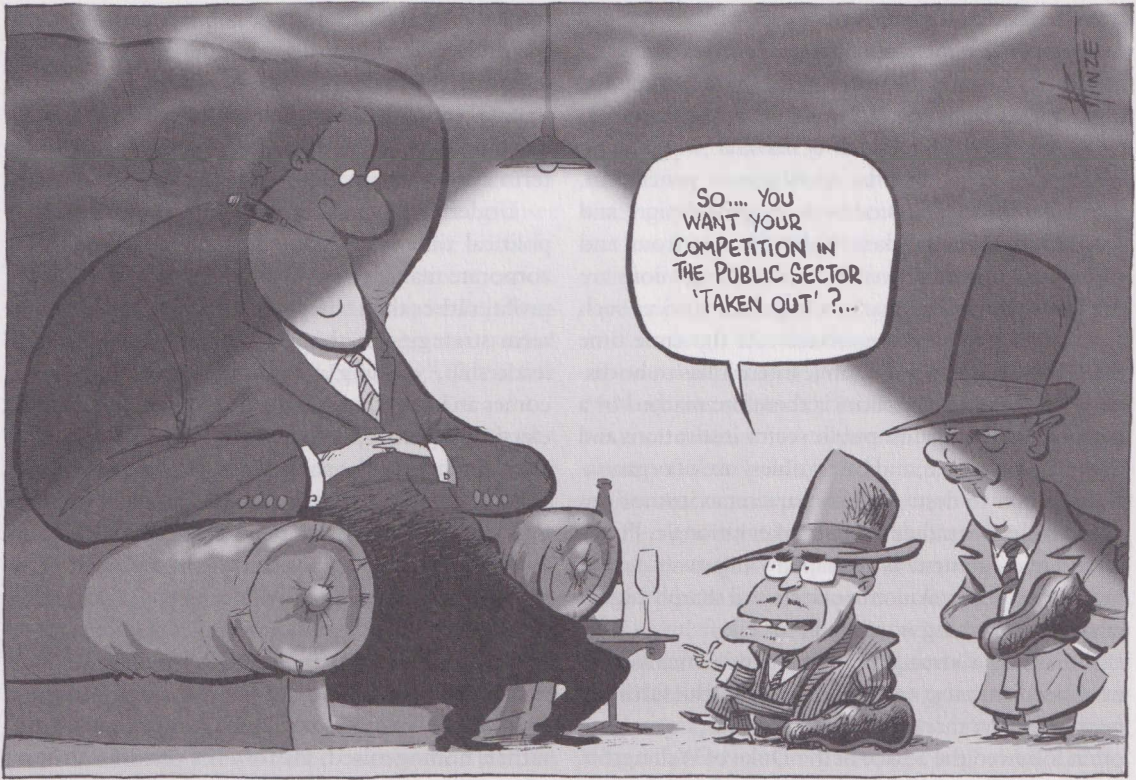
The main system of ideas in the Howard Government’s world is familiar. It is the doctrine called in Latin America, where it had the earliest and most

devastating impact, ‘neoliberalismo’. (A better name than ‘economic rationalism’ or ‘market fundamentalism’, in suggesting the wider agenda.)

Neoliberalism represents a new departure in conservative thought and politics. In the era of the Cold War, Menzies – like right-wing leaders in Europe and Latin America – had promoted a strategy of social compromise around import substitution industrialisation, in which the market was subjected to a great deal of Keynesian management. The proceeds of industrial growth funded an expanded welfare state that embodied class and gender compromises.

Internationally this strategy broke down in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with an upsurge of new social movements and the end of the postwar boom. US intellectuals began talking about “the ungovernability of democracy”. A shift in capitalist strategy began in the major world centres of capitalism, and became decisive in the decade 1975–1985. Its main elements were accelerated internationalisation of the economy (the word ‘globalisation’ came into use in the 1980s); a shift towards market discipline of the labour force rather than social compromise, turning highly unionised regions into ‘rust belts’; and an ideological offensive against the welfare state and economic regulation, replacing the old compromises with a more militant justification of capitalism. This is neoliberalism.

By the 1990s neoliberal ideas were dominant around the world, embedded for instance in the IMF (International Monetary Fund) structural adjustment programs, and any conservative government would have to operate in this framework. Howard personally was an early convert, but any conservative leadership would have acted in much the same way. It



was the Hawke Labor Government, shaking free of its declining party base, that made a mild neoliberalism the framework of national policy. The ground was cleared for a more rigorous version.

There are two key ideas that distinguish neoliberalism as a cultural agenda. First is its total concept of the market. Previous conservatism had seen market logic as appropriate to certain spheres of life, in balance with other principles – religious obligation, social solidarity, and patriarchy. In neoliberalism this balance is destroyed. Market competition is seen as a universal decision mechanism, the best means for making social decisions about anything from the price of bootlaces to the curriculum of higher education. This universal mechanism implies universal commodification. To put it more bluntly, in the neoliberal vision, everything is for sale. Individual choice in a market becomes the model by which all human behaviour is understood. We may have laughed when the Chicago economist Gary Becker did a market analysis of marriage, discovering that husbands and wives hired each other, but we should have known better – and he was given a Nobel Prize. Even religion is not immune: ‘faith’ is treated on the model of individual market choice, and religious

bodies are expected to operate as entrepreneurs.

The second key idea, a corollary of the first, is the need to remove all restraints on market-oriented behaviour. Market logic not only spreads into new fields, it also deepens and intensifies. The rhetoric of freedom modulates into a celebration of ‘winners’ and contempt for ‘losers’ – expressions that came into widespread use at the same time as the political triumph of neoliberalism. The deregulation of capital flows, and the deregulation of incomes, are vital policy expressions of this idea. As neoliberalism unfolded, it became clear that the removal of restraints also applied to the *content* of entrepreneurial action and not just to market exchange. The best-known case is official permission for environmental vandalism. Equally important, though much less debated, is the growth of managerial prerogative inside firms and public sector organisations – the condition for growing cultural control over the workforce.

To pursue these ideas requires reshaping the relationship between state and economy. Neoliberal economics were originally framed by Hayek and the Chicago school against the Keynesian approach, and their rhetoric about the state was largely negative. This creates the illusion that neoliberalism favours a weak

state. In fact its underlying concept of the state is a strong one. Neoliberalism does not recoil from the use of power, including the use of force. But it changes the logic: rather than regulating markets, neoliberalism treats the state as *a producer of markets*.

Markets don't arise by spontaneous generation, they have to be produced by intelligent design, and neoliberalism undertakes this with a vigorous and varied use of state power. Particularly ingenious are the devices to create markets in public services such as schooling and welfare services. At the same time the idea of a *non-market* public interest has to be discredited. Neoliberal politics is therefore marked by a general hostility against public sector institutions and traditions of service, and by a ruthless use of organisational power to destroy their character as institutions with a collective rather than a market rationale. Public sector management is reshaped on private sector models, by performance contracts and sharply higher salaries. Everything is, after all, for sale.

Pursuing a strong market agenda means that neoliberalism must concern itself with the fitting of people for the market. In previous eras, capital had often followed the advice of the Duke of Wellington, that he didn't care what the people did so long as they didn't do it in the street and frighten the horses. But in the 1960s and 1970s the ruling classes of the rich countries had lost control of the culture, and their leadership determined not to make that mistake again. The bitter campaign against 'political correctness', still being conducted by neoliberal think-tanks and politicians, expresses the resulting hostility towards ideas of social justice, tolerance and cooperation. It is supplemented by endless rhetoric promoting enterprise culture, achievement, success, wealth creation, and just plain greed.

At a practical level too, neoliberalism is concerned with producing the kind of people who suit the universal market. Managements create individualised 'performance management' and 'career development' systems in their organisations, and expand 'incentives' and bonuses as elements of wage systems. Attacks on unions both clear the ground for these individualised systems, and complement cultural policies designed to cut people off from sources of critique. The universal market will only work smoothly if the bulk of people cannot imagine any alternative. Hence, I think, the viciousness and also the vagueness of neoliberal attacks on left-wing intellectuals.

Woven through all of these mechanisms is a curi-

ous and powerful shift in the conception of time. In the high tide of industrial capitalism, as Galbraith argued in the 1960s, long-term planning was central to corporate life, as production tended to dominate consumption. Governments too developed long-term economic plans at national level.

Under neoliberalism, both the economic and the political time-frames are radically shortened. For corporate management the immediate realisation of profit, rather than the production of credible long-term strategies, is the great test. For the political leadership, 'winning' a given 24-hour news cycle becomes an important objective, and winning the next election is practically the outer horizon. Long-term consequences of the short-term strategies are simply beyond the focus. Here we have a phenomenological explanation of neoliberal politicians' shameless lying, and their striking lack of interest in such matters as global warming and the social tensions produced by their own 'wedge' politics.

Yet neoliberalism is itself a long-term strategy, and the market-making, person-shaping strategies unfold over many years. Time is not denied; it is, rather, homogenised. History is a continuous story of entrepreneurs and achievement, of barriers to freedom being overcome. Neoliberals in power can therefore cast themselves in a heroic role as reformers and liberators. (Though as we shall see, the practice often involves an assault on actual liberties.) The market is both timeless and immediate, existing in the neoliberal imagination in a kind of ethnographic present. The universal market colonises past as well as present society.

THE FRIGHTENED GOVERNMENT

For a government destined to have such a long run, the Howard Government has given off, from the start, a remarkable air of anxiety and even fear. 'Relaxed and comfortable' is the agenda for the suburbs but not for the government itself. The journalist Paul Kelly has remarked: "Howard's cabinet is tight, secret and collective. Its secrecy is the most abject defeat for the press gallery in thirty years."

Anxiety about control is reflected in an increasingly politicised public service, a departmental structure increasingly focused on the Prime Minister's department, and the constant spinning of media output. Perhaps the most startling example of the last is the 2004 national campaign about violence against women, which was delayed for seven months

while Howard and his staff changed the content (supposedly, it was too critical of men).

It is a crucial fact that the neoliberal agenda has *never* had wide popular support – anywhere. There is no popular demand to privatise public institutions, to cut public services, or to remove restraints on market behaviour. In Australia, as signs of popular responses to neoliberalism, we need only think of the Liberals’ ‘Fightback!’ debacle under Hewson, not to mention popular rejection of the current Industrial Relations ‘reform’ package. Poll evidence suggests sustained popular support for public schools, the ABC, in fact public services of many kinds.

A conservative government pursuing a strong neoliberal agenda is therefore operating at some risk. Its inherited base among the wealthy cannot deliver electoral majorities, and the neoliberal agenda itself does not win popular support. The fact of thin margins is important in understanding the strategies of the Howard Government.

This is, I think, an important reason for the government’s plunge into racialised wedge politics – a marked difference from the Fraser Government. Pauline Hanson showed there was some electoral mileage in racism combined with anti-establishment, anti-globalisation protest. Howard was careful to avoid the latter while he delicately cultivated the former, until he could find a foreign target that was removed as far as possible from transnational capitalists. Refugees fit the bill. The ‘We decide who comes to Australia’ campaign was a minor masterpiece of nastiness – evoking old fears of Asian invasion, scapegoating the weak, creating a symbolic link between the government and Australian identity – and, by denying the legitimacy of the search for refuge, justifying brutal treatment of those who came. Howard’s model has been remembered at Cronulla – We decide who comes to the Beach.

Now the refugee issue is no more, ‘terrorism’ fills the gap. The government has carefully stimulated popular fear, and in Howard’s and Costello’s recent speeches, has more explicitly linked anxiety about terrorism with anxiety about ethnic and religious difference. The government’s racism is opportunist, rather than doctrinal, but is very characteristic. There is nothing in neoliberal principles to restrain one from seizing the wedge opportunities presented by the refugee boats and the Twin Towers attack, indeed it would be irrational not to. The damage such campaigning does to Australian social life is beyond

the short-term focus of neoliberal politics.

The need to expand a narrow electoral base is also reflected in the government’s religious politics. There have been ‘auctions’ for the Catholic vote in the past, and there was an Established Church when New South Wales was a convict colony. But since responsible government in the 1850s there has not been anything like the subsidising of orthodox religion that the Howard Government has achieved – principally through huge grants to church schools, and through the funding of church agencies to replace the old state welfare machinery. In effect, Howard has recruited the conservative churches to his core coalition of corporate executives, property owners and the parliamentary remnants of Menzies’ mass conservative party.

The government has dealt the same way, on a smaller scale, with other groups available to be recruited. An interesting example is its recruitment of the anti-feminist men’s movement, with support of ‘father’s rights’ in divorce, certain men’s health initiatives, and surprisingly large grants for programs to combat the supposed crisis of boys’ education. Wheat farmers, as we know, got large sales to Iraq; and as the Cole enquiry unfolds it is striking how faithfully the Australian Wheat Board followed the script of neoliberal politics – doing whatever-it-takes to get the sales, spinning the truth afterwards, and blame-shifting when the heat came down.

But in one important case, Howard has *not* tried to widen his coalition. He has remained hostile to multiculturalism and has passed over the opportunity (which Fraser did take) to praise diversity and recruit a range of ethnic community leaderships to his cause. This notable piece of risk-taking makes it necessary to think about the Howard Government’s cultural politics, and the ways they have used power, as the regime passed from being an improvisation to a political fixture.

USING POWER

From 1996 the new government moved ahead promptly on the fundamental neoliberal tasks of constituting markets and eroding public institutions. The now-forgotten ‘National Commission of Audit’ provided the early smokescreen. The Howard Government expanded the Hawke/Keating program of privatisation, a process of mining the public sector for saleable chunks of activity. Telstra is the most conspicuous example, with the marketing of the

first tranche happily serving two neoliberal purposes – destroying an important public enterprise, and constituting large numbers of ‘mum and dad’ investors as property-owning market actors.

Neither this nor the other big privatisation, government IT services, was particularly successful in terms of efficiency or service. But privatisation is not an issue on which neoliberals are capable of learning from experience. The government persisted in finding indirect ways to constitute or expand markets. One of its successes was diverting money from public to private schools. Another was the back-door privatisation of universities through student fees and the commercialisation of research. The Job Network privatised another important public service, with very dubious effects on actual service, but like the privatisation of other social services had the happy effect of making it more difficult for disadvantaged groups to articulate claims on government.

To move towards the universal market, it is necessary to eliminate consciousness of alternatives. Neoliberal politics seeks not just to defeat opposition, but to obliterate or prevent it.

This streak in the Howard Government’s politics became visible very early, in the de-funding of women’s organisations and other institutions of ‘civil society’. Over the government’s ten years of office, the web of advisory, representative and consultative organisations that had grown up around federal government in the previous thirty years was beaten down or dismantled. It was partly replaced by a market for consultancies in which the government was able to buy the advice it wanted to hear. The voluntary welfare sector, an important critic of governments both Labor and Liberal, was made to understand that to criticise Howard Government policies was to risk having funds cut off. The national Aboriginal consultative body, which gained an unusual strength by being an elected body, was harassed, harangued and eventually demolished.

The government’s sustained hostility to the most important remaining independent mass media voice, the ABC, is familiar. Also familiar is the attempt to discredit critical historiography in Australia, dubbed ‘black armband’ history. The desired substitute is a bland narrative of enterprise and progress; regrettably from the federal government’s point of view, school curricula are still controlled by the states. The recent attack on university student unions is less understood, but equally diagnostic. This was not a

personal revenge lark, nor a category-mistake about ‘unions’. Student organisations were quite logically targeted by a neoliberal government because they represent a potential (and in the past important) centre of oppositional culture. Federal government control of university finance provided a way of harming them, and the Howard Government took it. The damaging consequences for higher education in Australia were, as usual, beyond the focus.

To stay in power the government needed to consolidate its base among the affluent while holding down economic disaffection in the working class. Maintaining the resources boom was the core of this. The Howard Government followed the classic neoliberal comparative-advantage strategy in which the Australian economy became fully dependent on the globalised economy. (This strategy was pioneered by the neoliberal Chicago Boys under Pinochet in Chile; in that case it produced a short-lived boom and then a devastating collapse.) International commodity markets obliged, partly because of sustained state-directed economic growth in China. This was the element of luck that Howard needed to make the rest of his strategy work.

The finance sector prospered with the growth of Australian international trade and participation in global capital circulation; elite incomes have rocketed to the point where corporate CEO annual packages of ten to fifteen million dollars are no longer seen as bizarre. The continued growth of the service sector provided thin and insecure employment, but employment nevertheless, for most working-class youth and with suitable massaging of the figures, unemployment could be presented as trending down. In due course the government could take the risk of expanding the workforce in the direction of a universal labour market. Here, neoliberal logic trumped gender conservatism. Not only male ‘dole bludgers’ but also supporting mothers have been pushed off ‘welfare’ (as it is now called, a strictly American usage) and into the labour force.

Of course the Howard Government isn’t responsible for changes in class structure, but it has done its bit to assist the concentration of wealth in Australia and the consolidation of an emerging neoliberal corporate elite. Tax ‘reform’ has lowered the extent to which public expenditure relies on income tax and corporate tax, while the lowering of top income tax rates has rewarded the enterprise of those who have the organisational clout to get elite salaries.

In one of the weirdest passages of a very revealing speech, Howard's Australia Day address for 2006 crows about the emergence of a new 'middle class' in China and India. (The same issue is currently troubling the Chinese government which revealed that there were eighty-seven thousand episodes of social protest, 'public order disturbances', in China last year.) Why Australians should welcome the growth of inequality and social tension in poor countries is a little obscure to me, but Howard and his speechwriters clearly think we should. This is at least consistent with their local agenda. Neoliberal politicians admire rich, powerful and ruthless businessmen in this country – as the Packer memorial at the Opera House showed – and think the rest of us should too.

Howard's foreign policy is not, however, focused on those emerging middle classes. It is focused on the American alliance; for the past few years, on close solidarity with the Bush regime and its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In that cause the Howard Government has reproduced American lies, manipulated local intelligence, created a local climate of fear about terror, and sparked massive prejudice against Muslims. Some of this is understandable as Wedge Politics Mark III (Marks I and II being Aborigines and Refugees), which currently seems to be doing very nicely, with the state Labor governments and the federal Opposition all lined up in an Australian panic about Homeland Security.

But in a wider sense an orientation to the global superpower is required by the strong neoliberal agenda. This orientation was, after all, present before September 11. In his first years in office Howard became notorious for literally flying over our neighbours on his way to London and Washington, reversing Keating's advocacy of openings towards Asia. The universal market is, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a global market and the main forces operating in it come from the capital-exporting countries of the global North.

In neoliberal logic, Australia is more like Illinois than it is like Sweden – it is a more or less arbitrary geographical unit in a globally integrated modernity. Its foreign policy automatically follows whatever is the current superpower line, because anything else would disrupt the conditions of operation of the universal market. Howard's recent Australian-values flag-waving is strictly for the cameras, not for the policy office or the boardroom. He has no inten-

tion whatever of defending Australian firms against international capital nor Australian workers against the export of jobs. Nor would the corporate elite expect him to.

VULNERABILITIES

Neoliberalism is so barren a philosophy, so miserable a way of conducting human affairs, that it is difficult to see it holding the consent of any people except its privileged beneficiaries, in the long run. In terms of any worthwhile contribution to the human spirit, this is a government of the living dead.

But it is the short run we live in, for purposes of practical politics. Here we have to be concerned with the consequences of the government's strategies that the government itself cannot control. An important case is the shift to comparative-advantage economic policy. For instance local manufacturing jobs are being lost to China – we now even import our Paddle Pops from there in refrigerated ships – while transnational mining companies sell to China vast quantities of Australian minerals. When the 'rust belt' effect is combined with growing economic inequalities as a result of deregulation and tax changes, it is clear that a lot of unfocused resentment is being generated. This emotion is likely to be strongest among groups that the Howard Government wants in its electoral column, notably working-class Anglo men. Racialised wedge politics has been helpful in keeping them on-side so far; but wedge politics also generates resentment and anxiety.

If every Muslim in the country were to vote Labor, it would not shake the Howard Government. But if Cronulla Beach gets repeated several times, then the claim that current policies promote the unity of the nation will seem hollow to the government's own supporters. According to the polls, Howard is already seen as a divisive figure. A strategy like that of Hawke in 1983, presenting the Opposition as the champion of compromise and unity, would be open to Labor.

The turn to neoliberal consultants to advise a neoliberal government about neoliberal policies is symptomatic of another emerging problem. Within the Canberra context, the Howard Government emphasises 'contestability' in policy discussion. This was meant to break down a supposed bureaucratic monopoly of policy advice. But the voices that now enter Canberra policy contests are all pre-selected. The government, in de-funding the institutions of

civil society, muzzling the welfare sector, dismantling ATSI, etc., has eliminated many centres of opposition but has also drastically reduced the diversity of its own inputs.

Commentators on bureaucratic affairs have also noted a decline in the research and policy capacity of regular government departments. Neoliberalism has attacked 'provider capture' of specific policy areas, but in eliminating the experts, e.g. taking education policy away from educators, the expertise has also been lost. (The result in education has been ten years of federal policy based on an erratic mixture of ministerial fads, electoral advantage and neoliberal dogma. Howard's truly silly remarks on the teaching of history in Australian schools never passed over the desk of anyone knowledgeable about curriculum.)

When we put this together with the broad preference for deregulation and elimination of controls over entrepreneurial behaviour, the opening of the Australian economy to transnational economic forces, and the specific dependence on global markets implied by the comparative advantage strategy, it is clear that neoliberalism has meant a fundamental loss of steering capacity (to use Habermas's phrase) on the part of the Australian state.

In a strange but entirely logical way, Howard exerts tighter and tighter control over less and less of Australia's affairs, and knows less and less about them. His government could be wiped out by an international recession, and there would be almost nothing he could do to stop it. His government could be disrupted by a surge of communal conflict that it has no effective way of predicting or damping. We have all been laughing at Wheat Board and Foreign Affairs protestations of ignorance at the Cole Inquiry, but there is a sense in which a neoliberal government actually is ignorant of the world, as a result of its own strategies.

The loss of knowledge may not seem a political problem, because for neoliberals the answers to most policy questions are pre-given, and any mismatch with reality will be covered by the relentless spin. Howard, like Bush and Blair, is a seasoned practitioner of the art of calling black white and white black, of denying responsibility, re-naming reality, and ignoring inconvenient facts. They and their corporate supporters have also shown, in cases from global climate science to Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, a significant capacity to silence dissenting voices at the strategic time.

Some ducking and weaving is usual in politics. But in neoliberalism the corruption of language and political culture is so systematic, reaches such an intensity, that it destroys the logic of democracy itself. If the rich and powerful can buy the truth they want, and habitually do, what is the value of a formal vote every few years, in an environment so controlled?

Is there a necessary limit to this corruption? It certainly could find accidental limits. If, following current government and industry spin, we expand exports of uranium and help expand an international nuclear industry that generates a regional nuclear war, we will have found a limit one way. We might find another, more slowly, through Australia's continuing state of denial about deforestation, fossil fuels and global warming.

But is there a more direct limit to the lying, a limit that lies in culture itself? Perhaps the neoliberal who continually cries 'Wolf' will, finally, not be believed by the villagers any more. Perhaps the sheer barrenness of an ethic of greed and short-term thinking will trouble increasing numbers of people currently in Howard's camp. A recent poll suggested 81 per cent of voters were critical of the rejection of the Kyoto protocol. I think neoliberal politics may be vulnerable to sudden collapses of assent. A problem of credibility seems now to be afflicting Bush and Blair, though not Howard.

The signs of dissatisfaction with the current distortion of meaning and language suggest that this is an important arena for oppositional politics. But opposition cannot be simply counter-spin – the government has consistently won such contests, and has the resources to go on winning. Opposition will need to operate at a more fundamental level, criticising the whole arena of spin and generating other forms of communication than commercial media, and other criteria of meaning than short-term profit.

An air of inevitability is one of neoliberalism's greatest assets. We are entitled to think neoliberal time is not eternal and neoliberal governments are not invincible. They have strengths, and they have steady support from international capital. But as the past few years in Latin America have shown quite practically, they can be rolled back. This government can still do a lot of harm while it hangs around; it is time to be rid of it.

Professor Raewyn Connell, University of Sydney, delivered this as the Keynote address to the 'Relaxed and Comfortable' Conference at Victorian Trades Hall in March 2006.

DEATH THE LEVELLER

THERE WAS A MEMO waiting for Dr Ben Johnson in his eagle hole, as he liked to call it, when he came in to work at Blamey University. It was marked 'Confidential' and was from the Boss, as the departmental head Professor Armitage liked to be called. It was a harmless vanity and Ben didn't mind pandering to it. Professor Armitage was keen on confidentiality, so much so that he had once sent out a memo in a sealed envelope with 'Not to be opened' stamped on it. Ben ripped open the letter and read:

Dear Ben,

I've had an unusual request from a former student of ours, Alex Goddard (Class of '95). He's a decent fellow, quite bright, I remember him well. The poor unfortunate chap has contracted AIDS, maybe fatally. He wonders if he can sit in on some of the classes, sort of therapy thing I suppose. I thought that he might start with your fourth year Renaissance seminar.

Do you have any objections?

Yours,
Kim

Ben stared at the note for a few seconds, then went and knocked on Professor Armitage's door. He heard the sound of a radio broadcasting the one-day cricket being turned off.

Armitage was in his mid-forties, of medium height, medium build, medium in just about every

respect, Ben used to think to himself from time to time, but an essentially decent, moderate man. He liked to call himself a refugee from England, seduced by Australia. Seduced by its wines, by its weather, and eventually by one of his brightest students whom he subsequently married and who had two children with him. It was not uncommon at Blamey for academics to marry their students, partly because there were quite a few older ones. If the university authorities ever brought in that law they were always talking about, prohibiting sexual relations between academics and students, Ben reflected, half the staff on the department would have to file for divorce.

"I received your memo, Kim," Ben said, waving it. "I even opened it. That's fine by me."

"It's a sad case," said Armitage. "He was quite a nice chap."

"I thought they could do things for AIDS victims now."

"Apparently not for this one. He sounded in very bad shape over the phone."

Ben stood up. "I'll have to clear it with Maggie, of course, but that shouldn't be too difficult. I'll go and see her now."

Maggie was the staff member with whom he took the honours seminar. The Cultural Studies Department at Blamey University had relatively few honours and graduate students so in order to satisfy the demands of the staff to teach at a senior level two members shared each seminar. Ben got along with

Maggie fairly well. She was a small, large-bosomed woman in her late thirties, dark-haired (at least at the moment, since it changed often) and still very attractive. She had a lively, engaging manner and was very popular with the students.

Because of the way they exchanged pleasantries in class – half-barbed, half-amicable – most of the students assumed they were married, or at least having an affair, but that wasn't the case. Her current consort was a Greek man some years her junior. His name was Socrates but Maggie always referred to him as 'Socks'. He was one of the most stunning looking men Ben had ever seen but hardly lived up to his name. He knew little English and at staff meetings would merely stand around smiling while all the women on the staff and three of the men would gape longingly at his beauty.

Now as Ben knocked on her door a high, pleasantly fluted voice called, "Come in."

"Ben," she said. "You look tired. Have you been talking to Jan again?"

He blinked. How did she know that? Jan was his ex-wife. "Sons and sums," he said. "That's all I ever talk about with her. But I've come to check something out with you."

As briefly as he could, Ben explained the situation of Alex Goddard to her and his request to attend class and concluded, "That'll be all right, won't it?"

But he had noticed Maggie's face growing steadily paler as she stared at him in disbelief. "You want someone with a highly infectious disease, one you've admitted could be fatal, to be allowed into class? That hardly seems fair to the students – let alone ourselves."

Ben felt uncomfortable. As far as he knew the disease could only be communicated through saliva or blood and this student hardly seemed the type who would suddenly stand up and begin biting the other people in the room.

"I tell you what," he suggested. "I've got a friend who's a doctor and who specialises in these things. If he says it's quite safe will you agree?"

Maggie looked uncomfortable but there didn't

seem to be very much choice. "I suppose so," she said with obvious reluctance.

When Ben rang his medical friend Don Lucas and explained his problem he heard a deep sigh at the other end of the line and then there was a long pause. "You expect the general public to be fairly ignorant of the HIV virus," he said finally, "but not university lecturers."

"Tell your colleague," he went on, "that she and the students are at no risk from this chap. On the contrary, he's at risk from them. If one of them has a cold he's putting his life on the line because his immune system is so vulnerable. He must know that, but I suppose he thinks that at this stage it doesn't matter."

That should do it, thought Ben, as he put the phone down. Now it remained only to ring the student as Armitage had asked him to do and inform him he was admitted. He was already becoming a little tired of this business.

"Mr Goddard?"

There was another long pause. The voice came weakly over the line. "Yes?"

"It's Ben Johnson here, from Blamey University. Just to let you know that we're more than happy to have you sit in on the Renaissance lit class. It's on Wednesday at 4.30, room 509 in Humanities 3. We'll be handing out poems in class, so there's no need for any preparation."

"Th-, thank you."

There was another long pause. Feeling the need to fill the abyss of silence, Ben said, "I'm sorry to hear of your illness. I hope it's not too serious."

The voice came slowly but distinctly over the line. "The doctors have given me six to eight weeks."

"My God," said Ben. "You poor bugger."

"Bugger indeed."

Ben winced. He could hardly have expressed himself in a more tactless way. Again he felt it was impossible to put the phone down on such a note and began to talk frantically.

"I think you'll enjoy the seminar. The seventeenth century is my particular passion. I don't know how

I got into it in the first place. Maybe it's because of my name. Though the spelling's different, of course. When I was a teenager I read a story in a boys' magazine that worked on the assumption that a student named Sherlock Holmes could not resist the temptation of doing some detective work if it were offered to him. So maybe it's the same with me."

Ben paused and waited. There was a long silence. Then Mr Goddard said, "How interesting."

"We'll see you on Wednesday then. I'll look forward to it."

Ben put down the phone. He remained seated in his chair for a few moments, looking out the window. His office was on the fifth floor and he could see the tops of the trees waving back and forth. Down below was the lawn, leading to the moat. Students necked there in the open or on some days played a game of football.

It was a windy day, unusually warm and sultry for April, with occasional brief, spasmodic gusts of rain. He wondered what he would do if he knew he had only six to eight weeks to live. Probably not attend a seminar on seventeenth-century literature. Even his own.

THE FOLLOWING Wednesday morning, when Ben arrived at work he found a note from Maggie waiting for him. It said that she had a migraine and would not be attending the seminar that afternoon. The photocopies of the poems she had selected were enclosed. He was not surprised and in fact felt a sense of relief. It would be one less complication. He unlocked his door, threw the sheets into his 'Out' tray without looking at them, and sat down at his desk. He opened the window and felt the still unseasonably warm air wash over him. He wondered whether he should tell the students why Alex Goddard was auditing the class. He decided he wouldn't. He sat at his desk and marked essays.

About four o'clock there was a timid knock at the door.

"Come in," he called, but there was no response. After a few moments he swivelled his chair around,

strode to the door and flung it open. Before him stood a tall, gaunt young man of almost cadaverous appearance. He wore a huge, ex-army greatcoat and was breathing heavily.

"Dr Johnson?"

"Mr Goddard. Please come in."

Ben had never seen anyone so thin. He moved slowly, with a kind of deliberation, as if each step taken were a conscious decision. He lowered himself into an easy chair in the corner, still without taking his overcoat off.

"I arrived early because I . . . didn't know how long it would take me to walk across campus."

This almost amounted to eloquence.

"They allowed me into the distinguished visitors' car park" – here his lip curled slightly – "but it's still something of a walk for someone in my condition."

Ben didn't know whether to make a reference to his 'condition' or not. He handed over a copy of the poems that Maggie had chosen. "You could have a look at these while you're waiting."

As the students filed in one by one they glanced with curiosity at the silent, immobile figure hunched in the corner. When they were all present, Ben said merely, "This is Alex Goddard, who's sitting in on class today." Alex inclined his head slightly but said nothing.

"We'll look at the first poem on the sheets," Ben said. The linking theme Maggie had chosen for this week was listed in bold type on the opening page: Death the Leveller. "The theme of death and the necessity of submitting to its inevitability is a common one in seventeenth-century and renaissance poetry," he read. "The margin between grace and fatalism is narrow and ambiguous." The first poem was a Song by Thomas Nashe. Ben read it out loud:

*Adieu, farewell earths bliss,
This world uncertaine is,
Fond are lifes lustfull joyes,
Death proves them all but toyes,
None from his darts can flye;*

I am sick, I must dye:

Lord, have mercy on us.

As he read he felt an increasing sense of discomfort. Maggie would not have meant it, he was quite sure, but she could hardly have chosen a less appropriate theme. He tried not to look at Alex and to make his own voice as impersonal as possible but he could sense the mouth curling in an ironical smile, just as it must have done when he had said 'poor bugger' over the telephone. As he read automatically he looked down the list at the poems Maggie had chosen to represent her theme. Webster's 'Call for the Robin-Red-Brest'. James Shirley's 'Dirge'. John Ford's 'Oh no more, no more, too late'. His heart sank. The two hours of the seminar stretched before him like an endless journey. Why had he not thought to look at the selection of poems before admitting Goddard into the class?

The comments of the students came to him as if in a haze.

"'Heaven is our heritage' suggests some kind of faith in divine solace."

"There's a heavy emphasis on fate in the poetry, sir, which could be construed as either acceptance of defeat or Christian resignation."

Earnest, intelligent, the students' words sounded in his ears like a horrible parody of human discourse. Ben was filled with a profound sense of unreality. What did these lines of verse mean? What significance could they have when written by someone who was not himself dying? From time to time, through the mental fog in which he now found himself floundering, Ben could sense the students stealing curious glances at the silent Goddard. Were they wondering why Ben had invited him into the class? Did they imagine he might be some kind of exemplar of the theme, their own memento mori?

At six o'clock Ben put a mercifully early end to the proceedings and the puzzled students packed up their bags and left, casting last glances back at the motionless Goddard. Outside in the corridor he

heard one girl say, "He lacks a bit of spark without Maggie, doesn't he?"

Goddard sat on without moving. Then, as if gathering all his energies for one concerted movement, he hauled himself laboriously to his feet. "Thank you, Doctor Johnson. It has been most rewarding." There was no smile around the edge of his mouth this time. He spoke without apparent irony. Ben had no idea what was in his mind. As he shuffled out the door Ben knew that he would never see him again.

He sat at his desk, his head in his hands, filled with an almost illimitable sense of futility. He knew that he could not go home to the present Mrs Johnson and their 6-year-old daughter yet. His mood would infect them like a virus. He would be unable to conceal anything from them. He had up to twenty-two years of teaching in front of him if he wished, before he retired, and the prospect filled him with a kind of metaphysical terror. He had no wish any more to peddle truth. He would rather sell real estate or used cars, some activity that had no pretensions to offering meaning or understanding of life.

He poured himself a glass of dry sherry and took it with him over to the window. Three floors down below a group of students were playing a vigorous game of football. Two girls sat on a bench at the side of the lawn, watching them with amusement. Their shouts of jubilation and ridicule and the occasional thump of the football being kicked came to him dimly through the closed glass. They breathed animal, uncaring life.

A deep, involuntary groan came from Doctor Johnson as he returned to the desk and slumped over it. He read the sheet in front of him.

Wit with his wantoness

Tasteth deaths bitterness:

Hels executioner

Hath no cares for to heare

What vaine art can reply.

I am sick, I must dye:

Lord, have mercy on us.

NIKANOR

I HAD EXPECTED not to like Nikanor, but I wasn't prepared for jealousy.

It was his gentleness that did it. It drove me crazy.

As I'd walked from customs into the Bogotá airport arrivals hall he hadn't been hard to find. Among the well-dressed, upper-class Colombians, he stood out a mile: a *campesino* with dark skin and functional, dusty clothes. At first his admittedly handsome, almost Asiatic face seemed solemn as he stared intently at the crowd of arriving passengers, but when his eyes perceived and then returned my look of recognition he broke into the shyest, gentlest smile.

A freezing heat coursed through my veins.

Susan, I thought. *So that's why.*

I managed to smile in return and start walking over, but my mind was no longer in the airport. It had flown back through years to the torment of a dream I'd once had, in which Susan had fallen in love with Damian, a friend of hers, because his gentleness had brought her out of herself in a way I'd never been able to. Back then Susan had denied my dream laughingly. Rolling over in bed, she'd pressed her nose onto mine, peered into my eyes and said I had "a great gentleness too" even though I "hid it sometimes". But now . . . For it was the same, uncannily the same: the gentleness in Nikanor's smile was exactly what Damian had had in my dream, and suddenly I felt certain it was why Susan was abandoning me, after eight years, for this Colombian peasant.

I could barely open my mouth to say hello. And I couldn't say it in Spanish, as I'd planned. As Nikanor began responding in Spanish to my greeting, I interrupted him brusquely and asked him to speak the basic English the consul had told me he had.

"*Si*, yes, I can to speak it, I am *sorry!*" he said, and smiled that infinitely gentle smile again.

There was quite a pause.

"So. You are Nikanor."

"Yes, *Nikanor*." I'd pronounced his name wrong. "And you are Susan's great friend. She did to speak about you much times."

"*Has spoken*", and "*many times*", *Colombia*, I was burning to retort, *and don't be so sure that you're the one she loves, mate.*

THIS WAS THE second time I'd lost Susan.

The first had been in January of that year – 1997 – when she phoned to tell me about Nikanor.

There wasn't much to be done, I'd concluded, once I could think again after that call, but try to kill her off inside me. It wasn't as if she had given me an option. She hadn't said, 'I'm being tempted by another man – come and save me'. She'd just said she'd met Nikanor and that was that. I didn't know how a Perth high-school teacher fifteen thousand kilometres away was meant to compete with a real-life noble savage. For a while I did entertain fantasies about flying to Colombia to try to 'get her back', but she had told me firmly not to. And in any case,

although we'd loved each other for eight years, I didn't know if I was ready for marriage, which I knew was what I'd have to offer.

Still, I don't think I'd really even come to believe what was happening by October, when the call from Canberra came: a monotonal bureaucrat telling me Susan had been taken off a river ferry in the Colombian Amazon basin by members of the FARC – Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia. And in the chaos sparked by that news the part of me that had never let Susan go held the rest of me down, and she was reborn with unbelievable pain.

In that state I flew to Canberra.

Perhaps because I was Australian, and Nikanor only Colombian – or simply because she'd forgotten to change her details – Susan had left me as emergency contact in her passport, found in her luggage after she was taken. Whatever the case, that was what gave me the leverage with Foreign Affairs to force the fact-finding mission to Taracua and demand inclusion in it – though it never would have happened if not also for Susan's quasi-official status and the ambition of Jim Cleary, the consul in Bogotá.

But me being the one, the man her in her passport; I had no time to think about it in Canberra, but as I flew to Bogotá, the unease it brought – almost the sense of fraud – took me over.

I wasn't the one who'd been with her on the river. And it wasn't me she'd been planning to marry.

I SIDELINED HIM whenever I could, all the way up the river.

I used my nationality and education and even my colour – whatever advantages I could get with Jim Cleary and Luis, the Colombian government 'observer' – to try to keep Nikanor behind me.

Which was always going to be a pointless effort. Nikanor was indispensable, both as guide and witness: he'd been taking Susan to visit his sister and brother-in-law when the kidnapping had happened. And Jim, who knew perfectly well of Nikanor's relationship with Susan, was paying him to act as an interpreter on the mission.

Nikanor and I spoke only once during the sweaty trip up the muddy Madeira. I had climbed up to the top deck of the ferry to read and had found him already there, alone, standing at the rusty rails and staring out at the jungle and the birds spraying up from it as we passed. It strikes me now he must have felt almost as out of place in that rainforest as I did. He'd been there only once before – on the aborted visit to his sister, who'd married a man from the region – and his world couldn't have been more different. He came from the stony, rust-coloured Colombian High Andes, where the women still wore lace aprons and bowler hats and where silence ruled and the endless wind made everyone an introvert because you could escape from it only inside yourself – or so Susan had written to me.

That afternoon, pretending to read, I examined Nikanor at length for the first time. What a small, dark, squat figure he was! I didn't want to imagine tall and graceful Susan even standing next to him. But the contrast forced me to think of Susan's courage. It was so *her* to have gotten into this incongruous couple. I could just see her not giving a damn about the vast differences between them, and following wherever her feelings led. Which in turn made me register – my insides softening into a familiar mess – how that same courage had also made possible *our* unlikely relationship. A soccer-playing geography teacher chasing a beautiful daughter of the Perth intelligentsia, PhD and all; I'd thought I'd hardly stood a chance. But she'd barely seemed to notice the difference in our backgrounds, and only ever referred to it when gently teasing me out of some insecurity or other I'd developed.

Nikanor turned away from the river. He smiled and approached hesitantly, sitting down by my side.

"Tell to me," he began, with an air so innocent and friendly I wondered whether he was toying with me, "how is the life, in Australia?"

I grudgingly described a few things, and when I stopped his eyes seemed sincerely filled with wonder. Which disarmed me just enough to feel obliged to ask him about his own life.

“Me, I am to studying this, how do you call it? – organic agricultural ways. Our soil is shallow – you know? But we have no money for, how do you say? Ferts –”

“Fertilisers?”

“That! So us students take this ways to our homes. That is the aid project, who organises this. That is how I did to meet . . . Susan.”

And I tried, but I couldn’t ignore that hesitation, that unintended display of sensitivity and respect.

It sawed at me for days.

STILL I KEPT HIM out of things as much as I could. Still I resented his mournful occupation of nooks of the boat. The pressure was intense on the trip, and I can see now that I was only just managing to hold on. But there was another reason why I was acting that way. Jim’s firm belief was that if Susan was alive we had a good chance of securing her release, because of the delicate cease-fire then prevailing in the region, and I was convinced it would be too much for me to go through that nightmare and get Susan back only to lose her again to Nikanor. When I considered that outcome, the pit in my stomach would hint at some deeper abyss.

My course was clear: I had to be the one to rescue her.

TARACUA WAS THE outpost of civilisation in the upper Amazon, and looked like it: a hotchpotch of tin shanties and wooden huts dumped on a clearing hewn out of thick jungle. On the opposite bank of the river the army was building an enormous camp, supply helicopters buzzing in several times a day.

We were expected in the town. A community assembly in the Baptist Church hall had been arranged to explain our presence and enable us to make our request for information about the kidnapping. Susan had been taken some distance upstream, but Taracua was where the FARC unit considered responsible had its support.

When we arrived the town seemed tense; the meeting itself was rigid with strain. There was a big

turnout, but that was because there had to be: the local authorities were putting on a show of co-operation for Bogotá’s sake. The fact that people had been pressured to turn up didn’t mean they wanted to help. To most of them, as Jim had said, we were just ‘more rich gringos’, intruding incomprehensibly into their battle.

Jim launched into a speech which Nikanor, sitting next to him and looking nervous, translated into Spanish. I heard my name mentioned and Jim gestured twice to me as I stood with Luis a few feet to one side. It had been decided that I, not Nikanor, would be represented as Susan’s fiancée for the sake of cultural acceptability and emotional impact. But it was becoming clear Jim’s address was missing the mark. The impact he mainly seemed to be having was to make some of the elder women cluck their tongues and look disapprovingly at me, as if they couldn’t understand why the crazy white man let his woman travel into the jungle on her own.

After Jim had finished, a thick, obstinate silence descended. The rows of dark, impassive faces simply stared at us – rather stupidly, I thought. Then a local Big Man got up and noisily walked out. Silence descended again, and Jim reiterated our request for any information. At this point a *mestizo* at the back of the hall got up and started a long, abusive-sounding speech from which I only caught the words *imperialismo*, *gringos* and *lucha* – struggle. Unable to get his precise drift, I was looking at Nikanor for his reactions and so was watching him when he underwent a strange transformation. His face hardened, his mouth closed tight and his usually feminine-seeming jaw took on a new, aggressive set. His eyes were narrowing, too, and his arm muscles beginning to flex when he suddenly pushed his chair backwards and stood up.

The *mestizo* stopped.

Jim and Luis and I looked at each other.

For a moment Nikanor seemed to have frozen; but then, raising his tremulous and naturally quiet voice so that it reached the back of the large hall, he began addressing the audience.

“Honourable fighters in the Colombian struggle,” he said – or so Luis translated for me – “this woman is as innocent of the crimes for which she has been taken as every one of us!”

A ripple of murmurs swept the room. Nikanor hesitated, his dark eyes wide, forehead creased, face working.

“Susan Jennings is no American. She isn’t responsible for the rape of our land by the imperialists. She is an Australian, from a country far across the sea, a place I had never heard of until I met her, somewhere that has nothing to do with our struggle.

“But she herself *has* to do with our struggle –” he was speaking louder, now, and with warmth – “not as an opponent, but as a supporter!” As he continued he became impassioned, asking “*los valerosos combatientes*” to consider the innocence of this “equally brave worker for peace”. Why should she be made to suffer as part of the fight against *los capitalistas*, he asked indignantly, just because she had white skin? That was racism as bad as the gringos’ was! Especially since Susan was “*en solidaridad*” with the struggle, a “type of soldier herself”, fighting every day for “*justicia para el pueblo . . .*” Still the intensity of his speech grew, as he forcefully condemned the injustice of her kidnapping one minute and pleaded for help with arms spread wide the next. His face was sweating, his hands shaking. For a while I stopped listening to Luis’s whispered translation and simply watched, transfixed by Nikanor. Eventually he slowed and calmed a little, and told his own story of meeting Susan through the aid project and of their ensuing friendship, though he omitted their romance.

Finally he paused, and dropped his head for a moment; and when he lifted it again and spoke, his face and voice were blazing with fervour:

“*Susan Jennings tiene un alma muy especial y buena, y la quiero muchísimo. Por favor, ayúdenme a encontrarla.*” – “Susan Jennings has a rare and good soul, and I love her very much. *Please help me find her.*”

In the long silence that followed, Nikanor held his dripping face up, looking expectantly at the audi-

ence, suffering under their gaze. And as I came out of my daze I saw this small, shy, South American Indian putting his whole soul on display for the sake of the woman I loved, and I began to get an awful panicking sensation, as if some sort of buoy that had been keeping my swamped mind afloat had just been snatched away. And suddenly everything I had kept back until now, about Susan and Nikanor and myself seemed to sweep me away with it, sucking me deep into awful mental rapids until I could hardly breathe and became dizzy and had to stumble over to a chair and drop onto it before I fell.

I barely heard or saw the rest of the meeting, though I gathered later that the audience had remained outwardly unmoved. But that had meant nothing: it was just a show of collective dignity. In the night, the anonymous tip-off was delivered to our hotel.

THE HOUNDS CAME, as soon as we arrived back in Bogotá from Taracua – the news hounds. Even more hunting came once I was back in Perth. Most of all they wanted me to talk about what it was like the night we read the tip-off note that claimed Susan had been executed and the three days that passed until her remains were found. Once, on TV, I did try to talk publicly about that night and those days.

I won’t be trying that again.

I don’t know why they killed her. I know this causes great disappointment to some, particularly journalists. I extend them my sympathies. I have given the newspapers all the theories I have – but in any case that’s not what I’m trying to get at in this.

On the ferry back down the river, I was aware of Nikanor only distantly: someone suffering on the periphery of my suffering. But in Bogotá, during the arrangements for the recovery and return of Susan’s remains to Australia, I began to see into Nikanor’s pain, and to see my pain in his. I thought I saw him seeing mine, too. And we began to talk to each other. Not deeply, nor intensely. But we talked.

Even if Susan had lived, I like to think Nikanor and I would have found some way towards each other.

Because what had allowed us to start approaching each other in the first place was that meeting in Taracua. That buoy which had been torn away from me there, I eventually realised, was Nikanor himself, who all along I'd been holding down to keep myself afloat. And when with his speech he'd wrenched himself away from my grasp, he'd set me off down my own terrifying river, whose rapids of accusation and regret ran me all the way back home and down through the long months of that suffocating Perth summer and on for a long time after that.

But that day in Taracua was also the beginning of an acceptance, and the germ of a belief, finally, that Nikanor was who he was, that I was who I was, and that he would always have been the one to rescue Susan – whether her live self or her body. That I, by contrast, was barely there, in Colombia. That I didn't really even know how to rescue someone. And it was more than that – though I only found out how much more when the stress of the trip home and the funeral and eight months of grief were behind me. As I sat in my kitchen one morning about that time, I was amazed to realise that this odd sad feeling I'd been having, quite distinct from my grief, was from missing Nikanor.

I HAVE WRITTEN this account in Bogotá, in the week since I arrived for my second visit to Colombia. I felt I had to see him again. Initially I'd tried to fly him to Australia, but he wouldn't come because he couldn't pay for himself. And I saw that it was right anyway that I go. So I've come, and Nikanor and I are going to ferry up the Madeira again, now that peace has finally arrived in the region with the 1999 accord. And I will go with him to visit his sister at last. On behalf, in a way, of Susan.

He met me again in the arrivals hall. There was an awkwardness this time, too.

"Thank you," I stammered, "for letting me come."

There was a pause as he took this in. Then he seemed to summon something up.

"You don't to know, how glad *I* am that you come."

And his dark face blushed and he opened into that gentle smile. And as he did so I felt I'd run to the end of my rapids and had finally come to a calm stretch, and was reaching out with my feet for the riverbed, and finding it there.

narrabri, waiting for rain

silos of storms loom, blocking the blue, shift us sideways with their massed weight.
clouds pace themselves like children stoning windows, stalk the horizon. on the
highway through town cruising road-trains limber up, bruise bitumen, flex freeway
muscles past Thommo's melodramatic motel.

above the lake, pelicans lumber through sky-lanes yellow with storm-messages, lower
landing-gear for dawn touch-downs, taxi into stillness. they came when the waters
spread, sea-planing in from dustbowls further west. now waders spoon-bill slides of
water, drill mud near a two-day stubble of grass.

the sky shakes droplets, upturned colander, and the earth waits, open to possibilities.
on our way out of town, we watch pool after pool after pool slip past, worry-beads on
a dashboard, displacing dryness.

LOUISE WAKELING

THREE MONKEYS

KENT DIDN'T WANT to start writing the Japanese Encephalitis report that afternoon. The air in his office was hot and soupy. Instead, after drinking the afternoon chai brought by the maid he told the director of the National Zoonoses and Food Hygiene Research Centre, where he worked, that he was going to make sure the new girl knew what she was doing at the temple. He had to see if she was competent with the blowgun and could collect blood from monkeys without hurting herself.

When it came to shooting monkeys off a wall with tranquilliser, Kent wasn't exactly experienced, but he didn't think that mattered. He left the office and walked out into the lane, which he followed in the direction of the temple. The air was still and cloud hung low over the valley. Dogs barked at him from behind high walls; an older woman in a red sari stared at him; a man carrying yoghurt in terracotta pots said *Namaste* and some boys grinned at him – perhaps laughed – when he strode through their cricket game. Besides being white, Kent was over six feet tall, going bald and had a sprinkling of fading freckles over his cheeks and bare arms. Few men in Kathmandu were going bald, he had noticed, and even fewer had freckles. He knew it shouldn't bother him, for he'd been in Kathmandu for months, but he wished he was less conspicuous. Every time he left his apartment or job he had to steel himself so that the stares and grit of the Kathmandu streets couldn't touch him.

When he had first arrived he thought he would be comfortable away from Australia; away from his ex-wife, but the longer he stayed the more he realised that Kathmandu unsettled him. So he hung out with other expatriates, who seemed familiar. The UN guys had it best: four-wheel drives and large houses. Kent had a maid, but most of the UN guys had a maid, a cook, a gardener and someone to look after the kids. Although Kent didn't hunger for such status symbols, all of these trappings looked like insulation from the reality of Kathmandu, which he couldn't quite fathom.

Kent walked slowly up the hill. He was sweating. At the base of the temple steps, young men asked if he wanted a tour. In answer, he shook his head and smiled. The smell of wet trees and juniper smoke from the temple was pleasant. The white dome of the stupa stood on the hill, topped with a golden spear and tattered prayer flags.

At the top of the stairs the courtyard opened out, revealing the stupa: Swayambunath, the monkey temple, and two smaller shrines. A group of men stood over near the stupa, surrounding the girl. She didn't see him. He wasn't sure if she'd remember him anyway, for they'd met at a reception on the night she arrived, when her eyes were bleary with jet lag. He turned his back to her, paused to draw breath and glanced out at the view. Then he sat down on a stone bench, put on his sunglasses, and watched.

At first, he could only see the girl's head. Her

hair was plaited and her face appeared calm. She was gesturing to the men. He felt sorry for her. It was impossible to do anything like take blood from monkeys without attracting an audience.

One of the men broke off from the group surrounding her, and asked a pair of tourists to move out of the way. The girl, who was quite tall, cleared a space around herself. As the men backed off, Kent saw she was dressed in a green *salwar kameez*, over which she wore an unbuttoned dirty white lab coat. It looked like an odd combination to him, but other women had told him that a *salwar kameez* was a comfortable garment. Perhaps, like him, she wanted to fit in.

She held a bamboo pole in her right hand and pointed to a monkey which perched on the roof of one of the temples. A hush fell on the men. She raised the bamboo pole to her lips and blew. She struck the monkey in the rump with the syringe, and in a few moments the creature fell onto the stones.

She was a good shot with a blow gun. He stood up and walked over to take a closer look, removing his sunglasses and pushing through the men so that he was in the front row. More than anything else he wanted to look at her face, to see how she managed to be so quiet and tranquil in her movements. It inspired a curiosity in him that he hadn't felt for ages.

The monkey lay on its back. Kent saw it was female, and perhaps in the early stages of pregnancy. He guessed the monkey was young – probably under two years of age, judging by its condition and the state of its teeth. The girl bent over the monkey. She pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and began to perform a physical examination. With a stethoscope she listened to the monkey's heart, then she inspected its ears and mouth, and took a needle and syringe from her pocket. One of the men stepped forward. She gave him a pair of gloves and he held up the vein for her. Without any poking around in the monkey's arm she found the vein and filled a blood tube. Through all this, the men were quiet and the girl's face was expressionless.

Kent felt something expand in his chest; a kind of lightness. He had not imagined that anyone could

make a job like this look so easy. Monkeys, after all, were wild and ungovernable.

A smile touched the girl's lips. She and the man who wore gloves picked up the monkey and moved it to the shade in a corner of the courtyard. After that, she spoke to the men in Nepali, even though, as far as Kent knew, she'd only been in the country for a month. She gathered up her blow gun and boxes of blood tubes and syringes. From her pocket she withdrew a scrap of paper and a pen, and sat down on a bench.

Kent loomed over her. "Emma, isn't it?"

She had smooth skin and pale brown eyes. Kent realised that he was staring at her hungrily, and he looked away.

"Kent. Hi. Good to see you," she smiled.

"Came to see how you were getting on."

"What do you think?"

He shook his head. "You're doing a fine job." Even though he had been impressed, he could not say so.

She folded her hands in her lap. "Thanks."

"Should go," he said. Her feet, he saw, were encased in sandals that were popular with backpackers. Her toenails were dirty and unpainted, unlike a Nepali woman's.

She said, "Wait a minute." She pulled a notebook out of one of the boxes, flicked through the pages and passed him a sheet of paper, which was covered in messy handwriting and crooked lines. "You could include these results in your report on rabies."

His face felt hot.

"Read it," she said. "From the blood I collected, I found out almost 5 per cent of monkeys at the temples have rabies."

He gulped. "You've tried to draw some kind of table?"

She nodded, offering no apology.

After a time he realised the paper listed where she'd caught monkeys infected with rabies, dates and numbers.

She said, "We should vaccinate monkeys at the temples. I could do it when I take blood."

Her expression looked full of moral certainty. It made his throat tighten in irritation. "It costs

money,” he said. “When did you graduate from vet school?”

She looked perplexed for a moment, as if his question was irrelevant. “Almost two years ago. And you?”

“Oh, I’ve been working for more than ten years now. You haven’t been here long. It’s difficult to get anything done here.”

“If you’re determined, I don’t know . . .” Her voice trailed off. “*You* get things done. That’s why I’m talking to you. Or at least, you always seem to.”

In truth, all he managed to do was write reports. “I’ll see,” Kent said. “We’d have to ask for more funding.”

She nodded, then glanced at her watch, stood up and removed her white coat, rolled it into a ball and crammed it into a box of blood tubes.

“I have to go home to feed Hannibal,” she said.

Kent raised his eyebrows.

“Baby monkey. His mother died.”

Kent didn’t want to let her go. He picked up one of the boxes – the one containing syringes – and they walked down the hill through the trees. When they reached the road it was almost dark.

“You’ve been caring for this monkey?” Kent said.

She nodded. “He’s had diarrhoea a few times.”

“You like monkeys?”

“I was a giraffe freak, actually, when I was a kid. I wanted to be a zoo vet,” she said.

Kent nodded.

As he kept pace with her, the recollection of her concentrated expression at the temple reminded him of how he’d felt long ago, when he’d first qualified. He’d worked at a thoroughbred stud, looking after sick foals, and had made them drink from their mothers, or force fed them through a tube. At night, he lay with a sick foal on his chest, its front legs on either side of his shoulders. If it stopped breathing, he woke up, pushed off the foal’s warm body and tried to bring it back to life. Even if he was half asleep, he thumped on the foal’s ribs. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn’t. Still he remembered the smell

of milk which coated his fingers, the horsey odour clinging to his hair and clothes, the weight of a foal’s body. But feelings for the foals fell away from him. He hadn’t been able to hang onto his desire to save them, perhaps because the more he thought about saving racehorses, the less clear things became. He didn’t like the fact that when these foals grew into two-year-olds, they’d be confined to narrow stables, injected with hormones and made to run until they broke down. He’d stopped knowing what the point of it all was. In Kathmandu, it was the same. He didn’t know whether what he did would ever change anything for the better.

While he was thinking all this, they reached the crossroads at the rear of the palace.

“Which way are you going?” she said.

“Left.”

“Me too,” she said. “So what about you? Did you come here to save the world?”

Kent wasn’t sure if he heard sarcasm in her voice. He felt tired. “In a way, yes. And my wife left me and I was tired of working in small animal clinics.”

Emma stopped. “You’ll have to forgive me for saying this, but you seem weighed down by everything. As if you really care. It makes me curious about you.”

Her eyes met his, and she glanced over his features, and then looked away. Kent forced himself to smile, but felt embarrassed. How wrong she was. He didn’t care anymore. He wished he could care about how many people died of rabies each year, but all he saw was lists of fatalities in the provinces. No-one had any expectation that these numbers could be changed.

She said, “Why don’t you come back to my apartment and meet Hannibal? Maybe you can give me some advice.”

They came to a narrow lane and turned along it in the direction of the foothills. The windows on either side were dark, and he wondered if she was ever afraid to walk along the alley alone.

“Oh God,” she said. “It’s load shedding night. I’d completely forgotten.”

Kent looked up and saw that there was soft candlelight in each of the surrounding apartments. One

night per week, in a different district of Kathmandu, the electricity was turned off for two hours because there was not enough to go round. She must've known this, he thought. She was taking him back to her apartment on load-shedding night. Perhaps she, too, longed for a quick grope in the dark; sweaty love made under the mosquito net. His heart quickened at the thought.

He followed Emma up the narrow stairs to her apartment. The door was unlocked, and when they entered the place was pitch dark. She began speaking in the darkness.

"Hannibal, I'm home."

The monkey made a cheeping noise in reply. He wondered if he could really put his hand on her shoulder and draw her close.

"Where is he?" Kent said. The light was dim. He could not make out how large her apartment was, or where various rooms lay.

"In a cage in my bedroom."

Then there was a loud crash. He didn't know where the noise came from, but it sounded quite close, and as if someone had thrown or knocked something onto the floor. He froze and cursed silently. Here he was, with a chance, and they were to be interrupted.

She whispered, "Sounds like someone's in the kitchen."

For a moment they stood still and waited. There was another noise, like a ball striking the floor.

"Perhaps they're drunk," Kent said.

Emma giggled.

"I'll look, if you like," Kent said.

"Let's both go," she said. "If it's a burglar, we'll scare him away." She called out loudly in Nepali, "*Namaste dhai*."

Kent's Nepali language was terrible, but he understood what she'd said. It meant, literally, *I salute the God in you, older brother*, an odd greeting for a thief. There was another crash.

"Take this," she said. She handed him a head torch from her bag. They walked into the kitchen and he turned on the lamp. A monkey sat on the kitchen bench beside the stove. He was undeniably a real monkey, made of flesh and blood, and he gave

off a powerful smell like cat's piss. His back was hunched over the fruit bowl. One of his long arms dangled over the edge of the counter, his fingers twitching. In his other hand he held a mango from which he'd taken a bite. He was in bad shape: his fur was grey-green with missing patches, he was old and his penis sagged against his skinny leg. A number of saucepans and lids lay scattered on the floor. Kent recoiled at the sight of him. Emma laughed, turned her back to the monkey and casually stuffed blood tubes into her small fridge.

She said, "I want to make sure Hannibal's okay; that the monkey hasn't been in my room. I'll be back in a second. He'll probably leave if you encourage him." She smiled.

Kent pulled the torch onto his head, where it felt tight and uncomfortable. As soon as she left he raised his arms.

"Get out," he said. His voice sounded weak. The monkey hardly responded.

He yelled again, and the monkey bared his teeth.

Was he incapable of getting rid of the monkey quickly? Above all, he didn't want Emma to come back and find the monkey still in the kitchen, an awkward thing that might stand between them.

He raised his arms again, but this time the monkey raised its arms in answer. The gesture seemed a mocking one. Kent took a step towards the creature. The monkey opened his mouth wide, showing the red flesh at the back of his throat.

For a moment Kent stood still. Uncertain of what to do, and frustrated, he unbuckled his belt and wrenched it free of his jeans. He wrapped one end of the belt around his hand and swung the brass buckle through the air. The buckle jangled. He hit the monkey hard on the back of the neck.

The monkey touched his neck where Kent struck him, and before Kent could hit him again, he swung out the open kitchen window, down onto the fence and ran across the vacant lot into the dark.

A moment later the lights came on. Kent found himself breathing heavily in Emma's kitchen. Mangoes and bananas were spread out across the floor, and some spice jars were smashed. The odour in the

kitchen was a mixture of a musky monkey smell and spices. It was too strong for Kent's nostrils.

"Has he gone?" Emma called from her room at the back of the apartment.

"Yes," Kent said. He leaned against the bench and caught his breath.

She brought Hannibal to the kitchen doorway on her hip. Kent saw her feet were bare.

"Careful," he said. "Looks like he broke some jars." Kent pointed to the floor, where splinters of glass were mixed with cloves, turmeric and spices he didn't recognise.

Emma put on a pair of thongs. "He went without any trouble?"

Kent nodded. The belt was still wrapped around his hand. He stared at the baby monkey, which sat on Emma's hip. The monkey's arms were looped around her neck. He had a small wrinkled face.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" she said. "I can make chai."

He nodded. "The bathroom's down the hall?"

She looked into his eyes and grinned. "The monkey gave you a scare? They can be quite fierce."

Her feet crunched on the glass. She didn't seem to care that she was grinding it into the cement floor. She began to sweep it up with a small brush. He tried to smirk, made his way along the hall, and, hoping she hadn't noticed, threaded his belt through his jeans. For a few minutes he soaped his hands. The smell of the monkey still hung in his nostrils, and his heart thumped against his ribs. He splashed his face with water in an attempt to calm down. The night felt different, as if it had been tilted off its axis, as if the direction in which it had been travelling – towards a kiss – had been altered by the monkey in the kitchen.

When he returned to the kitchen she was stirring a pot on the stove, and he could smell chai spices: cardamom, ginger, cloves and tea. If she'd asked him, he would've said he wanted black tea, very plain.

"There's blood here," she said, pointing to the window sill.

"How strange."

Where the monkey had touched the window there were some spots of blood. She rubbed the

blood off with a tea towel and then placed it in the sink. For a few moments they said nothing. Emma gave Hannibal a baby's bottle.

She arranged some cups on the bench. "I'll put him back in the cage," she said. "I want him to sleep." She wandered down the hall.

When she came back she washed her hands and arranged the teapot and cups on a tray. It seemed an old-fashioned gesture. "Are you homesick sometimes?" she said.

"Not exactly," he said. "Are you?"

She looked at him. Her eyes were large and dark. She shrugged. "It's as if I was always meant to come here; to get away from Australia."

"Why?"

"I didn't belong there. I've escaped. I'm doing something more meaningful."

"How's that?"

"If I'd stayed in Australia I would've turned into a bore: a country vet who knew only how to manage a tricky calving." She didn't look at him.

"Do you really think what you're doing here is meaningful?" he asked. He held his breath.

"More meaningful than staying back in Australia, and more interesting."

He wished he could believe that. Maybe she was helping in some way – a vaccination program at the temples might help, for example. He was suspicious, though. So much of what was being done in Kathmandu he regarded with scepticism; it benefited aid agencies more than Nepal.

He said, "All I do is write reports. Will anyone ever read them?"

She put her head on one side. "I don't know if I'm doing anything meaningful in a tangible way. But I talk to people at the temples. My Nepali isn't very good, but unless I chatted to people, I could never have imagined what their lives were like." She smiled.

"And that's enough?"

"I don't know yet. It's enough for me at the moment." Her face wore a tranquil expression, as if what she'd experienced was locked inside her, where no-one, especially not him, could touch it.

Perhaps he had it all wrong.

Before he could say anything more, she said, "Come on. Let's go onto the roof. There's a wonderful view."

As she walked ahead of him up the stairs he watched the green fabric of her *salwar kameez* flap in the breeze, and when they reached the top of the building, the lights that spread out in all directions had a dizzying quality.

Emma placed the tray on a wooden seat, and, ignoring him, walked over to the edge of the roof, which was surrounded by a low wall, and looked out. The view to the south was dotted with apartment blocks, each several storeys high. Some of the lights were on, and Kent could see dark shapes of people moving back and forth; or sitting, their faces lit by the blue glow of a television screen; or eating, perhaps *dhal baht tarkaari*. On a nearby roof, two young men stood talking. One of them lifted his arm to wave, and then the men disappeared.

She said, "Did you hit that monkey?"

He nodded.

"With a broomstick or something? I'm surprised." She turned her head away from him, and continued to stare in the direction of the apartment blocks.

Blood rushed to his face. The wind made her *kameez* cling to her. He stepped towards her and placed his hands on her wrists. They were thin and warm. He had an urge to pull her to him, to encircle her with his arms.

She didn't try to yank her hands out of his, but he could feel her resistance. "What are you doing? You've got the wrong idea." She placed her foot on top of his and ground her heel into the bone on top of his foot. It hurt.

He let her go. It was dark, but he could see the whites of her eyes. At once the night felt airless and unbearable, as if they were trapped like insects under an upturned glass.

She said, "White guys are all the same here. On the rampage. I can't believe it."

She shook her head.

He wanted to explain. It was hard to find the words. "I just want to understand how you believe. How you can think that what you're doing is purposeful, when all I see is aid workers driving around in four-wheel drives, collecting their salaries and investing in offshore bank accounts. You think I care, but the truth is, I don't."

She stepped away from him. "What's that got to do with grabbing me by the wrists?"

He shrugged. Her hair lifted in the breeze. He saw, then, that her face had lost its calm. Perspiration beaded her forehead. As if to distract herself, she absentmindedly poured the tea. He would never touch her again, he saw now. It had been a terrible mistake. He had wanted something strong yet fine to bind her to him; a bridge to the country she inhabited, which he saw now as different, superior, to his own empty place. Perhaps there could have been something like that, but he had broken it. Instead, he had become part of what she wanted to escape.

He said, "I'm sorry."

"You'd better work out a way whereby you can care," she said. "You'd better find it in yourself, because otherwise you're just like everyone else. Just someone living off the money they pay you, going to the only jazz club in town, pretending that you've never left Australia, or that you can insulate yourself from this place."

He nodded. He sipped his tea and tried to like it, and then looked at his watch. It was after nine o'clock. "Can I buy you dinner? As a way of apologising?"

She hesitated and put her head on one side. "Not tonight. Perhaps another time. And only if you don't get any funny ideas."

He shook his head. It was clear that he had to leave. She drained her teacup and he followed her downstairs. In the end, he could do nothing but retreat. The alley outside seemed emptier than it had earlier. The air smelled of mud and damp grass, nothing exotic. He would have to find his own way home.

MARY FORTUNE

THE ONLY TRULY BOHEMIAN LADY WRITER WHO HAS EVER EARNED A LIVING BY HER PEN IN AUSTRALIA

FOR THOSE WHO complain about the hard life of the Australian writer, the lonely hours, the pay, the bloody GST on books, consider Mary Helena Fortune (c. 1833–1909). She was a pioneer author, earning her living by the pen at a time when the Australian fiction market was tiny, there were no local book publishers, far less grants for writers, PLR or ELR. Of her famous Austral contemporaries, Adam Lindsay Gordon found the life of literary art so hard he committed suicide; Marcus Clarke and Henry Kendall struggled with despair and simply to survive. Moreover Fortune's writing career was near-continuous, with weekly or monthly publications for over a forty-year period, from 1865–1909.

Much was hackwork, yet modern reprints have shown she stands the test of literary time.¹ Her work was freelance and eclectic: lively journalism, Gothic melodrama, and a memoir of goldfields life termed by modern reviewers the most “vital account of those exciting days”, and deserving “to be regarded as the first instance of Australian, as opposed to colonial, prose”.² She is best known, though, for the longest-running early detective serial known, ‘The Detective’s Album’, for which she wrote over five hundred stories from 1867–1908.

This professionalism is even more significant considering her gender. At a time when women were expected to be domestic helpmeets, angels in the house, Fortune freely admitted to being self-supporting, without the benefit of spouse, almost unheard-of for a woman writing in the colonies. She boasted that her tea tasted all the better because “I have earned every penny of the money that bought it myself”, adding “God bless ye all, my dear friends, and grant me continued independence!” – an unusual, even eccentric wish for a Victorian woman.³

But although her writings, some autobiographical as in the example quoted above, appeared regularly, she was totally unknown to her public, hiding behind the pseudonyms ‘WaifWander’ and ‘W. W.’. Such was conventional for contemporary women writers, such as the Brontës and George Eliot. But Fortune was not a conventional woman, as research has shown, indeed anything but. The pseudonym shielded her – and protected her income – from her reading public, whose Victorian values she decidedly did not share.

The true story of Fortune's life, her husbands, sons and lovers, has only gradually been emerging from the shadows; and it is extraordinary stuff.



San Francisco artist Freddie Baer's impression of Mary Fortune.

It offers an ongoing object lesson on attitudes to gender which still prevail; on how Australia values its authors; and how easy it is to forget those aspects of our past which do not conform to the national mythologies, the secret, ratbag histories of real people.

Until the 1980s, Fortune had been largely forgotten, with even her gender uncertain. The following facts have since been revealed. She was born in Belfast, Ireland as Mary Wilson, and as a child emigrated to Canada with her father George. She married Joseph Fortune, a Quebec surveyor, in 1851, and the couple had one son, Joseph George. She emigrated again to Australia with her child in 1855, to join George Wilson, who was then on the Victorian goldfields. There she briefly married a policeman, Percy Brett, who by his second marriage was the great-grandfather of Judy Brett. There was no evidence of a Fortune–Brett divorce, and such were expensive and difficult at the time. Bigamy was indicated: but by Fortune, or Brett?

In addition Fortune's second son was born in Australia in 1856 prior to the marriage to Brett. His father was given as Joseph Fortune, but there was nothing to suggest that Mary's first husband

emigrated to Australia, nor died here . . . the biographical facts that would have made her a woman, in the Victorian sense, of good fame. A death record for Joseph Fortune could not be located; nor for Mary, though she lived into the 1900s. The latter remains elusive, despite the efforts of various researchers.

These facts have been established for some years, but recent research in Canada by members of Joseph Fortune's family has answered the question of bigamy. Joseph Fortune died in Quebec in 1861, three years after his wife married Brett in Australia. Thus Mary Fortune is apparently situated in the Victorian category of erring female, with a child of dubious legitimacy. Such calls to mind images from nineteenth-century sentimental or genre painting: Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*, Tissot's *Abandoned*, Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* trilogy, and other representations of the outcast, fallen Victorian female. But this image of Fortune is not the whole story, nor an explanation of her life.

Beside Fortune as Victorian Scarlet Woman can be added a series of photographs, police mugshots. Of Mary Fortune's two sons, Joseph George, son of Joseph Fortune, had died on an Australian goldfield, aged 5. The other, whose paternity and legitimacy was in dispute, had lived to adulthood. However he was neither named nor baptised on his birth certificate. I had trawled through the death and marriage records for numerous male Fortunes in the nineteenth century, the trail being thoroughly confused by a large and prolific unrelated family of Fortunes from Narnagoon. The relevant information was elsewhere.

The prison record for Fortune's second son, Eastbourne Vaudrey Fortune, notes that he was known as George Fortune, Henry Lidney and various other aliases.⁴ His mother is described on the record as "Mary Fortune, a newspaper and journal writer". He served over twenty years in Victorian prisons for offences ranging from vagrancy to robbery under arms. It is a bitter irony that the title of Fortune's only book, from 1871, a selection from her detective series, was *The Detective's Album*, referring to a detective's collection of mugshots – just like those of her son. Life imitating art? If so, very cruelly.

It seems even crueller that the same year the collection was published, a cause for celebration in any writer's life, the teenage E.V. was first arrested by

[Mary Fortune] was homeless – despite being arguably at the time the most published author in Australia, having contributed four serialised novels, poetry, journalism and over sixty short stories to the *Australian Journal* and other periodicals.

over sixty short stories to the *Australian Journal* and other periodicals. Perhaps we should add to our Fortune image bank no. 3 of Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* series, the fallen woman dosing underneath the bridge.

Given Fortune's homelessness, it has to be wondered whether her pseudonym of 'Waif Wander' was another case of art into life. Fortune could be self-referential, perhaps emboldened by her anonymity: Percy Brett makes various recognisable appearances in her fiction. Certainly Waif Wander was an odd nom-de-plume for a woman in an era where femininity comprised domesticity. Perhaps it was precisely this separation from the women's place, the home, that she denoted. In an 1872 article, 'Our Colonial Christmasses', she referred to herself as a rolling stone. The following, published in September 1871, was written in the guise of a male character, yet has an apparent biographical resonance: "You must have led an unhappy and roving life, to know how hard it is to be still, and to go quietly through the world like the people – the tame *nothingness* people around you".¹¹

Additionally, Waif is a legal term, signifying among other things lack of ownership – and a woman without a legal owner in the Victorian era was single, beyond the control of husband or father. And to delve into the dictionary even further, waif also has the meaning of outcast, which for a woman in Victorian society usually meant loss of virtue. In the pseudonym, does Fortune hint at her errant status? Most probably yes.

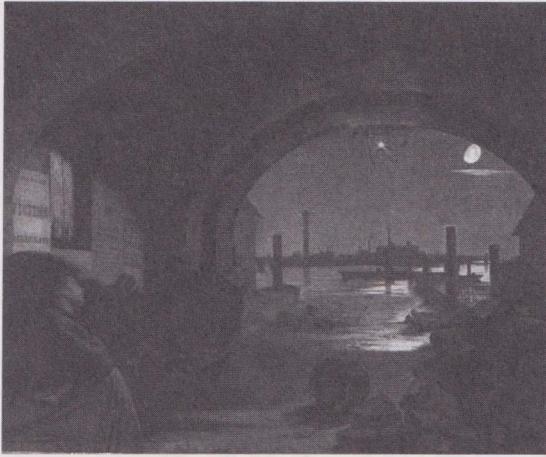
In 1898 the magazine *Table Talk* referred to Fortune as "probably the only truly Bohemian lady writer who has ever earned a living by her pen in Australia". It praised her as "the best detective story writer" in the country, but added "she is very old now and lives from hand to mouth" – despite publishing regularly in each monthly issue of the *Australian Journal*.¹² "Truly Bohemian" was apt. In March 1873, when E.V. was convicted for a second time, under his alias James Davidson, the *Children's*

Registers record that Fortune was seemingly living in a de facto relationship: "Father James Davidson, Mother Mrs Mary Davidson [. . .] is stated to be a writer for the *Australian Journal*."

His third conviction, from October 1873, noted: "Father Joseph Fortune dead. Mother Mary Fortune, a governess [. . .] East Melbourne, is in poor circumstances. Mother is a drunk." Indeed, one of the few things remembered about Fortune at the *Australian Journal* was that she was "of bibulous habits".¹³ But if she was a drunk in 1873 yet survived, writing hundreds of stories until the early twentieth century, she presumably dried out, to relapse again.

The images associated with Fortune multiply: scarlet woman, grieving mother of errant son, alcoholic, as in Hogarth's engraving of the gin-soaked mother, too drunk to attend to her child? The latter was regarded with particular horror by Victorians. In her writing, Fortune echoed the conventional attitude, being as rigidly censorious as Mrs Grundy, the Victorian exemplar of respectability. Her first detective story, 'The Stolen Specimens' (1865), contains a young woman called Ellen who becomes "more and more addicted to the cursed liquor [. . .] it at length became no uncommon thing to see her staggering up the street, still carrying the unfortunate child, with its clothes, as well as her own, the picture of neglect and untidiness". Here Fortune is writing from the viewpoint of a male detective and his prejudices. Ellen ends by hanging her child and later dying herself in an asylum: "the victim to the curse of intemperance so prevalent in our colony".¹⁴

An 1868 piece of journalism, written in flaneuse mode, is even more evocative and similarly scathing. 'Waif Wander' has gone looking for lodgings. She meets a prospective landlady, Mrs Rash, with a partiality for 'lime juice' (gin). Later that day she encounters Mrs Rash again, the landlady now legless drunk, stuck in a mud hole and being taunted by urchins:



Augustus Leopold Egg, *Despair [Past and Present, 3]*, 1858, Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London.



William Hogarth, *Gin Lane*, 1751.

A number of angry ducks that herslip had dislodged from said hole were quacking and flapping their dirty wings behind her, and she herself [,] propped up against the fence, with her hair hanging in disorder, and her scarlet jacket displaying a deplorable rent, was abusing, to the best of her ability, the dancing, and screaming, and halloing children.

WaifWander helps Mrs Rash to her feet, and through her gate home. Despite the kind act, she is quite unsympathetic. She finds the spectacle ludicrous, and it cheers her up after a long day's trudge after accommodation.¹⁵

What could make a woman a female, nineteenth-century, version of Charles Bukowski? *Australian Journal* editor Ron Campbell thought he knew: "God knows, she probably had every reason, as she wrote more, and doubtless got less for it, than any other Australian writer of the time." He researched and wrote the history of the Massina firm, the *Australian Journal's* publishers, and had access to a wages book (now lost) from the earliest years of the periodical. It is possible W.W.'s pay was recorded within, given Campbell's comments. In the *Bulletin* he described her as "one of the first women freelance-writers of these parts [. . .] she supported herself entirely by writing, though apparently only just".¹⁶

Other writers found the *Australian Journal* a hard paymaster. Fortune's contemporary and crime fiction collaborator, James Skipp Borlase, publicly complained that the magazine "did not pay its writers a quarter as high per page" as the *Family Her-*

ald, its English equivalent. The *Australian Journal* bitterly disputed these remarks. It should also be recalled that Adam Lindsay Gordon famously shot himself after the Massinas presented him with the account for *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes*.

However, the magazine was probably not unusual in its poor pay for writers. Borlase wrote that: "Australia is, in fact, at present, the last place that the professional man or the man of letters should emigrate to. Many [are] at present enduring semi-starvation in every Australian city [because their wages] are lower than that of the compositor who sets the 'copy'." He himself struggled until he returned to England and a career in popular fiction. It is also possible that, as a woman, Fortune's pay was even more reduced. Australian feminist journalist Alice Henry complained in 1901 that: "Women writers of more than ordinary ability receive less than half the remuneration given to men whose writing is of far inferior merit . . ."¹⁷

Whatever may have been the reason for Fortune's descent into the ranks of the disreputable poor, it did give her genuine, firsthand, experience of the lowlife – something that few crime writers have. Such matter figured in some of her crime stories, such as the fine 'The Phantom Hearse', from 1889. Thus, in terms of modern values, she has 'street cred', or authenticity – but earned at an appalling price. In 1874 the *Police Gazette* of Victoria noted:

Information is required by the Russell-street police respecting Mary Fortune, who is a reluctant witness in a case of rape. Description: – 40 years of age, tall,

pale complexion, thin build; wore dark jacket and skirt, black hat, and old elastic-side boots. Is much given to drink and has been locked up several times for drunkenness. Is a literary subscriber to several of the Melbourne newspapers. Stated she resided with a man named Rutherford, in Easy [Easey] Street, Collingwood. (10 February 1874)

Were this article a fiction, such as my novel *The Scarlet Rider* (Tor, New York, 1996), which partially fictionalised the search for Fortune, I'm not sure I would add the detail of Easey Street, coincidentally the site of a notorious twentieth-century murder. Sometimes life is too neat even for art.

The image bank is rather crowded now, with E.V. and the various imaginary and one actual representation of Fortune, if only in words. But I want to add another image, change our (received) perception of Fortune once again. Again, as a mother, but the images that most readily come to mind are modern, from news reports about the Family Court. If true, the following is even more extraordinary – from a woman who in so many ways defied the mores of her time.

In 1855, Mary Fortune travelled to Australia from Canada, with her 2-year-old son Joseph George, leaving her husband Joseph behind.

What happened?

1855 is significant in the history of Canadian law. In that year, the separate Canadian provinces began to reform their marriage, divorce, alimony and child custody legislation, to be slightly more in line with the American states, on the other side of the border. Fortune's contemporary Metta Victor, the first author to write a detective novel in America, married under the relatively liberal Michigan law, and was able to divorce and remarry without complication.

In Canada, there was one exception to the reforms: Quebec. Mary Helena Wilson had married Joseph Fortune in Melbourne, Quebec, in 1851. Quebec was strongly Roman Catholic, and it followed the Napoleonic and patriarchal code of law, which did not permit divorce, although recognising legal separations. The Fortunes, as Protestants, had slightly more options than a Catholic couple. A few Protestants were able to divorce under Quebec law by Parliamentary decree, something involving expense and difficulty assuming both were of agreement that the marriage had broken down.

An alternative was to cross the American border and divorce there, though the divorce would not be legally recognised in Canada. Such actions were known as 'migratory divorces'.

It is possible the Fortunes did obtain an American divorce. But at issue was the issue – Joseph George, b. 1852, the only son of an only son, of a family who were of some significance and standing (although they had gone down in the world since the eighteenth century, when they were substantial land- and slave-owners in South Carolina). The 1855 reforms did liberalise custody, with the father's absolute patriarchal rights being modified. The courts would examine the child's welfare, make discretionary rulings. But the double standard still applied. Maternal custody was dependent on good character, and most importantly, male relatives of respectability and money to house and keep the mother and her children. This applied both to Upper Canada and Quebec, where judges ruled on *separation de corps*. The tendency, though, was to favour the father in granting custody.¹⁸

In 1855 Mary Fortune was only 22. She had no brothers, and her father, George Wilson, had emigrated to Australia. She thus had no male relatives in Canada, something crucial if she needed to get out of her marriage and take her child with her. If her marriage broke down, it is possible that the couple parted by mutual agreement. But would a father have consented to his only son being taken to the other side of the world, never to see him again? I do not know for certain, but I think not.

One of the Canadian Fortunes emailed me: "Mary must have been very unhappy". And I think this is *one* thing we cannot dispute. We can postulate a young woman, in a breaking-down marriage, with a small child, aware of geographical inconsistencies in the marriage laws, and that they were changing (as she would have known at the least from reading newspapers). But she could have been aware too that even in the case of a divorce or a legal separation custody decisions would have gone against her.

A drastic option for the unhappily married in the nineteenth century was what was called in Australia Poor Man's Divorce (simply disappearing), as practised by Borlase, Daisy Bates and who knows how many others. Mary's father George Wilson was in Australia, on the goldfields. Perhaps he had a lucky strike, sent her money. Joseph Fortune was a surveyor, in a rural area, where townships were

being created. That could have taken him away from home for long periods. And where they were living, Knowlton Falls, Quebec, was close to the American border. Once over it, Mary and Joseph jr would be out of the reach of Canadian law. She could then have very quickly taken ship, in Boston or New York, for England, and then to the Australian colonies.

The above is conjectural, but I have run this scenario past several Canadian legal scholars, and the consensus is: It looks like your Mary did a runner with the child. Sue Martin commented: "But how brave for the period!" With the particular bitter irony that within three years the contested child was dead, of meningitis contracted on the Kingover goldfields.

The voyage to Australia may have turned Fortune into a writer, but her personal life apparently condemned her to an existence of anonymous, underpaid literary drudgery. It was not really possible for a woman without money or title to be a writer *manqué* in the era of the Angel in the House. Moreover the economics of colonial Australian publishing were heavily weighted against the writer. At least Fortune did not die in complete poverty, for she successfully applied to the Massina firm for an annuity circa July 1909, when she was apparently suffering from poor eyesight, and unable to write anymore.¹⁹

She may have had additional health problems. After his final release from prison E.V. went to Tasmania, seemingly reformed and died in 1907. Yet two years later Mary Fortune mentions having received a letter from her son. The possibility exists that she had a third son, but it is more likely she was simply suffering from senile dementia, one symptom of which can be false memories of the beloved dead, where they apparently live again. Indeed she commented, ambiguously: "there is a want in that brain somewhere nothing else can possibly account for the muddle".²⁰

So to conclude by turning to the image bank one last time. What do we have? Angel? Devil? Sinister or Shady Lady? Scarlet Rider? Scarlet Woman? Drunk? Mother of a jailbird? Mother of Australian detective fiction? All of these perhaps, or simply human . . . and a singularly unfortunate one.

1. Fortune's journalism and memoirs have been collected as *The Fortunes of Mary Fortune*, Lucy Sussex, ed., Penguin, Ringwood, 1989. An edition of her crime fiction appeared as *The Detective's Album*, Lucy Sussex, ed., Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, Shelburne, Ontario, 2003. A pamphlet of her poems has also been published: *Cooee and Other Poems* by Mary Fortune (Waif Wander), Mulini, Canberra, 1995. Other short stories and poems have additionally been anthologised.
2. Patricia Clarke, *Canberra Times*, 20 January 1990, p.84; Adrian Rawlins, *Australian*, 28–29 October 1989, p.8.
3. 'How I Spent Christmas', in *The Fortunes of Mary Fortune*, p.187.
4. VPRS 515 P, Unit 29.
5. Chris McConville, 'Outcast Children in Marvellous Melbourne', *The Colonial Child*, Guy Featherstone, ed., RHSV, Melbourne, 1981, p.44.
6. *ibid.*, p.44.
7. The entries for E.V. (George) Fortune are found in the *Children's Registers*, Old Series 3: fiche 38, 649; Old Series 5, fiche 62, 489.
8. Suzanne Davies, 'Vagrancy and the Victorians: The Social Construct of the Vagrant in Melbourne, 1880–1907', Diss. Melbourne University 1990, p.271.
9. *ibid.*, pp.326, 272.
10. The Vagabond (Julian Thomas), 'A Day in the Immigrants' Home', *Argus*, 29 April 1876, p.4.
11. 'The Bushranger's Autobiography', *Australian Journal*, p.34.
12. *Table Talk*, 25 March 1898, p.3.
13. Ron Campbell, letter to J. K. Moir, 26 May 1952, Moir Collection, La Trobe Library, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.
14. *Australian Journal*, 14 October 1865, pp.106–108.
15. 'Looking for Lodgings', *Australian Journal*, 19 December 1868, p.299.
16. Campbell, *Bulletin*, 25 March 1953, p.9.
17. Borlase, pp.233–234; Henry's comments were reprinted anonymously in *Colonial Eve: Sources on Women in Australia 1788–1914*, Ruth Teale, ed., OUP, Melbourne, 1978, p.226. The author was identified in Diane Kirkby's *Alice Henry*, CUP, Cambridge, 1991, p.43.
18. See Constance Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice: Women and Law in Nineteenth-Century Canada*, Women's Press, Toronto, 1991.
19. James Skipp Borlase, 'Melbourne in 1869', *Temple Bar*, 30 November 1870, p.233; 'Our Whatnot', *Australian Journal*, December 1870, p.219; Campbell, *The First Ninety Years: the Printing House of Massina*, Melbourne, 1859 to 1949, Massina, Melbourne, 1949, p.233; as noted by Minaille Furlong on the ms letter she received from Mary Fortune, c. 1909, Letter to Mrs [Minaille] Furlong [June 1909?]. Moir Collection, La Trobe Library, State Library of Victoria.
20. VPRS 515 P, Unit 29; Letter to Mrs Furlong.

Lucy Sussex is a Melbourne writer. She would like to thank Judith Brett, Andrew Brown-May, Lorraine Chevrier and Glen Porteous, for their help.

THE COURAGE OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI

FOR MANY PEOPLE, Aung San Suu Kyi's name is synonymous with the struggle for democracy in Burma (Myanmar).¹ She is respected and admired for her courage and perseverance in the struggle for human rights and basic freedoms in a country where 'fear is a habit' and military misrule treats too many of its own citizens as enemies. Readers of *Overland* will be familiar with the hefty personal sacrifices she has made in pursuit of her political values – incarceration for ten of the past seventeen years, and she remains in solitary detention today. Why is Aung San Suu Kyi such a threat to the military authorities who are, after all, armed to the teeth? And what is it about her political values that also inspire a greater universal audience beyond her supporters in Burma? The universal import of her principles and values was recognised when she won the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize whilst in detention.

It was during a return visit to Burma to care for her ailing mother, just as the massive popular uprising against one-party authoritarian rule was gaining momentum in 1988, that Aung San Suu Kyi (or Daw Suu for short – 'Daw' is a term of respect for older women) was catapulted into public life. She had lived outside the country since she was a teenager, and was settled in Oxford with her husband and two children, returning to Burma periodically. But as her husband Michael Aris wrote in his introduction to her book *Freedom from Fear*, Aung San Suu Kyi was always deeply preoccupied with the question of what she might do to help her people² – she never forgot that she was the daughter of Burma's heroic leader, *Bogyoke* (General) Aung San, who brought Burma to the edge of independence from British



After her release in 1995, photograph by Kai Ianssen.

rule in 1947, only to be assassinated before reaching this goal when she was 2 years old. In a letter to Michael Aris before they married in 1972, she asked him a favour: "I only ask one thing, that should my

people need me, you would help me to do my duty by them. Would you mind very much should such a situation ever arise? How probable it is I do not know, but the possibility is there.”³ Although she could not have imagined the momentous role that was to actually transpire, these little insights add weight to some commentators’ description of Aung San Suu Kyi as Burma’s ‘woman of destiny’. In this destiny, as I note below, her ideas are very much concrete, lived ideas embodied in her daily work and from which she is never disengaged. The sources of her ideas are synthesised from influences especially of her father’s political life and ideals (about whom she has also written), her own social and political activism which is thoroughly infused with her own form of engaged Buddhism, and her social and political writings and speeches.

Aung San Suu Kyi became an instant leader in her first public appearance on 26 August 1988. This landmark speech, the first of some one thousand public addresses given throughout Burma until her first arrest in 1989, took place at the mighty Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon (Burma’s holiest Buddhist shrine) to a rapturous audience of around 500,000 people. A huge portrait of her father, Aung San, hung above the stage embodying the symbolism of her words: “The present crisis is the concern of the entire nation. I could not, as my father’s daughter, remain indifferent to all that was going on. This national crisis could, in fact, be called the second struggle for independence.”⁴ But this time it was against the army that her father had created. The people also did not miss the symbolism of her standing on the very same site where her father had given some of his most important speeches in the lead-up to independence. She called on the authorities to hold free and fair elections, and she called on the people for discipline and unity in what was a very tumultuous environment. A mass pro-democracy movement had emerged in 1988, growing to include hundreds of thousands of people by the time of the ‘8-8-88’ National General Strike on 8 August. With her charisma and intelligence, Aung San Suu Kyi (often referred to, in hushed tones, as ‘the Lady’) also became something of a personality cult, something she would be the first to decry. She has always emphasised loyalty to principles rather than individuals; yet at the same time, she personified so potently the principles she and the democracy movement were calling for. This is what makes her

so remarkable – that she lives her principles. As life-long Burma scholar Josef Silverstein comments, her ideas are not offered as an example of a scholar or reflective thinker working in the abstract.⁵ Rather, she lives her principles with courage and determination, and personal sacrifice. But personal sacrifice is something that she does not admit to. Once when she was asked in an *Asiaweek* interview about her status as a champion of democracy she quipped, “Well, I don’t think anything particular about it. For me it is just a job that has to be done.”⁶ She also rejects the martyr complex, saying “What you need are workers, not martyrs”.⁷

When asked what he most respects about Aung San Suu Kyi, her close associate U Tin U (deputy chairman of the National League for Democracy) says it is that people trust her to speak the truth – “the lady speaks frankly and people like it”.⁸ So what are some of the main elements of her thinking that resonate so powerfully? One, outlined in her famous ‘Freedom from Fear’ essay, concerns the corrupting influence of fear: “It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.”⁹ For Aung San Suu Kyi, people cannot be truly free if they are living in fear. She recognises that fear is a habit and people are conditioned to be fearful. Particularly in authoritarian states, asking questions can have dangerous consequences and so people simply do what they are told to do. And thus those in power become more oppressive and the people get more frightened – it is a vicious circle.¹⁰ She writes further:

Within a system which denies basic human rights, fear tends to be the order of the day. Fear of imprisonment, fear of torture, fear of death, fear of losing friends, family, property or means of livelihood, fear of poverty, fear of isolation, fear of failure. A most insidious form of fear is that which masquerades as common sense or even common wisdom, condemning as foolish, reckless, insignificant or futile the small, daily acts of courage which help to preserve man’s self-respect and inherent human dignity. It is not easy for a people conditioned by fear under the iron rule of the principle that might is right to free themselves from the enervating miasma of fear. Yet even under the most crushing state machinery courage rises up again and again, for fear is not the natural state of civilised man.¹¹

In her challenge to authoritarian rule, she invokes Nehru's assessment that the greatest gift for an individual or a nation is fearlessness, not just in the bodily form but absence of fear from the mind. For Aung San Suu Kyi what is needed is courage through determined effort, the courage to cultivate the habit of refusing to let fear dictate one's actions.

In her reference to the second struggle for independence, Aung San Suu Kyi calls for a "revolution of the spirit" born of an intellectual conviction for a need to change mental attitudes and values which shape a country's development. It is not enough to change official policies, institutions or just material things, she argues. A political system must be guided by certain spiritual values. For example, in her 1991 essay 'In Quest of Democracy' she invokes a simple Buddhist model of the four causes of decline and decay in Burma: "failure to recover that which has been lost, omission to repair that which had been damaged, disregard of the need for reasonable economy, and the elevation to leadership of men without morality or learning".¹² In articulating the decline in moral and political values, her thinking combines modern political principles (for freedom, human rights and democracy) with Buddhist values such as *metta* (loving-kindness), *karuna* (compassion) and *thissa* (truth).¹³

Some people might wonder whether it is simply idealistic or naïve to talk about *metta* in politics but Aung San Suu Kyi responds by saying "it makes a lot of practical good sense" to her because these values can move people more strongly than any form of coercion.¹⁴ She says that *metta* is not only to be applied to those connected with you; you should also radiate *metta* towards those who are against you. So she sends *metta* to her oppressors – she does not see any point in animosity; she says she does not hate her captors, claiming that "you cannot really be frightened of people you do not hate".¹⁵ As one commentator notes, in the absence of access to instruments of government, Aung San Suu Kyi's approach has been to emphasise spiritual dimensions to the political process and to incorporate Buddhist qualities into her leadership qualifications.¹⁶ She has also cultivated her spiritual growth through the years in detention.

While clearly Aung San Suu Kyi's most trenchant opponents are the top military men ruling Burma (they have negatively depicted her as everything from neo-colonial 'axe-handle' to toothless 'democracy

princess'), other critics have questioned her apparently uncompromisingly principled approach. There has been a perception (amongst some journalists and diplomats for example) that she is inflexible. But it is worth remembering that the military has been consistently opposed to real dialogue over the past decade and a half. Apart from the occasions when secret talks have occurred led by now-purged junta strongman General Khin Nyunt (little is known about their content), Aung San Suu Kyi and her party have been denied the opportunity for true dialogue. Some view her approach of radiating *metta* even to tyrants as a way of persuading the Generals to come to the bargaining table.¹⁷ But others have questioned the impasse arising from her perceived uncompromising commitment to principles, as the following excerpts from a long interview with *Asiaweek* captures:¹⁸

INTERVIEWER: Politics is the art of the possible. You seem to be holding out for the impossible [referring to the call to recognise the results of the 1990 elections].

ASSK: Why? What are we holding out for that is impossible?

INTERVIEWER: Parliament for a start. They are not going to give it to you.

ASSK: Well, that's what they say. In how many countries have military regimes absolutely insisted that they were not going to give in and they had to give in anyway? So what's so impossible about asking for change? . . . haven't there been regimes just as bad, just as obdurate, and actually far more efficient, but in the end they had to agree to change?

INTERVIEWER: So you don't rule out power sharing?

ASSK: We say we don't rule out anything before negotiations. After all, that's what negotiations are for. To find out what one can accept.

INTERVIEWER: You are regarded as inflexible . . .

ASSK: . . . I think it is inevitable in such situations. Because if you stand up to a military regime and stick to your guns, you are accused of being inflexible. You have to make a distinction between standing up for certain basic principles, and . . . inflexibility. If you give up all the basic democratic principles which we are fighting for, then why [sic] would we be doing with the movement at all?

Whether or not she likes it, Aung San Suu Kyi has

developed a personality cult. But Burma's 'woman of destiny' has tried her best to counter references to her as such things, saying that her simple attitudes may be part of this problem: "Some people want to make something extraordinary out of me, but I'm not particularly extraordinary. I suppose people think I'm extraordinary because I'm so simple they can't believe it."¹⁹ She has also told people of Burma that she can only show the path to democracy, but: "Do not think that I will be able to give you democracy. I will tell you frankly, I am not a magician. I do not possess any special power that will allow me to bring you democracy. I can say frankly that democracy will be achieved only by you, by all of you."²⁰

Her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a decisive victory in the 1990 elections (the results of which have never been honoured) and, notwithstanding her long periods of solitary detention, her popularity has not waned. Gustaaf Houtman points out the paradox that while the military complains about personality cults destroying Burmese politics, it is precisely its own authoritarian form of government that produces the personality cults it so dislikes.²¹ The Rangoon regime, threatened by her principles and popularity, has felt compelled to detain her for ten of the past seventeen years. Her first detention lasted from July 1989 to July 1995, after she was arrested (along with a host of her NLD colleagues) for speaking out against the former dictator U Ne Win. During the early part of this period she received limited visits from family and diplomats, but much of the remaining time was solitary. She kept to a strict, disciplined routine during her incarceration, which included insight meditation practice. When her surprise release occurred in July 1995 she immediately resumed her political life with speeches and long, busy days with people from all walks of life.

Immediately after her release in July 1995, I joined the throngs of people who came to the gate of her compound at 54 University Avenue for her daily speeches as the monsoon rain poured down. During those first few days the crowds grew to thousands in a country where gatherings of more than a handful of people are deemed illegal. The people's mood was euphoric – there was hope for change at last, the international media poured in and beamed images to the rest of the world of the charismatic leader (who always wore fresh flowers in her hair) speaking animatedly to the people, addressing their

questions. Soon her daily speeches were kept to weekends so that she could get on with the work of her party. Her senior NLD colleagues were released from Insein jail, and the party gathered momentum once again. The NLD began functioning again and Aung San Suu Kyi encouraged people to participate in the movement.

The SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) regime at the time allowed the talks to go on, hoping the crowds would die down. The regime then began intimidating the crowd by sending in military intelligence personnel with video cameras to record people's faces and eventually barbed wired barricades were erected. In 1997, the SLORC reconstituted itself into the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) after some particularly corrupt SLORC members were purged. In the period leading up to Aung San Suu Kyi's re-arrest in September 2000, the regime subjected the NLD to increasing harassment and limitations on activities. In one incident when Aung San Suu Kyi insisted on travelling in defiance of the regime's restrictions, we saw the rather odd stand-off between her entourage (stuck for days in the car by the bridge) and the SPDC authorities. She was released from house arrest in May 2002, but just over a year on she and her supporters were violently set upon by a junta-sponsored mob and she was re-arrested and this time sent to Insein jail. This was her first stint in this notorious prison, and undoubtedly gave her insights into what her colleagues had suffered during her long years of house arrest. She was then transferred to house arrest where she remains today. In October 2004, the regime purged the 'moderate' faction headed by intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt, who was known to hold a more open approach about entering into dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. This purge has left the hardline junta faction in control and Burma's political stalemate stalled as ever. The regime maintains its choke-hold on power by virtue of military might and Aung San Suu Kyi remains in solitary house arrest.

Since Aung San Suu Kyi entered the political scene so spectacularly in 1988, Burma's military has more than doubled in size to become the second largest in Southeast Asia (after Vietnam). The regime continues to claim a monopoly on 'security', and in its version of 'national unity' it calls for the crushing "of all internal and external destructive elements as common enemy". You can find these goals professed

in state-run newspapers and on street signboards all around the country. Yet Aung San Suu Kyi continues to symbolise the challenge to this militarised version of reality with her political values, their practical application and powerful resonance with so many people, even if she remains isolated from her followers under house arrest. This makes her such a potent symbol for freedom and democracy for so many people. But it also means that the hardline military junta in power continues to feel threatened by this woman and the political principles she embodies. People continue to hang onto their dreams for a future society free from fear and its corrupting influence. The military has recently shifted its capital 400 kilometres north of Rangoon to a place called Pyinmana. It is here that they are bunkering down, afraid of external invasion or internal uprising.

Aung San Suu Kyi in her writings and speeches has called for the military to be true to her father's vision – that the army “refrain from adopting a stance

the preoccupation with trade and national security/counter-terrorism agendas of Australian foreign policy. She is calling for a wider engagement with Asia that cannot be measured in terms of national security and trade alone. The pursuit of ‘security’ narrowly conceived as national security obscures the wider sources of insecurity and violations of human rights and dignity (in some places carried out in the name of national security) which if left unaddressed only compounds regional and global insecurity. As Joseph Camilleri has said, “What we need in Australia, as elsewhere, is a new participatory ethic, whereby people in their various groupings address the challenges of a rapidly changing world, and increasingly do so in the context of inter-cultural dialogue”.²³ And the exploitation by the Australian government of “fear and the flag to keep us in line”,²⁴ as Graeme Cheeseman has noted, also serves to narrow the political and intellectual engagement that is possible.

Her message that true independence means people are free from fear and that the state serves the people (and not the other way around) resonates for other societies beguiled into giving up freedom and human rights.

that would make their strength of arms seem an instrument of oppression . . . He warned that if the army came to be detested by the people, the reason for which it had been founded would be vitiated”.²² Unfortunately today, at a time of growing democratisation and the declining role of the military in Asia, every aspect of life in Burma remains dominated by the armed forces, which operate overwhelmingly as an instrument of internal repression. She has frequently said that security without freedom is not real security. Too often ‘security’ is used as an excuse for crushing the rights of the people. Too few among Burma’s fifty-three million people experience true security in the sense of freedom from fear and freedom from want. Her message that true independence means people are free from fear and that the state serves the people (and not the other way around) resonates for other societies beguiled into giving up freedom and human rights.

But her call to the global community for support and help in the struggle connects the struggle to us all. Aung San Suu Kyi is asking for support beyond

In a message to the Australian Parliament in 1999 Aung San Suu Kyi reiterated the universal bonds of humanity which link each country to others: “We have always believed that peace in the world is only possible if there is peace in the individual countries of the world”.²⁵ In this regard, she has often called for people to “use your liberty to promote ours”. We are fortunate in Australian political life that we do not have to confront the same magnitude of struggles as those faced by Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese people. But at the same time, the universal messages of her political thought and values which she is determined to apply to every aspect of life, at the expense of her own freedom, reminds us of the principles that we perhaps too readily take for granted. Let’s hope that the intellectual and spiritual conviction of her political life can be realised one day in Burma and other countries deprived of even the most basic human rights. Her advocacy of persistent effort, courage, *metta* and the intellectual conviction of a questioning mind free from fear will no doubt continue to vex Burma’s Generals, but hopefully

one day the power of her principles will prevail. For now, Aung San Suu Kyi remains one of 1156 political prisoners detained for nothing more than the exercise of these very principles. Hopes for her release in late May – following the high-level visit to Burma by UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs and her first access to a foreign visitor in over two years – were dashed when the regime renewed her detention for another year. And as Desmond Tutu has said, “as long as she remains under arrest, none of us is truly free”.²⁶

1. In July 1989, the State Law and Restoration Council regime changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar, along with the names of several other large cities and administrative divisions (e.g. Rangoon become Yangon). The UN and many governments (including ASEAN states) recognise these name changes, but some countries (including the US and Australia) still refer to the country as Burma. Whether to call the country ‘Burma’ or ‘Myanmar’ frequently provokes controversy – while the regime claims it has simply re-instated the original transliterations for the country, its political opponents regard the name change as illegitimate. This article retains ‘Burma’ as the more familiar form for referring to the country.
2. Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings*, Penguin Books, London, 1991, p.xvi.
3. *ibid.*, p.xvii.
4. *ibid.*, ‘Speech to a Mass Rally at the Shwedagon Pagoda’, p.199.
5. ‘The Idea of Freedom in Burma and the Political Thought of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’, in David Kelly and Anthony Reid (eds), *Asian Freedoms: The Idea of Freedom in East and Southeast Asia*, CUP, Cambridge, 1998, p.201.
6. *Asiaweek*, ‘We Have Compromised’, 11 June 1999.
7. *ibid.*

8. Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, Penguin Books, London, 1997, pp.212–213.
9. *Freedom from Fear*, p.180.
10. *Voice of Hope*, p.38.
11. *Freedom from Fear*, p.184.
12. *ibid.*, p.169.
13. For more detail on her form of socially engaged Buddhism, see Stephen McCarthy, ‘The Buddhist Political Rhetoric of Aung San Suu Kyi’, *Contemporary Buddhism* 2:2, 2004.
14. Aung San Suu Kyi, *Letters from Burma*, Penguin Books, London, 1997, p.17.
15. *Voice of Hope*, p.16.
16. Gustaaf Houtman, ‘Sacrilising or Demonising Democracy? Aung San Suu Kyi’s “Personality Cult”’, in Monique Skidmore, ed., *Burma at the Turn of the 21st Century*, University of Hawaii Press, 2005.
17. McCarthy, ‘The Buddhist Political Rhetoric of Aung San Suu Kyi’, p.76.
18. ‘We Have Compromised’, 11 June, 1999.
19. *Voice of Hope*, p.62.
20. *ibid.*, pp.212.
21. ‘Sacrilising or Demonising Democracy?’, p.202.
22. *Freedom from Fear*, p.188.
23. Quoted in K.C. Boey, ‘Letter from Australia: Dialogue to Pick Best of All Worlds’, *Sunday Times* (Malaysia), 1 November 2003.
24. Graeme Cheeseman, ‘A Time for War: Correspondence’, *Quarterly Essay* 21, 2006, p.80.
25. Aung San Suu Kyi, Message to the Australian Parliament, 22 September 1999.
26. InterPress Service, ‘Silenced but Not Forgotten, Burma’s Suu Kyi Turns 60’, 7 June 2005.

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Love Cinquains

Cooking
for a lover,
who can bear the challenge?
Best to throw everything in to-
gether.

Making
conversation,
‘How was your day today?’
knowing that whatever you say
will bounce.

KATHERINE GALLAGHER

Rendition

We have brought you to this place.
It is a cell indistinguishable

from any other:
We have multiplied them across the earth.

Here you have relinquished
your country, your family,
your name.

Here you are

A perfect blank
screen for our spectres —
here you are a filament
throwing light upon our shadows.

How you illuminate
when charged!
Steady pulse burning
down to a flicker,

The phantoms gather
strength with your wavering,
your prevaricating,
your confessions an excess
matching our pressure:

Between us we must
ornament this cell.

Even momentary
decorations will suffice:

This cable the tinsel,
This box the gift,
This water the wine we sip
in celebration

Of the miracle
Which is our country's
endless resurrection,

Our infinite justice
rendered again
And again upon
your surplus body.

We have loosed you from your trimmings —
all remnants and revenants

We have no need of

Your spittle
(mere froth to our colonnades)

Your fingernails
brittle beneath our hammers —

Your name.

ANWYN CRAWFORD

mirror of the times

sunday papers the same old parade
freshly pressed pimple-free model flesh
the same faces behind recycled a-list events
notable somebodies
nobody
has ever heard of [interspersed
with the comfortably familiar
different names
same faces

unattainable status]

& the poetry of taglines:

property ('*you wish*')

finance ('*inform the affluent*')

beauty lift-outs a million pages of sport and cars
shell-games and gatecrashers
and the question of just when did vacuity
hijack society?

BRENDAN McCALLUM

Intangible Presence

Sometimes,
particles of living
too late to ride the final breath
remain.

Presence
without substance,
voice
without sound . . .
wandering amongst the living.

Sometimes,
the living step fleetingly
into the transient space
inhabited by those who were.

Sense
without seeing,
feel
without touching,
an essence of being
rather than substance . . .

momentarily blurring the
definition of actuality.

JUDITH A. GREEN

Storm at Low Tide

Ranges of clouds conceal other cloudscapes;
the noise of thunder is like the noise of
history. Thickening, moving closer,
the rain is a sift of chalk and charcoal;
the river, dwindled by summer, still holds
in suspension gold pins, strands of daylight.
Bubbles from crabs form spools of wordless speech.

Along the mud-flat, a dog rollicks, bathers
lounging in sinking deck chairs. An iron wheel
is dragged to a pit dug near tethered boats.
The storm breaks, I turn home – the rain my skin,
the pools I wade through my sandalled feet.
Mist masks the road, my body. From the water
of sea and sky and river, this poem.

DIANE FAHEY

Coastal Drive

At the ocean
edge
there are bulldozers
and the new housing estate
has been tugged into
no
safe harbour
above the coastal highway
the sky is a lung
breathing in
mouthfuls of traffic
while
oil tankers
with the slow anticipation
of chess pieces move
across the water surface
from
a construction site
cranes reassemble another
sunset

JULES LEIGH KOCH

Incomplete

Have
you
noticed
how
after a while
the edges start
wearing away
breaking off
things
like
knives
spanners
scissors
saws
concepts
words
sentences
understanding
life
the world?

WILL FRASER

Northern Country

Paddle steamers load on load off
their freight of tourists, a steamer
to each price bracket of leisure.
We amble through the old river port's
dressed up rusticity. In the sharp etched
shadows of a narrow alley we meet the past,
where the dead straight line of a dirt road
gives ground to a grand Yellow Box
budding at its tips on a slight rise
above the River Reds. Windmills in
the roadside reserve, and Peppercorns
of a long ago home paddock.

You can live anywhere there is water;
to live here you need shade.
The Peppercorns – tired hosts of chattering Weebills –
ease themselves down on their haunches.
Crushed, their pink fruit smells like Christmas.
Wagtails clatter a warning. Bones
of various things that have come in
under the trees to die. Back down at the road,
empty font of a dried up billabong.
The last car of the day just drove past.

Bits of tin, bales of wire,
rusted pieces of machinery; clues
like fossils telling what was here before.
Orange broken bricks, steadfast chimney,
vortex of rotten timber at the bottom
of the old well. Shards of bottle glass
and pretty floral-patterned crockery
nestled in red dust.

So much sweat, so many deeds,
so many straight lines scratched
over the land. Something was broken here,
something was thrown across the room.
A violent past you carry everywhere,
like a handful of dust in your pocket; still,
yours for always as real as that thin line
of trees bounding the horizon,
not some recreated fakery.
What began with open hands hardened
into self-righteousness, ended in bad dreams.

But peace.

Maybe you could have lived here.

MARK PRENDERGAST

In Storage

The streets have mutated from the past.
The freaks, the insane free thinkers
appear absent amongst the people.
Down the streets, people dress with modernity:
the now is here more than ever.
We are in our times,
we live in these times
as the past seems to be the past.

A series of tombstones stand,
the decades marked out.
Their epitaphs read:
'The roaring twenties',
'Generation X' . . .
and like the cemetery
no one remembers who lays where.

After all these decades
we've finally laid the past to rest,
after all these years of heartache
the slate is now wiped clean
while the green fields grow
courtesy of this generation's seeds.

The past has been boarded up in storage,
the lives of the infamous
now just documents in unmarked boxes.
Retracing the steps of the past
has become a task in tediousness
as history remains unmarked
and no negatives remain.

MATTHEW SMITH

Translation

'Bless thee, Bottom! bless thee! thou art translated.'

It is not a matter of the word. Glance,
smile, too, can be counterfeit,
adjustment from what is assumed real
to the ajar door of personality.
That time for all its good humour, zeal,
can neither heal nor mend: who lives
is time-traveller enough, expert
at costume, refinement of select word,
etiquette, all the lore of breath.

Lacking the way, there is a song
in the head that cannot be sung,
palsied memory the poorest translator
of all: therefore accept, in half-identified
change, glass face of the real, boundary
between what is seen, dancing
meadow flower, and what is but
trauma recalled. Each fragrance
is stated within the hour, as if love
like some final answer

should sulk just outside our reach.

SHANE McCAULEY

Purnululu Wandering

*Australia we sobbed through the paperbarks' songs
to birds and gentle animals*

and to the soft-stepping people of its river-banks

— from 'Silva', by Robert Adamson

In your rivers of sand, these
frozen oceans of salt,
silicate-crust
of earth, my heels break
crust with each step; I crush
sticks, dried
leaves hidden
beneath

I sink, and
wade

through sandstone, pink
riverbed

outside
the wind throws fresh the loose
the grains
of sand across spinifex, stinging hiss
and wattle cry; some bird I won't
should see. But
can't.

Fire memories
shimmer; dormant
tongue
in your rumours of ants, rock
red

apricot
termites mound
cooked flesh. Fires
lick
past. Withered
spinifex; limp puffing
ash.

And dust
y black shoes.

Rivers
of sand, heaped
tracks, tracks, dung
of crushed rocks

— your

things, brilliant
things.

STUART COOKE

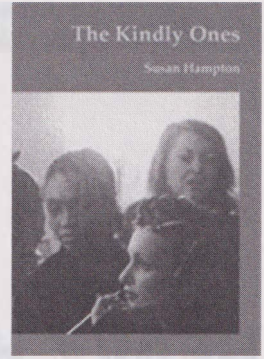
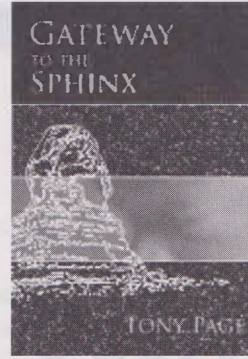
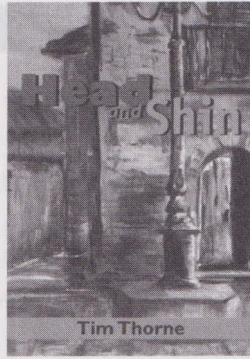
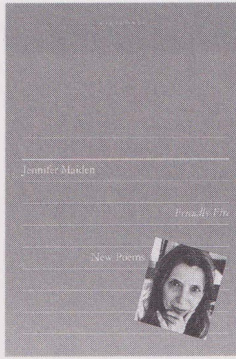
HEAVY HITTERS

Jennifer Maiden, *Friendly Fire* (Giramondo, \$21.95, ISBN 192088212X)

If these poems have dignity (and they do), it comes about through their creation of a voice that is neither melodramatic nor chipper, neither ingratiating nor alienated. It's not exactly 'Have a nice day', but neither is it 'I don't give a damn'. This voice is mellowsly ambivalent about plot, even though Maiden's "notoriously unpublished" novel *The Blood Judge* supplies her with fictional characters to populate and reflect on scenes from a twenty-first-century world. Thus George Jeffreys (named for England's legendary hanging judge, now a dodgy social worker) and Clare – lethal-minded ward of the state – turn up at a rally in London, and again, together, in Baghdad. George also visits Kandahar, Berlin and the White House. The different reactions of Clare and George to the worldly events depicted add to the book's prismatic effect. The prism may seem to splinter from time to time as the baddies – Bush, Rice, Rumsfeld in these scenarios – get to strut their created stuff. The satire is off-beat, and is served by odd and striking phrases. For instance, the lines "George Bush Junior was on the TV, obsessed/ as usual with Baghdad" are repeated from one 'George Jeffreys' poem to another, like a running gag, with a woodpecker-like determination that is in itself funny. The fine poem 'Thunderbolt's Way', about a nineteenth-century bushranger and more, glows like the friendlier face of the strategically twofold title.

Tim Thorne, *Head and Shin* (Walleah, \$20, ISBN 1877010030); *Tim Thorne's Best Bitter* (PressPress, \$7.70, ISBN 0958036780)

In the nineteenth century, the multiple plots of Australian history hurtled along, cranked-up by quirky, contradictory settlers. One was Chinese-born Quong Tart, who "having arrived aged nine and skinny/ on the [gold] fields, grew with the tea trade". The adult Quong Tart, Sydney restaurateur and unofficial diplomat, brokered the resolution of a political crisis ("the birth/ of the White Australia Policy that never was") that shook the NSW government in the 1880s. Tim Thorne's historical portraits are built on research and have more edges than a Swiss army knife. They're also fun, with a sparky humour that Quong Tart, himself a noted wit, might have liked. "Quong Tart went on board the *Afghan*,/ worked a deal over a cuppa,/ kept everyone sweet (enough to eat),/ said later, "I like Britis' race alright, my word!"/ died when one of them mugged him for twenty quid./ The Policy continued to non-exist/ for 80 years of white tea with sugar" (from 'Mandarin of the Crystal Button'). Tasmanian Tim Thorne is the author of eight poetry collections so far. *Head and Shin's* twenty-two history poems (a sequence called 'aUStalia') create a period sense yet also cross-cut to the present – they're shaped to bite. *Head and Shin* takes on contemporary Australia too. A different sequence – 'The Streets Aren't For Dreamers' – offers sixteen concise poems written



in the resigned, or resistant, or menacing voices of people who have a hands-on relationship with the rough end of the economic-rationalist pineapple. “Always look at their eyes. It weakens them/ and brings slow thoughts they can’t afford./ You get to know the best marks from eyes,/ to avoid the mad, the scared, the smart,/ eyes hard as money are good for a challenge;/ just don’t expect to win every time./ Those softened by grog, TV or work/ or flashing with outreach charity are best/ for a touch, a con, an easy ride” (from ‘Advice’). *Head and Shin* isn’t nice: it’s a wake-up call, with style. However, in the chapbook *Tim Thorne’s Best Bitter*, style seems to overwhelm content, and the result isn’t always a pretty sight. These performance poems wear their targets on their sleeve: shaping up against George W. Bush, neocons, Iraq War advocates, global capitalism, Christian Rightists and political spin-doctors along with Camilla Parker-Bowles and celebrity magazines (but why bother with the last lot?), they seem well-poised to yank reactions out of an audience – knee-jerk reactions, at times. The range is from well-grounded dramatisations of military types (the soldier in ‘Alabama’, and the entertainers in ‘Purrfect Angelz’ – both from ‘Mesopotamian Suite’) to less-grounded word-spinning that just spins. Written on boozy, noisy, but friendly pub air, the poems in *Tim Thorne’s Best Bitter* might flash as graphic, even funny satire. On the page they’re kind of helpless. Don’t let this lesser work put you off *Head and Shin*.

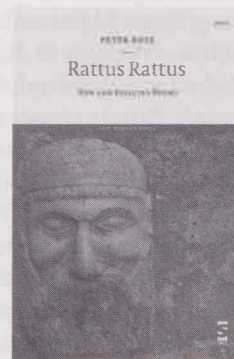
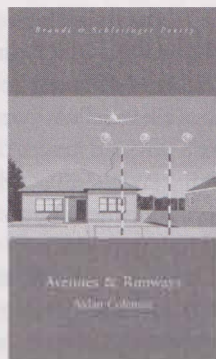
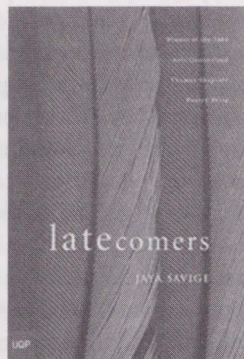
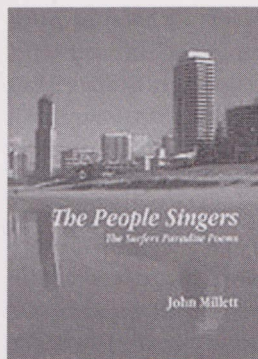
Tony Page, *Gateway to the Sphinx* (fip, \$18.95 ISBN 1741280508)

Having fought unconsciousness through science lectures that were, in fact, analogy-free zones, I can recommend this to anyone who teaches science.

Teaching science involves teaching the language of science. This book engages scientific language with ‘real world’ everyday language and also with poetic language. It’s a plus – a boon. And the poems are made from hard-worked, lucid writing that conveys wonder at the marvels of our own being as described by science. They’re neither awash in noble sentiments nor transparently anxious to put the whole enterprise under the sign of fun-fun-fun. In short, this book is not a dumb-down. It’s literate, and a serious attempt to bridge the once-notorious gap between ‘the two cultures’, i.e. science and the arts. I have to add that I find its unvaryingly *normative* language-use a bit banal, good intentions notwithstanding. But I can’t do other than respect its good intentions. And I’d certainly use it in a classroom. Segments and samplings might work better with a learning group than whole poems, but obviously it all depends on the individual facilitator and learner/s.

Susan Hampton, *The Kindly Ones* (fip, \$18.95, ISBN 1741280931)

“Solitude tries to extricate itself/ from creation and just be quiet/ I walk around the town – bat-winged, god-eyed./ Sulphur-crested and currawongs/ are eating all the fruit” – thus speaks Tisiphone, ancient Greek Fury and time-travelling narrator of the long title-poem, of which more later. Susan Hampton’s new collection opens under the sub-title ‘On the Bright Road’, a suite which reports – in brittly incisive phrasing – on a postmodern world that is laden with ironies (for the speaker of these poems, at least). The poems here work to regain space in our imagination for ancient mythic figures. Thus ‘Waiting for Goliath’ re-animates the Biblical David, while focusing on Michelangelo’s homoerotic marble statue and the preoccupations of a “man in Florida”



who sought to cover a replica with “a leopardskin loincloth”. This poem also brings out the deeper irony that Michelangelo sculpted the boyish giant-killer David gigantically (“17 feet tall/ and weighs five tonnes”).

Yet at times the irony-conscious stance-taking does itself in. The speaker of the elegy ‘Derrida is dead’ takes too long arming and girding herself with the language of scientific reductionism in order to do battle with exactly that – Derrida surfaces only in the poem’s final, thoughtful lines. An elegy ‘Spare us’ mixes rural portraiture with – sounds like – extracts from a paper on flash-flood management, along with Biblical quotations. Arresting and fine as ‘Spare us’ is, it’s hard to know if the Biblical authoritarianism is being questioned or endorsed. A reader’s journey ‘On the Bright Road’ can be bumpy. Then everything changes. The title poem, ‘The Kindly Ones’, is nothing short of astounding. It is a sustained and convincing reconfiguration of ancient Greek myth. It transports The Furies (aka The Eumenides), Alecto, Megaera and Tisiphone, who witnessed the bloody fall of the house of Atreus down the generations (hounding its last survivor Orestes to death) to twenty-first-century Sydney, with Miltonic ease.

The Furies participate in new, contemporary stories and re-name themselves The Kindly Ones (they’ve eaten the seed-gospel of Jesus, forgiveness has budded into their thoughts). Tisiphone is storyteller, bard, maker: the oldest Fury, she vocalises here with wonderful tonal variations. Tisiphone, newly employed in a call-centre, is colloquial when it is apposite: “Then, splashed with his blood and bearing his head,/ she runs to the banqueting room where his followers/ are being slaughtered among the mixing bowls./ . . . Revenge,/ though sticky-

fingered, is sweet./ More chicken?” She can also speak with embodied sensuousness: “the muscles loosened by alcohol/ desire tightened, the room’s available neon/ and the reflection of chrome on the cars/ outside in the hot sun/ air that at dusk smells sweet”. She is capable of worldly wisdom, incantation, lyricism; through forty-three pages, she is never banal. A spellbinding verse-novella, a page-turner, ‘The Kindly Ones’ is also philosophical (asking us at least to consider how we come by our religious and cultural myths). In taut five-line stanzas, ‘The Kindly Ones’ unreeals as a thinking woman’s lucid epic that doesn’t exclude the male reader.

John Millett, *The People Singers: The Surfers' Paradise Poems* (fip, \$18.95, ISBN 1741280958)

“The financial planners come out at night/ rising from the black sands/ of the Nerang River./ Their tongues are small dictionaries/ with words made from silk./ At night they pour the widows/ into a whiskey glass” (from ‘Elderly Retiree and Financial Planners’). Financial planners and the retirees they cultivate represent only a fraction of John Millett’s highly-populated Gold Coast – a world that “does not stop singing . . ./ even when my tongue is caught in the rain/ and feathers of gold lighting cover the sky” (from ‘Sunrise over Surfers’ Paradise’). *The People Singers* puts you there, in that circus-like strip between Mt Tamborine and the Tasman Sea; reading this poetry is like passing through a door that opens directly onto Cavill Avenue. Even so, Millett’s Gold Coast is so fabulous that it may eclipse the actual place – at least for some been-there readers. The book is a rhapsody on themes of loss and survival, greed and loneliness, the sea and its creatures, water and air and the ways in which youth can tantalise those for whom sex is a memory. There is wide-

ranging social portraiture, and some of it is rich and subtle: 'Widows at Jupiters Casino', 'Old Woman Naked in a Window', 'The Cuckold of Hedges Avenue', 'Boxer at Jupiters Casino' are excellent poems, the last very fine on the boxer's physical grace: "His dance is the careful/ grey light dawn shifts/ when a mist steps aside . . ." The poetry is notable for its visionary hedonism, and is single-minded in its approach to people and things. If you're as susceptible as I am to being manipulated emotionally by fluent, flamboyant and sometimes brilliant troping, you may fall in love with *The People Singers*. Those who prefer a sparer line should probably go elsewhere.

Jaya Savige, *Latecomers* (UQP, \$22.95, ISBN 0702235199)

The cover shows bird feathers under magnification, cleansed of micro-fauna and detritus. It's a fastidious design, but doesn't suggest the boldness of the book's best poems, or their nuanced expressiveness: "circus of light/ men fall from the sky/ airport blossoms of suitcases/ which one do you hide in?" (from 'Void if removed'). Images build cumulatively, as in these lines from 'A place for the rain': "she crawls through the hollow log/ and finds time there/ time to handle the fabric of the mountain/ time to stitch the moss into couture/ there's a place for the rain/ behind her eyes . . ." Always, vocal pitch and tone are controlled through judicious line-breaks and subtle variations on regular beats. This care for voice marks Jaya Savige as a lyric poet; yet it's a lyricism that meets and takes on contemporary mores: "I hope to convince my siblings/ there exists an aeroplane of hope./ They know only stabbed parachutes/ and the chortle of the saboteur" (from 'Catch you later').

Thematically, *Latecomers* admits us to a Hobbesian world (yes, 'the war of all against all') but traces the warlike character of our times back – and back – speculatively. One of the book's ingenuities is to enlist southern Queensland place-names (e.g. Skirmish Point) in its reflections on the war-like state. The poet was raised on Bribie Island and perhaps the great reclusive and allusive abstract painter Ian Fairweather, who lived twenty years on Bribie, somehow shadowed this verbal art. Excitingly, *Latecomers* pays tribute to Sylvia Plath in the poem 'Salute the new prospero', returning us to Plath as prophetic poet, political poet (her *Ariel* "shackled in the cold bark/ of your steel trees, pining/ like napalm for children,

weeping/ waves of radio tears . . .") and helps us forget the soap-opera anti-heroine of Christine Jeffs' pathetic film. Jaya Savige also homages the late Martin Johnston, in the three-part elegy 'Agapanthus', in which classical allusions are grafted onto lines that are equally delicate, playful, and emotionally very strong. The book might have ended on that one: the subsequent tributes to love (partner, child) and subdued rueful epiphanies seem to load it with reassurance – well-written, but for this reader a bit of a let-down after the shooting-star display of the earlier lyrics, not all of which yield meaning readily. The intransigent opacity, the recondite vocabulary court charges of obscurity; yet after dwelling with the poetry for a while, a reader may end by dropping the charge. Where such charges stick, however, is to some of the book's several villanelles, which suggests only that villanelles may be more pleasurable to write than to read – 'The Metal Detectors' excepted.

Aidan Coleman, *Avenues & Runways* (Brandl & Schlesinger, \$22.95, ISBN 1876040696)

This is a first collection by an imagist who shows some real affinity for the Black Mountain poets of North America – clean, polished lines; a contemplative tone; images that evoke an everyday world yet shine with their own quiet intensity. When these poems are good, they tend to be very good. 'Cranes' – about the mechanical, building-site kind – is arresting, and could be anthologised: "At night/ among the city's/ brightest signatures/ some/ are lit like runways/ others/ fishing in the shadows . . ." Contrastively, 'The Wedding Plan' ventures social commentary (e.g. "Your mother, desperate to find a clause,/ offers washer and dryer,/ a TV, if only/ we'll wait/ the length of a warranty"), building tension between the thing-ness of things and the people-ness of people. The caveat has to be that minimalism, even as buffed as it is in this book, has pitfalls. Tiny example: 'Spiders', which seems only to project an arachnophobic shudder onto a creature (or 'thing' or 'object') that some might find inherently interesting as it goes about the living of its life. It could be a pity if the "song that breaks/ like water from rock, that breathes/ in rough edges, blisters/ like rain in the backstreets/ prickly-sweet and raw" got turned back towards 'Easy Listening' through other poems' reaching-out after generalised group-feelings; through facility of sentiment. Raymond Carver edited like crazy to get that out of his prose;

Denise Levertov didn't get it out of her poetry, although she presented as a perfectionist. William Carlos Williams, who wrote about a red wheelbarrow and plums in the icebox, also wrote 'Paterson', which takes huge risks – and sings.

Peter Rose, *Rattus Rattus: New & Selected Poems* (Salt, \$33, ISBN 1844710696)

The cover photo – in autumnal rust-tones against white – shows us a face from another time: clay or stone, high-cheekboned, strong-browed, smiling wryly under a pair of eyes that meet our assessing stare with their own. Those wakeful, unembarrassed eyes belong to a face that is actually a spigot in a watering-trough at the Church of San Sebastiano in Rome. It's a perfect cover image for this book, because, unlike a fountain, which just gushes at you, you have to work a spigot to get any water. So it is with Peter Rose's poetry. The reader has to do a little work to meet it half-way: and be rewarded. The mode is reticence: call it arch, call it overwrought, yet the writing renders public spaces freshly intimate: "Communal laundries tinkle in the frost,/ the way a high-rise manoeuvres/ through cloudscape, eclipses it" (from 'The Governors of the Feast'). For all their delight in ambiguity, the new poems in this *New & Selected* offer a moral vision that does not spare the poet from its clarities. The European poems especially create a world where surveillance and control are ubiquitous, spreading through the privacy of lovers (see 'Graffiti') and through spaces once deemed equally public and sacred, such as the sanctuary offered by the Catholic (meaning 'universal') Church. In *Rattus Rattus'* Rome of the Holy See, it's not the on-sale holy relics that may get under a reader's skin but the ways in which space is divided and boundarised for the greater efficacy of commerce. In the book's title poem, the speaker and his companion are quietly moved along from St Peter's Square at the end of the business day. They end up at the Tiber, where they notice "a stupendous rat,/ bigger than a monstrosity,/ mapping the slimy historic bank". The poetry has already prepared an impact-zone for that large, rude gesture through the restraint it practises elsewhere. Two further Roman poems, 'The Calling of St Matthew' and 'Hospital of the Innocents' are spectaculars, loaded with baroque detailing, dense with innuendo. 'Barnaring Beach', by contrast, is a classic of Australian understatement, with something of John Passmore's funny and accurate beach sketches about it ("Siblings

in pink togs/ hurdling waves, quashing them . . ./ the lovers' eyeful colloquy./ Intermittent squalls,/ elders sheltering in a cliff") along with a payoff that transcends the occasional: "The facing island, a mortal blue,/ beckons, intensifies, vanishes."

Rose's autobiography, *Rose Boys* (2001) is also a memoir of his athletic brother, who was confined to a wheelchair for twenty-five years before his death aged 47. The poem 'Ladybird' dissolves a narrative of public roles and responsibilities into a dreamscape where grief transmutes memory into symbol (no one will ever win – or lose – the tennis match in this created dream). Yet, by the end, something new is added to the confessional genre: an affirmation of shared activity, fiercely joyous. To read through the samplings from Rose's earlier collections *The House of Vitriol* (1990), *The Catullan Rag* (1993) and *Donatello in Wangaratta* (1998) is to trace a journey of poetic development, from strenuous construction and wilful formality to the generous emotional unfolding of these new poems, which wear their formidable craft as lightly as they breathe.

Kerry Leves is a NSW poet.

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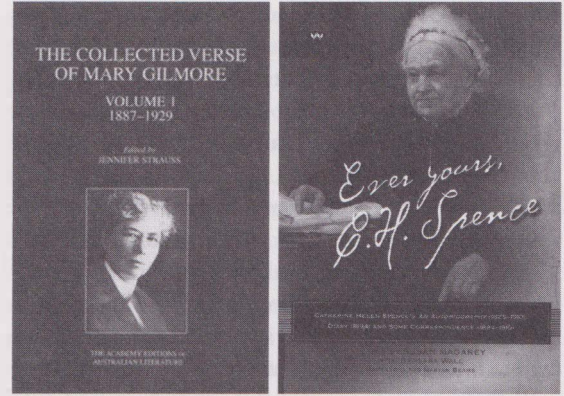
ANN VICKERY

Jennifer Strauss (ed.): *The Collected Verse of Mary Gilmore* Vol. 1 (1887–1929) (UQP, \$80, ISBN 0702234869)

Susan Magarey (ed.) with Barbara Wall, Mary Lyons & Maryan Beams: *Ever Yours, C.H. Spence* (Wakefield Press, \$39.95, ISBN 1862546568)

Last year saw the publication of two invaluable resource volumes on two of Australia's most significant women writers. Read in conjunction the parallels between Catherine Helen Spence, characterised as the 'Grand Dame' by suffragist Rose Scott, and that other grand old woman, Dame Mary Gilmore, become clearer. Both were excessively proud of their Scottish background. Both held strong socialist views and were key promoters of women's rights although these were not their foremost political concern. With Gilmore separating from her husband in 1911, both spent the majority of their adult life as single women. Besides sharing a longevity of career that can only be marvelled at (both wrote and spoke publicly for over sixty years) they enjoyed being and were not averse to reinforcing their status as 'national treasures'. Spence is perhaps best known for advocating an electoral system of proportional representation which still operates in Senate elections throughout Australia and in every bicameral state. She also realised a successful literary career, becoming the first woman to publish a novel set in Australia (*Clara Morison: A Tale of South Australia during the Gold Fever* [1854]). She participated in emergent women's rights organisations and was a key figure in child welfare reform in this country. Arguably Australia's best-known woman poet, Mary Gilmore joined William Lane at Cosme, his utopian colony in Paraguay, and upon her return edited the Women's Page of the *Worker*. She was one of the earliest to emphasise the importance of Aboriginal culture to Australia's identity as a nation.

Jennifer Strauss's collection of Gilmore's verse is published as part of the Academy Editions of Australian Literature and is the first volume of poetry in their series. As the foremost scholar of Mary Gilmore, Strauss has spent the past nine years painstakingly researching and compiling the first volume (collecting work from 1887 to 1929). At roughly 740 pages, this is a Herculean feat and is to be followed up with the second volume, scheduled for publication in 2007. It



is not, however, its brick-like proportions that merits admiration but the diligent forensics work behind editing such a collection. Strauss's initial aim was to make all of Gilmore's poems available but she ended up collecting only the ones that had made it into print. Even the task of collecting the printed verse had unforeseen difficulties. Not only were Gilmore's papers scattered among numerous libraries (including SUNY–Buffalo in the US) but in the Mitchell Library, composition dates had been removed when a poem was close to publication, and in the National Library, poems written on the backs of letters and scraps of paper were catalogued as unpublished even though some were clearly versions of published poems. Strauss and her assistants, particularly Margaret Henderson, had the unenviable job of trying to match manuscripts to published work. This was made more difficult by the fact that Gilmore had gone back through some manuscripts and added unfortunately often incorrect publication details.

Strauss's desire to publish the collection by composition date was thwarted by the fact that not all were available. She opts for a chronological structure alternating between uncollected and collected work. For all the untitled poems, she follows Gilmore's policy of using their first line. She also places Gilmore's notes closer to the poem than her own editorial notes, for Gilmore saw such marginalia as very much part of the text. The value of this scholarly edition is that it enables more sophisticated analyses of Gilmore's writing and publishing processes. Gilmore's development becomes clearer, including her replication of White Australia views and more careful consideration of race relations, as well as her increasing modernisation of modes of address. A number of poems mimic the style of

contemporaries like Bernard O'Dowd or Dowell O'Reilly in order to set up a critical but couched response. Other poems echo British women poets (such as obvious favourite Christina Rossetti) and then there are Gilmore's intriguing translations of South American poets.

Whereas one of Gilmore's best-known poems, 'Marri'd', is often read autobiographically (following the misguided presumption that women poets necessarily write in a naïve mode or 'from the heart'), Strauss's collection makes apparent that it is a formula poem, informed by the oral tradition of working-class verse. Its colloquial tone and brusque style is repeated almost to a letter in 'Sweethearts' and appears also in 'Us is Out, Her 'n Me'. Gilmore even substitutes a blackface minstrel dialect for the Celtic one in 'Comin'. The formula is revised almost two decades later in 'I wisht I was unwed again' which comically portrays the ambivalence of domestic life, as being caught between the throes of 'true love' and a need for independence.

While Gilmore's dialect poems are rather schmaltzy, other poems are overly didactic, and others again have a bland predictability. This is Gilmore, the populist 'versifier'. Yet Strauss's volume also presents Gilmore as a more adventurous and complex poet to good effect. Forever dwelling on issues of remembrance herself, Gilmore would be distinctly pleased at Strauss's efforts.

Like Gilmore, Catherine Helen Spence has been fortunate to have a scholar commit so thoroughly to resurrecting her profile. Following Magarey's own biography of Spence, *Unbridling the Tongues of Women* (1985), this latest addition reproduces Spence's autobiography and features a newly found portion of Spence's diary, as well as some of Spence's correspondence. Most of the autobiography was penned by Spence when she was in her dotage but the last third was penned by her friend and colleague, Jeanne Young. I was not too familiar with Spence's work before reading her autobiography and it did not make me warm to her. One feels that the word by which the elderly Spence wished to have her life characterised is 'worthy'. And indeed, the autobiography presents a very virtuous and industrious life out in the colonies. Following the dominant approach of Victorian autobiographies, it documents the individual's contribution to society; this is confirmed by Spence's rather self-important opening line, "Sitting down at the age of 84 to give

an account of my life, I feel that it connects itself naturally with the growth and development of the province of South Australia". Yet Spence herself notes a disquiet with the requirements of standard autobiography, "There is so much in one's life that looms large from a personal point of view about which other people would care little, and the difficulty often arises, not so much about what to put in as what to put out".

While there might be more personal reflection than was typically available, Spence never lets herself get emotional. On love, she states as a matter of fact:

I believe that if I had been in love, especially if I had been disappointed in love, my novels would have been stronger and more interesting; but I kept a watch over myself, which I felt I knew I needed, for I was both imaginative and affectionate. I did not desire a love disappointment, even for the sake of experience. I was 30-years-old before the dark veil of religious despondency was completely lifted from my soul, and by that time I felt myself booked for a single life.

Her cynicism over her two marriage proposals presents Spence at her most likeable. Spence also gives a wonderfully dense picture of life 'way back then', recording the costs of schooling, servant pay, and minor domestic items. For anyone interested in the minutiae of daily life in the nineteenth century, Spence's autobiography provides great material.

When John Stuart Mill responded positively to her pamphlet, *A Plea for Pure Democracy* (1861), Spence was further thrilled to interview him during a trip to England "although I did not get so much out of him as I expected". An interview with George Eliot, another major force on Spence's thinking, fared less well. One feels some sympathy for Eliot who was forced to entertain a complete stranger arriving suddenly on her doorstep. "[N]o subject that I started seemed to fall in with her ideas, and started none in which I could follow her lead pleasantly," recalls Spence. Disabusing her imagined intimacy with Eliot, she felt she had been "looked on as an inquisitive Australian desiring an interview upon any pretext".

Spence declared herself a New Woman, defining the New Woman as "awakened to a sense of capacity and responsibility, not merely to the family and the household, but to the State; to be wise, not for

her own selfish interests, but that the world may be glad that she had been born". And indeed Spence would be Australia's first female political candidate. Women's rights always took second place to her promotion of "effective voting". As she discerns, "[It] was not until the movement for the enfranchisement of women grew too strong to be neglected that I took hold of it at all; and I do not claim any credit for its success in South Australia and the Commonwealth, further than this – that by my writings and my spoken addresses I showed that one woman had a steady grasp on politics and on sociology".

While the autobiography is a rather dry read, Magarey's retrieval of the diary entries sheds quite a different light on Spence's life. It had been thought that Spence's diaries had 'gone out with the newspapers' once Young's book was finished and Magarey speculates that Young's refusal to turn the diaries over to an archive was due to their damaging representation of her husband. This may well be so although Spence seems to have sharp – if often short – words to say about quite a few men. It is tremendously exciting then that a diary has now been located although its present owners also refuse to have it archived and fiercely maintain anonymity. Magarey was lucky enough to borrow the diary for a week and took extensive transcriptions. Presented with a tough ethical dilemma of either supporting the current owners' wishes or the public right to know, Magarey chose the latter course, for which we can now be thankful. For Spence's diary reveals a less hygienic and respectable personality. Her entry for Sunday 24 June 1894 records her views regarding church-going:

Mrs Clayton was four times at Cathedral . . . except myself who only went at 11- + 7- A beautiful building for very poor sermons – I am told both preachers were good men and the evg one a splendid pastor – but such twaddle as he talked with endless repetitions – Athenaeum Creed chanted in mg. Litany in evg – music fine and the intonation most musical

but what a sense of unreality about it all – . . . Alas to me God is indeed a God far off – but I do not care to have such a God too near me . . . If this God could save us and does not he is not good – If he saves me and does not save others he is not just. So my aloofness has its compensations . . .

Spence's humour is especially evident. On Monday 9 July 1894 she records going to the Royal Academy but "I am disposed to admire what is not really admirable". And on Saturday 6 October 1894, she is feeling poorly but notes, "All the blame was put on the cold bath and not to eating too much duck".

The final part of Magarey's volume is a selection of Spence's letters to two feminist contemporaries, Alice Henry and Rose Scott. As with the diary excerpts, the Spence represented here is lively and there are views expressed that would, no doubt, have been modified or erased in the autobiography. Her discussion of gender politics and family life has elements of relevance today, such as the following example:

And here each day I am challenged in the *Register* by a correspondent to say if the middle class women who will not follow Roosevelt's advice and have children galore should not be deprived of the franchise – I think the men are as willing to have large families as the women – the cost of bringing them up is so great in this age of hard and cruel competition.

I agree with Magarey's contention that such letters deserve their own study, finding myself wanting to read Henry and Scott's responses. Hopefully, encouraged along by Magarey's work here, such correspondence will find publication. As both Strauss and Magarey's volumes indicate, there is still much retrieval work to be done in order to gain an understanding of not only the magnitude and depth of output, but also the textual stagings of the subject employed by our early women writers.

Ann Vickery holds a Monash Fellowship in the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research.

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History and National Identity

LYNDON MEGARRITY

Marilyn Lake (ed.): *Memory, Monuments and Museums: The Past in the Present* (MUP, \$34.95, ISBN 522852505)

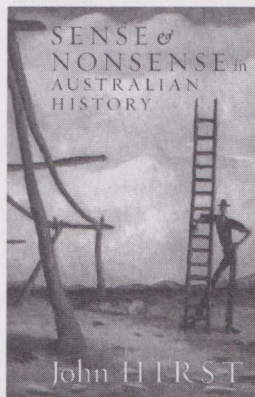
John Hirst: *Sense & Nonsense in Australian History* (Black Inc., \$34.95, ISBN 097507699X)

One of the major themes of Australian historiography in the past two decades has been the interaction between the past and the present and how that process impacts upon public and private life in Australia. Since the bicentennial, the increasing number of government-sponsored commemorations of historical events has encouraged historians, archivists and other professional memory-makers to reflect upon public understandings of the past. *Memory, Monuments and Museums* is the latest in a growing number of publications which essentially ask the following question: 'How can narrative, myth and common memory enhance, rather than displace, historical values of balance and accuracy?'

Memory, Monuments and Museums is a collection of essays gathered from the Australian Academy of the Humanities' November 2004 symposium held in Hobart. In common with numerous books which originate from conferences, what worked well at this symposium does not always translate easily into print. Some of the Tasmanian papers seem slightly parochial outside the symposium's context of the Tasmanian official bicentenary (2004). Similarly, the over-use of academic jargon and buzzwords, well understood at the conference level, may limit the audience for this collection.

The book nonetheless contains many essays with fresh insights into our healthy and not-so-healthy relationships with the past. For example, John Frow's 'The Archive under Threat' details the dark side of digitisation for history and the public generally: academic knowledge is increasingly becoming a private commodity. With the increasing digitisation of journals and other collections, people unassociated with a university or who do not have funds to pay for digital access are denied much new knowledge. It is to be hoped that Frow's paper is not the end of the discussion. The benefits of traditional libraries and archives run the risk of being ignored because of the relentless pursuit of technological change.

Another standout essay is Graeme Davison's study of national museums across the world. Davison



persuasively argues the case for facilitating public inquiry and debate about national identity by setting a national museum's presentation of historical narratives and collective memories within the global context. Davison's article is complemented by Dawn Casey's article on her period as director of the National Museum of Australia. Casey's essay usefully outlines the conflict between the advocates of pluralist/open-ended history and those who would prefer a more didactic, official history.

Several contributors provide thoughtful and well-written reflections on the ways in which memory can be used to create or transform the present. Katie Holmes shows how the creation of European-style gardens by Australian pioneers created a bridge between the past and a hopeful future: providing comforting memories of 'home' gave the settlers the confidence needed to make the best of their new country and to be transformed by their experiences. Iain McCalman also discusses the transformative aspects of memory in an essay which demonstrates the positive aspects of nostalgia. Nostalgia for the Wild West, for example, encouraged President Theodore Roosevelt to preserve the wilderness through the creation of national parks.

In short, *Memory, Monuments and Museums* has much useful material about our understanding and use of the past which will be of greatest interest to students and practitioners of Australian history.

The book nevertheless lacks a sense of coherence and purpose as a whole, a problem which can be traced back to its origins as a collection of diverse conference papers.

John Hirst's *Sense & Nonsense in Australian History* differs from *Memory, Monuments and Museums* in so far as it is clearly targeted to a wide audience. The book's coherence comes from the fact that it is a retrospective collection of Hirst's essays, most of which attack the left-liberal approach to Australian history. The author rarely, however, descends to blatant political point-scoring. Instead, Hirst concentrates on constructing an approach to history based on hard realism combined with a strong empathy for the values and circumstances of groups and individuals.

Hirst writes sensitively and respectfully about European-Aboriginal conflict over the past two hundred years. One of the best essays in the collection is 'Five Fallacies of Aboriginal Policy' (1994) which acknowledges the wrongs done to Aboriginals through European settlement, but also notes the dangers of symbolic land-oriented government policies which downplay the suburban, westernised realities of most Aboriginals today. In an essay specially written for the collection ('How Sorry Can We Be?'), Hirst rejects the notion of a 'blanket apology' for the evils of European settlement in part because the distant past cannot be altered by apologies. He somewhat overplays the extent to which white racial violence in the nineteenth century was purely protective, as opposed to calculated and cruel (the history of the Queensland Native Police, for example, shows evidence of pre-meditated atrocities). Still, the author

plausibly argues that the twentieth century was the period in which Aboriginals experienced the greatest civil rights abuses, through the reserve system and by eugenics-tinged family separations enforced by officials.

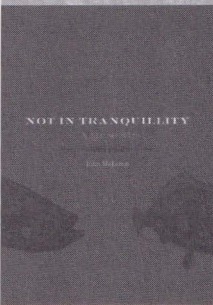
The majority of Hirst's essays convey a very positive vision of Australian history. He forcefully argues that Federation was ultimately the creation of idealists, not hard-headed bean-counters; he stresses the benefits of an Australian egalitarianism; and his work also suggests that modern multiculturalism was a product of the cohesion and tolerance already extant within Australian society. Hirst pays careful attention to the issues which have divided Australians, such as sectarianism, but on balance, finds that Australian society has been remarkably cohesive.

In compiling and editing this book, a number of opportunities were missed. At times the use of headings would have enhanced the presentation and clarity of the text. While space concerns have led the editor to discard footnotes, a short list of references at the end of each essay would have been appropriate to encourage further reading and debate. Finally, as many of these essays are over ten years old, it would have been desirable for postscripts by the author to be inserted at the end of each essay. Political, academic and social trends over the past decade must surely have given Hirst new insights into his old research subjects. These are minor quibbles, however. *Sense & Nonsense in Australian History* is an entertaining collection of essays which deserves to be read, re-read and debated by Australians interested in national identity.

Lyndon Megarrity is a historian and reviewer.

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Sunlit Plains Remembered

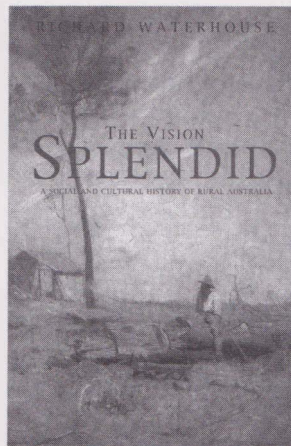
DAMIEN WILLIAMS

Richard Waterhouse: *The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia* (Fremantle, Curtin University Books, \$29.95, ISBN 1920731059)

When the Prime Minister used his Australia Day address to call for greater attention to be paid to Australian history in schools, he did so by invoking the Federation slogan ‘One People, One Destiny’. “Too often,” he said, “it is taught without any sense of structured narrative, replaced by a fragmented stew of ‘themes’ and ‘issues’. And too often, history, along with other subjects in the humanities, has succumbed to a postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated.” This is certainly not the case in *The Vision Splendid*. Richard Waterhouse uses the year 1914 to divide his book into two parts that are written around the broad themes of land, work, leisure and representations. In doing so, he convincingly argues the case for a more subtle view of rural Australia that looks beyond the bush and pioneer legends, re-created in the twentieth century as simple and straightforward narratives that ignore the complexities and divisions of nineteenth-century history.

Appropriately, Waterhouse begins his account with an engaging story of the way Land and Selection Acts in colonial Australia shaped social relations between squatters, selectors, farm workers, Aborigines and the Chinese. Squatters who made land claims beyond the government’s designated areas of settlement often had little interest in permanence. Their aim was to get in, get rich, and get out. In a wider, imperial sense, this made establishing a settler colony extremely difficult. With very little ‘improvement’ of the land, pastoral practice was considered little better than ‘nomadism’. As competition for land increased, so did the level of violence between Europeans and Indigenous people. In places such as Coranderrk, where Aborigines had successfully adopted European farming practice, land was broken up and distributed at the behest of local whites who used race to justify their greed.

In going beyond the economic reasons behind numerous colonial Selection Acts, which were designed to encourage agriculture over pastoralism, Waterhouse shows the political philosophy



behind the colonial legislators’ dreams of having a yeoman class of smallholders bringing civilisation to a state of nature. These ideas persisted into the twentieth century and informed the soldier settlement schemes that followed the First World War, 50 per cent of which had failed by the late 1930s. Applying

Locke 101, however, could not overcome the reality that large areas of the Australian landscape lacked phosphorous and water, meaning that they could not support intensive small-scale agriculture.

Waterhouse spends considerable time building on his previous work on popular culture and early Australian theatre. In particular, he conducts a very good survey of the way the bush has been represented in film, providing an extension to the excellent research done by Ross Cooper and Andrew Pike that concluded in 1977.¹ While the respective roles that sport, mechanics’ institutes, film and television played in the exchange between rural and urban cultures is well covered, surprisingly little detailed attention is given to television content. That a phenomenally popular program such as *Seachange* – which essentially told the story of an urban middle-class lawyer finding her ‘dreaming’ country in a rural town – should appear at the same time as pastoralists, miners and Bruce Ruxton were going into convulsions over the Wik decision and the *Native Title (Amendment) Act*, may warrant further investigation in a second edition.

There is, however, only so much that can be covered in the space available. In 274 pages, Waterhouse writes an engaging and wonderfully researched book that draws from a wide range of primary sources. It is a shining example of how Australian history can be written cogently and concisely while giving due attention to the complexities and contradictions of the past.

1. Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900–1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production*, OUP, Melbourne, 1998.

Damien Williams works for a cultural heritage advisor and will commence a PhD in History later this year.

Gee Fizz

JEFF SPARROW

Kenneth Gee: *Comrade Roberts: Recollections of a Trotskyite* (Desert Pea Press, \$29.95, ISBN 1876861096)

“Were we fool then, or are we dishonest now?”

Hazlitt’s response to William Godwin’s recantation of their shared Jacobin past nicely skewers one of the contradictions facing political apostates. Ex-radicals invariably daub their old ideas in the most lurid colours, seeking to paint themselves as repentant sinners joining the light (rather than, say, Judas Iscariot – the other obvious Biblical referent). But the more risible they render their old creeds, the more their claim to authority rests on a self-confessed gullibility. Before embarking on his own pilgrimage to the Right, the American Trotskyist Max Shactman scoffed at ‘the I-was-a-political-idiot-but-now-I-am-smart-school’, a college whose alumni include columnistas ranging from Christopher Hitchens to Keith Windschuttle.

In *Comrade Roberts: Recollections of a Trotskyite*, Ken Gee reveals himself as a graduate of the same institution. His book essentially reheats anecdotes about Australian Trotskyism in the Second World War first served up in three (rather better) *Quadrant* articles in 1986.

“We Trotskyites”, Gee says, “were a mixture of a handful of genuine Depression-hardened proletarians, with a residue of declassed intellectuals, idealists, dreamers, born losers, power seekers, thugs, neurotics and drunks.” But the very compulsion that Gee (who used the party name ‘Roberts’) feels to heap dirt on his long-dead comrades gives the lie to his description. Why else should such inconsequential misfits still disturb him to the point where he’s now produced two sets of memoirs, not about the six decades he spent as a conventionally right-wing Crown Prosecutor, QC and judge, but the three years he devoted to socialism?

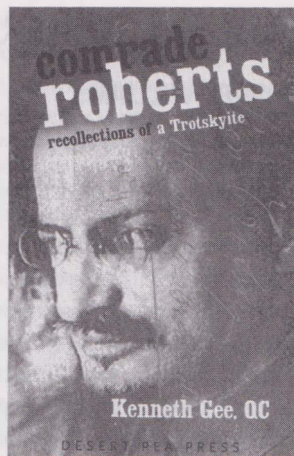
At some level, one presumes, Gee recognises that the zeal he and the others in the group’s orbit – people like Jim McClelland, Laurie Short and John Kerr – brought to Trotskyism entailed a nobility lacking from their more lucrative anti-communist careers. Whatever their eccentricities, the Trotskyist leaders Nick Origlass and John Wishart stuck, with their raggle-taggle followers, to their principles,

as the government tried to ban them and the Communist Party slandered (and occasionally bashed) them as fascists. In almost impossible circumstances (several members were driven to suicide), they kept the traditions of classical Marxism alive throughout the midnight of the century.

That’s why, rather than the circus freaks Gee portrays, the early Trotskyists attracted such remarkable talents: not only McClelland and co. but people like Guido Baracchi, one of the founders of the Communist Party of Australia, and Jack Kavanagh, who played a leading role in both the Canadian and Australian communist movement.

Of course, Gee, who now lauds the murderous anti-Semite Nicholas II as “relatively forward looking”, cannot acknowledge any value in the Trotskyist project. Instead, he frames his book largely as a cautionary tale about Marxism, a doctrine about which his brief dalliance with socialism seems to have taught him absolutely nothing. Accordingly, he muddles Sorel and Proudhon, mistakes Hewlett Johnson for Lincoln Steffens, attributes Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* to Lenin, invents a tautological group called the International Workers of the World and criticises Gramsci for his leadership (long after his death) of the European communists. On almost every occasion where Gee, with the plonking condescension of the initiate, refers to communist theory or history, he manages to trip himself up – whether over the date of Makhno’s suppression or Trotsky’s relationship to the Workers’ Opposition.

One can only presume that Comrade Roberts realises that his right-wing readers will neither know nor care about the truth, and so feels no pressure to complicate a nice story with actual research. Did Lenin really call fellow travellers ‘useful idiots’? Did he think ‘the Truth is whatever serves the revolution’? Of course he didn’t – but the quotes sound



sufficiently villainous to send a pleasurable thrill down the withered shanks of *Quadrant* subscribers.

At the same time, Gee's unwillingness to seriously engage with Trotskyism's intellectual legacy renders his book oddly empty – an unedifying attempt to score obscure personal points, rather than a useful piece of social history. Gee might not be capable of explaining the differences between Lenin and Trotsky but, hey, he can report that Wishart wore a scrotal truss, Origlass was bossy and Baracchi disliked cracked cups.

Remarkably, he manages even to get most of his trivia wrong. He riffs at length about Baracchi's wealth – but describes his father as a wine

importer rather than a gentleman astronomer, and so misses the patrician element that made Baracchi's background so distinctive. He notes that Jack Kavanagh seemed ancient at fifty, an observation that loses some of its force when we realise that, in 1940, Kavanagh was already into his sixties. And so, relentlessly, on.

Why do so many ex-radicals pick at their past like a scab that won't heal? Because history can never really be undone. As a young man, Gee was brave and idealistic – and, much as that now bothers him, there's nothing he can do to change it.

Jeff Sparrow is *Overland's* reviews editor. His biography of Guido Baracchi will be published by MUP in 2007.

on moving & not & capitalism & that

F stepped from
the box, then
moved back inside.

the walls were
lined with lines.
they led to desks
leading to more desks.

there was an absence
of a back door
of even the idea
of a back door.
the yawn of heating
came on.

customers turned
to beetles before
his eyes.

EDDIE PATERSON

Progressivism and its Enemies

KALINDA ASHTON

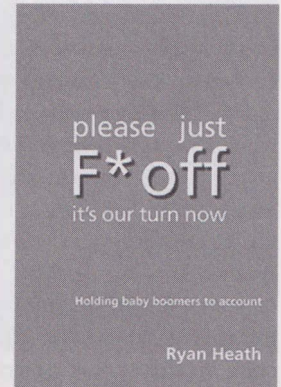
Sarah Maddison & Sean Scalmer: *Activist Wisdom* (UNSW Press, \$39.95, ISBN 0868406864)

Ryan Heath: *Please just F* off it's our turn now: Holding baby boomers to account* (Pluto Press, \$25.95, ISBN 1864033282)

Andrew Bolt sees them as dole-bludging hypocrites, disgracefully un-Australian. John Howard brings his own sociological diagnosis to the table: they form part of Australia's elite, tottering around, righteous to the brim with political correctness and self-importance, clutching their lattes and their inner-city superiority close to their chests. But how do progressive political activists see themselves and what have they learned through their involvements in campaigns? A welcome antidote to the current conservative assault, Sean Scalmer and Sarah Maddison's *Activist Wisdom* builds on discussions with a diverse collection of politically committed individuals. They attempt to intervene in the field of social movement theory by constructing a methodology that can avoid the customary divisions and dichotomies that dominate the field. By privileging the experiences, ideas, and conclusions of political activists themselves the authors innovatively draw out the tensions, patterns and challenges characteristic of campaigns for social change.

Scalmer and Maddison conducted interviews with environmentalists, student campaigners, women's liberationists, peace activists, 'anti-capitalists' and those engaged in movements for Indigenous rights. *Activist Wisdom* is an unabashedly partisan contribution, focused on Left challenges to the status quo.

The book gives a rare insight into the consciousness of activists: their own aspirations and reflections. It provides a keyhole view of the contributions of ordinary people who have helped shape Australian society. What ensues is a highly rewarding, personal and political social history. The authors assess the 'practical knowledge' political activists accrue and reveals some of the strategies and approaches they employ to sustain themselves, build movements, adjust to changed circumstances and remain involved in the long term. Structured around a series of tensions – democracy and unity, revolution and reform, organisation and democracy – that arise within social movements again and again, *Activist Wisdom*



unearths a hidden seam of knowledge gleaned by activists in the course of their struggles.

The book is generally engaging and refreshing in style, although the compelling observations are preceded by some rather jumbled, overcrowded early chapters. *Activist Wisdom* is also sometimes hampered by the authors' attempt to canvass so many elements: proposing a revision of contemporary social movement theory, giving readers an introduction to its historical aspects and debates, and providing the background to these. The authors inevitably skate over or rush through areas. But *Activist Wisdom* is a lively and innovative book that acts as a counter-narrative to the dominant media stereotypes. Though I would have liked to see a comparison of Australian interviewees with the views of activists internationally (and not just in the West) and more emphasis on the external (economic, governmental, ideological) factors that influenced the rise and fall of movements, this is less a criticism than a call for an encore. More please.

Please just F off it's our turn now: Holding baby boomers to account*, on the other hand, written by erstwhile Young Labor hack and Blair Government staff member Ryan Heath, is hilarious. The title provides an early clue. Surely Heath isn't afraid to use the word fuck on his cover? Was he worried a full profanity might stymie reviews in the mainstream papers? Is this really the voice of young people's rage?

No; as it turns out. Heath's book is less a polemical generational attack than an extended advertisement extolling the virtues of him and his circle of friends and promoting a predominantly conservative

political agenda – the familiar pragmatics of moderate Labor – lightly camouflaged in self-promoting ‘Gen Y speak’. The premise is disingenuous and the writing style ridiculously tame, while working hard to be inflammatory: “if the pension isn’t good enough for them then tough titties”.

Though it’s not very well written and is under-researched (many of Ryan’s conclusions rely on anecdotes from his peers, tiny opinion polls and facts found buried in other people’s newspaper columns), the book suffers most of all from a lack of conviction. *Please just F* off* has nothing of the courage or clarity of *Gangland*, the pointed ‘generationalist’ intervention into cultural production, the media and the publishing industry, that Mark Davis wrote in the nineties. Heath’s account of his super-flexible, emailing, texting, sojourning, blackberry-addicted friends, who love capitalism but don’t get their just desserts (or their faster broadband) could more accurately have taken its title from a Smiths song: ‘Please, please, please let me get what I want’.

Apparently ‘we’ (those born after 1970) are global, responsible, anti-PC and pro-capitalism. And “we have moved beyond concepts of left and right”. In the generational utopia of *Please just F* off*, it seems, no-one young is indigenous, poor, working class or unemployed. Youth wages are not a problem: “Most young people aren’t actually affected by junior pay legislation . . . because employers know they won’t keep talented young people on such low rates.” The upbeat, self-congratulatory “snapshot of our sexy generation” slides into very silly territory. “We can get sex anywhere, anytime, anyhow and with anyone in the twenty-first century,” Heath declares. Sure, I might be a 27-year-old near-ludite who listens to the Smiths and doesn’t get out enough, but *really?*

Despite Heath’s certainty that it is boomers – whose one-time radicalism has given way to complacent control – that are responsible for the woes of young people in Australia, it is hard to distinguish elements of his cultural and political analysis from any of the boomer columnists he claims to so despise, writing in the *Good Weekend* or *Australian*. Is lamenting the ‘brain drain’ phenomenon that supposedly forces talented Australians to Europe and the US, that controversial? Heath explains he left Australia for London because there “with your peers you can run media and financial markets”. Heath’s

assertion that, “if you care about other people capitalism is the only game in town”, his decrying of the “old mantras of the left”, and his preference for the “glue issues”, such as the environment, that can bind us all together, probably sound familiar arguments because they are.

Under the guise of speaking for disaffected youth, *Please just F* off* is also a thinly veiled attack on activists and the Left. Heath questions the point of street protests, savages the Greens as a privileged force attracting “faux activists” and eroding the chances for “serious” progressives (Heath’s Labor Party, we presume). Readers are instructed not to listen to anti-capitalists and to change the world by, amongst other things, being a better line manager at work or choosing a personally meaningful career path.

While scattered with the anecdotal assumptions of his friends, there’s very little attempt to accurately represent demographic patterns. Heath misspells Anne Summers’ name while rubbishing her suggestions for changing the world. He quotes without irony or suspicion a Motorola survey that concludes young people would rather get an SMS than a Christmas card. He claims that in 2003 there were only twenty-seven thousand deaths “because of political violence (i.e. war)”, without any evidence.

A problem with parading one’s credentials as a web-savvy trend-spotter and all-round fashionista, awash in popular culture and today’s news, is that one almost inevitably comes off sounding like a dag. Heath twice acknowledges his parents in *Please just F* off* and draws lessons from experiences at the Youth Roundtable and the Lions Club speech he delivered as a teenager.

There are real questions to ask about how we live now: Is ‘youth culture’ real or pre-packaged? What are the effects of economic change on youth employment and housing? How have new technologies transformed our cultural and social lives? What are the strategies via which established and establishment values are promoted in the publishing industry and media? What are the patterns of youth political engagement? Sadly, Heath’s book doesn’t address any of them seriously. *Please just F* off* reads like a project conceived of by the marketing department of a publishing house as a controversial book the kids might buy.

Kalinda Ashton is a Melbourne writer and creative writing PhD student at RMIT.

New Australian Science Fiction

PAUL VOERMANS

Bill Congreve & Michelle Marquardt (eds): *Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy* (MirrorDance Books, \$19.95, ISBN 0975773607)

Lucy Sussex: *A Tour Guide in Utopia* (MirrorDance Editions, \$24.95, ISBN 0975785206)

What attracts the writer to the fantastic? When childhood is filled to bursting with action and colour and new experiences, connecting the dots in the topsy new coruscating brain pathways and part-apprehended facts, a physicality that is too big for the small body you find yourself in and fear and loving and hunger and pain that cause you to just squeal with their possession of you and just as quickly to sleep and dream, the fantastic is a natural part of your pillow, your fire, the night, the clouds, the long grass and the expanse of paper on a rainy day.

Perhaps the proliferation of adults recording their fantastic experiences as though characters and situations are made up is just a symptom of what some people say is our extended childhood, where we get about in pumps and shorts, turn our hats backward, play video games and live with mum and dad till we're forty.

We amuse ourselves to death (or at least to the death of our pixelated enemies) because we have no real engagement with those around us. Our TVs get bigger and more defined, our violence funnier and the networks aimed at the younger demographic show wall-to-wall ghosts, witches, aliens, cartoons (and footy).

But was the world a better place when the only printed book was the Bible?

2004's dozen best speculative fiction short stories, published in Bill Congreve and Michelle Marquardt's attractive edition evidence both the technological blooming of our civilisation and a puerile fixation with mind candy.

In this anthology, 'The Meek' is, as Damien Broderick is so often and so effortlessly, both elegantly sombre and playful. And although Terry Dowling's 'Flashmen' is almost mawkish in its treatment of its alien-busting heroes, it is also a nicely turned comic-book tale in dry Australian. I loved Lynette Aspey's 'Sleeping Dragons', which is at the same time simply fantastic and yet utterly credible in its human elements.

There are very few slight stories. From Margo Lanagan's nasty 'Singing My Sister Down' to Rjurik Davidson's soulful fantasy about jazz and love on the Left in 1940s Melbourne, it's a collection attempting much by writers who, if they are not well known, ought to be and perhaps will be soon.

In Lucy Sussex's latest collection of shorter fiction, *A Tour Guide in Utopia*, the writing is less even, but the intent is more obvious. Here are a dozen pieces often featuring academics or obvious literary constructs, who speak in stilted language that often jars with me.

It's one thought experiment after another, the entertainment perhaps residing in the language or the novel tidbits unearthed by Sussex in her research. And while the work is actually at its best when the writer is not attempting compression, or complication or conceit, we are constantly offered what Thomas Disch calls Big Ideas – from the reason behind madwomen in nineteenth-century literature to Heisenberg's Uncertain Nazism – things the literature of the fantastic ought to be good at and about.

My favourite tale is 'Merlusine', which the author says is the most spontaneously generated of them. It shows. Like many of the stories here it begs to be longer, but is more a comment on the marketplace's difficulty with sub-novel length. There is a genuine, archaeological, and just plain hedonistic interest in music in this story which could form the basis of a fascinating novel, combined as it is with affectionate travelogue fiction about Cajuns and slaves and freak shows (and why and how they are attractive).

Sussex indicates in an Afterword that she has looked back on her work of over a decade, published all around the world, and seen a different person, a developing writer. I do hope that her future development includes some more simple adventures like this one.

Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Science Fantasy all have a great capacity to talk directly about ideas, to be as blunt as children and as wrong about the adult world. Buy these books and enjoy both.

Paul Voermans is the author of two novels published by Victor Gollancz. His new SF novel should be out next year.

Peter Garrett and the Dodshon Kid

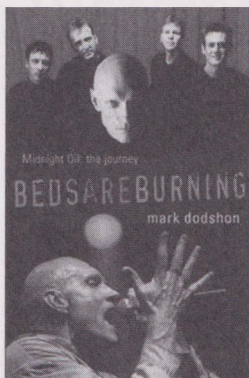
MICHAEL GEORGE SMITH

Mark Dodshon: *Beds Are Burning, Midnight Oil: The Journey* (Viking, \$29.95, ISBN 0670041637)

It was obvious just looking at him – the sense of relief was palpable, and Peter Garrett admitted as much when he finally took the podium to present an award – that he was glad to once again be among friends. The smile didn't leave his face the whole evening and he reaffirmed that pleasure and relief to me in the hotel lobby afterwards, at the conclusion of the 2005 APRA Music Awards. Gripping my hand in both his he admitted that, as mercenary as the music industry can often be, he knew he was mixing with people here who had many of the same aspirations he had held so dear for the previous twenty-five years. While he was enjoying the new challenges and the steep learning curve he was facing as the Federal Labor Member for Kingsford Smith, he was he said all too aware of being very much in a "party of one" in Canberra.

Not that Garrett really expected anything else. His mother may have been involved in fundraising for the local Labor member when he was a youngster, but back in 1984 when he had been asked to stand as a candidate for the Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP), the Labor Party had ensured his failure to capture a Senate seat, by handing their preferences to the Liberal candidate. As the then 'hard man' of the Labor Right, Graham Richardson, admitted to Mark Dodshon: "[Garrett] was a worry, always. He gave them [young people] a quality-of-life argument that I think they essentially believed. And only he could do it." He has also admitted "how right [Garrett] was on the environment. I wouldn't have fought with him anyway. It would have been a great strength to us [to have had him join the Labor Party]. But Peter would never accept the rigidity of party discipline . . . that's why we didn't ask him."

It would have been interesting to read Richardson's thoughts not only on Garrett's decision to eventually join the Party, but on his then becoming an elected Labor member. It would also be interesting to now read how Garrett himself is coping not only with that 'party discipline', but also living with the certain knowledge of having to now fight all over again, from inside the 'belly of the beast', so many of the battles he had hoped had been already won by the efforts of so many fellow activists over so



many years, while he was still fronting the Oils: the Identity Card, uranium mining, Indigenous rights, the environment. But that would be another book.

Dodshon's account is however a timely reminder of the achievements and legacy of one of Australia's most significant rock bands, and of the crucible in which the ideas and philosophy by which the Honorable Member now lives, first found form. Not that Garrett or the other members of Midnight Oil were thinking about anything so nebulous as embodying "the sentiments of a generation uncomfortable with Labor's retreat from the ideals of the Whitlam era", to quote Philip Hayward (*The Abundant Culture*, 1995). But that's just what Garrett, guitarists Jim Moginie and Martin Rotsey, drummer Rob Hirst and the three bass players – Andrew James, Peter Gifford and Wayne 'Bones Hillman' Stevens – who passed through the band, together became. As Dodshon notes: "There are still musicians expressing social opinions but very few of them exist as part of mainstream culture, and none are part of the public discourse of a country in the way that Midnight Oil were in Australia."

Beds Are Burning, taking its title from the song that took the band to the top of the international charts in 1988, begins at the end of Garrett's scuttled run at a Senate seat for the NDP, not in some embattled party room looking over the numbers but in Sydney's Hordern Pavilion before several thousand screaming rock fans. And in a way that's entirely appropriate, because it immediately establishes the paradox that was Midnight Oil as a band, unique certainly in Australia and probably anywhere else. Right from their beginnings late in 1973, the band's emphasis was always firmly on the music, on honing their skills, on writing the strongest songs of which they were capable. But once the line-up consolidated, so did the philosophical platform on

which the band would operate throughout its career. As a fellow activist, a member of the Double J/Triple J radio team of broadcasters, and a publicist and writer, Dodshon often found himself very much a part of the same struggle.

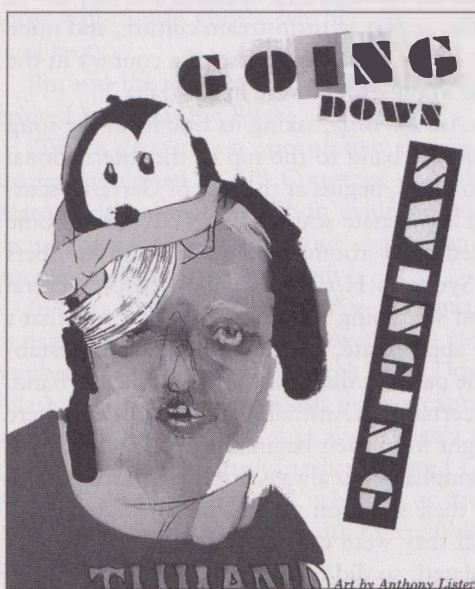
The band's manager, Gary Morris, a 'sixth member' in a very real sense, also recognised that commitment: "I found myself approaching a lot of unis and they had the Movement Against Uranium Mining, Greenpeace, Save the Whales, a lot of these grassroots entities . . . It really dovetailed into the psyche of the band, especially Peter's, of having some kind of social purpose behind the music." Paul Gilding, who headed Greenpeace International, reinforces the point: "It should be said that they were always Midnight Oil issues, not just Peter issues. It was very clear that the band was a cohesive group in terms of the politics of what they were doing. And the commitment to it was absolute – the amount of money they gave away was enormous!"

Dodshon gives the reader a glimpse of just how many different community groups and organisations were helped in concrete financial ways by the band. There was never any public relations milking of these extracurricular activities, no grandstanding or sermonising, no pretensions or 'holier than thou' attitudes. For the band, it was simply practicing what they believed was their collective social responsibility. Dodshon also presents a band that was prepared to throw away potentially incredibly lucrative "commercial opportunities" in order to stand by those

collective convictions. They refused for example to appear on the American Grammy Awards when *Beds Are Burning* was topping US charts, because Garrett had committed himself to MC the 'Long March for Justice, Freedom and Hope' at Bondi Beach, opting to keep his word to some four thousand Indigenous people rather than "sell the Oils" to potentially millions of music fans across America. It's the same commitment that saw Peter Garrett MP reunite with the Oils to perform at the WaveAid concert in Sydney in January last year to help raise money for the victims of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, and later join his fellow musicians as a compere at a benefit concert in Sydney to raise funds for Pete Wells, the archetypal "rock'n'roll outlaw" slide guitarist with Rose Tattoo, who passed away in March after battling prostate cancer for the past couple of years.

These young men created a body of work – in a genre most consider disposable – that may never equal the universal appeal of The Beatles but will always challenge anyone who cares to take the time to listen to it, to think about the world in which they live, and to ponder the possibility that they can, if they choose, make a difference. And that, as Dodshon's story of friendship and unity makes clear, is a legacy worth celebrating.

Michael George Smith has been the Associate Editor of the Sydney-based free music, arts and entertainment weekly, *The Drum Media*, for fifteen years, and has also been playing bass guitar in a variety of bands around Sydney and nationally for more than thirty years.



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Are you a born writer?

Do you have what it takes? Test yourself! By Lofa Heimann

Can you hit the bin three times in a row?



Have you ever tried to drink from a cup you knew to be empty - three times within 5 minutes?



Will she ring?

Did you ever have three unconnected thoughts in a row without having written down a word?

Do I smell gas?

Musn't forget to put the rubbish out...



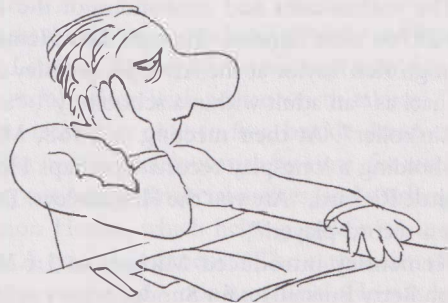
Have you asked the thesaurus for an alternative to 'said', though you know full well that you've done it three times before without success?



Have you been to at least three book launches where you consumed wine and cheezels without buying the book?



When checking the biographies of successful writers, have you discovered at least three of them who are younger than you?

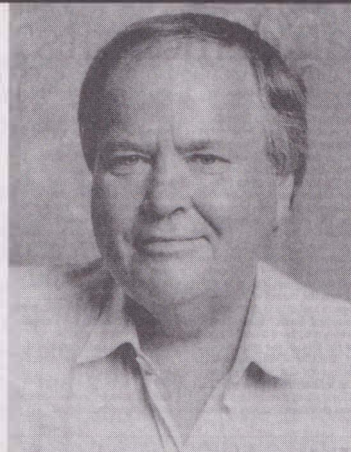


If you answered 'yes' to three of the above questions, you may still become a great writer, but chances are less than you think.

MICHAEL GRAY DUGAN

1947–2006

WRITER AND BOOKMAN



THE NEWS OF Michael Dugan's death on 16 March this year was met not just with grief but with dismay. For forty years he had been so much present, for so many, in the writing scene in Melbourne. From the age of 21, when he started editing *The Australian School Librarian*, he helped to mould children's book writing and publishing; he was already one of the movers preparing a decade of new ideas and change in Australian poetry.

Michael Dugan's father was an *Age* journalist, eventually sub-editor; his mother wrote poetry. The middle child of three in a comfortable, well-read, affectionate middle-class family, schooled at Wesley, he seemed destined for conventional success in a profession.

However, in 1965, leaving school, he knew he wanted to write. He had started with a youthful essay published in 'Junior Age' – but his orientation was poetry. His life's work among books began with a job in The Little Bookroom.

The enthusiasms and encounters of the 1960s and 1970s were decisive. He met Kris Hemensley through Ken Taylor at the ABC. Hemensley recalls Michael as "an adult within a schoolboy", "a great rock'n'roller". At their meeting in 1968, Michael was holding a long-play record – perhaps Hendrix or Little Richard. "Are you the Hemensleys? Do you have a record-player?"

Hemensley introduced Michael to La Mama, which Betty Burstall let for Sunday poetry readings. Both were poets, editing little magazines and bringing together young writers. Charles Buckmaster sent a manuscript to Michael at *Crosscurrents*, which

he was bringing out at his own expense. Sweeney Reed introduced him to poets who read at Strine's Gallery. He also made a connection with the Heide painters sponsored by John and Sunday Reed, and their librarian-poet Barrie Reid – though Michael already knew John Perceval from Canterbury, near his parents' home.

The literary scene round a swarm of roneo'd anthologies and small press publications was the beginning of Michael's huge circle of friends. Meantime he started "on the ground floor" at the book-importing business – children's and educational – of Joyce and Courtney Oldmeadow in Beatrice Avenue, West Heidelberg. Practical and reliable, he was soon doing the day-to-day money and liaising with teachers and the Curriculum and Development Department. John Jenkins remembers Michael's extraordinary knowledge of publishers' lists and personnel, built in contact work with publishers' reps. He'd found Jenkins a job – his first – at Oldmeadows'. "It was a pleasure to work with him; there was no change in him, at work, at home, it was the same man you got."

Jenkins knows whereof he speaks – for a while he too lived at the house at Sunbury Avenue, Surrey Hills, shared by Michael, Dave Jones (the 'landlord'), and Simon Jones, guitarist in the King Hippo Poetry Band. Later came Robert Kenny, editor with Dugan and Phillip Edmonds of *Contempera* publications (another 'New poetry' pioneer), and many another. "People drifted in and out." This convivial household fed the be-whiskered and side-burned Michael's catholic tastes in art and friends.

Dave collected paintings; Michael “read – vocalised – not sang” with the King Hippo Band. At one stage Dave decided to do up the house. He jacked up one corner, and the house *broke in two* during a band rehearsal. Michael’s response: “We didn’t think we were that loud.”

Michael Dugan the earning writer began at 21, with a children’s non-fiction book, *Travel and Transport*, in Oxford’s illustrated ‘Life in Australia’ series. Within a decade he had thirty (of the eventual two hundred plus) titles to his name. Two landmark anthologies, bias Melbourne, sought a new poetic (*The Drunken Tram, six young Melbourne poets*, 1972) and *Outback Reader* (1975, with John Jenkins). There were books of his own poetry, several of nonsense verse, stories, and half-a-dozen more factual books for children.

Over a lifetime of educational writing he was to cover a wide range of topics including government, industries, inventions, medicine, getting jobs, games, holidays, weather, history, war, transport, and migrant nationalities, in such series as ‘Famous Australians’, ‘Discoveries and Innovations’, ‘Australian Disasters’, ‘How they lived’, ‘Australia’s Children’, and ‘Fact Finders’. Over the four decades he wrote for Oxford, Hodder & Stoughton, Jacaranda, Penguin, Macmillan Education Australia, and others. Anyone sampling these books will find a difficult kind of prose written well – a style with no room for self – clearly pointed, lively, plain, and talking to a listener on the same level.

Michael’s literary, financial and book trade experience, along with his genuine concern for the field, combined to make him a consultant of choice on children’s and educational writing. John Collins recalled his work in the 1970s for Jacaranda: “He wouldn’t have called himself a mentor – but he helped all sorts of people. He was a marvellous anthologist, generous and perceptive. If only I could have brought him in as a Development Editor . . . He never really wanted to do that, but if you mentioned a problem with a manuscript he was always willing to have a look.”

Some non-fiction subjects were much more to him than mere facts. His genuine interest and concern for migrants fuelled not only a series, *The Germans, The Maltese*, and so on, but a well-received large illustrated book, *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Australia’s Migrant Experience* (with Joseph Szwarc), published in 1984 by the

Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs. To them too he proved a faithful consultant.

The children’s writing field has often looked like a Cinderella alongside adult publishing. No-one contributed more than Michael Dugan to the increased regard for writing for children. Introducing *The Early Dreaming: Australian Children’s Authors on Childhood* (Jacaranda, 1980), Dugan points to the genre’s debasement in 1940s wartime conditions and the renaissance of quality children’s fiction with the generation of writers represented in the book. Full of good anecdotes and advice on writing for children, it stands companion to a row of Michael’s lively and successful anthologies for children.

His own work is a treasure-house. *Dragon’s Breath*, about the dragon who saved a village, and *Dingo Boy* both came out in 1980. The scandal of the awful things Billy does in *Billy, the most horrible boy in the world* (1981) was recently relived on TV. *Melissa’s Ghost* (1986) brings together the future – a family working to make a go of farming – and the past of the place through dreams in which lost knowledge comes to light.

Michael Dugan’s work involved many collaborations and is posited on a sense of community. When Court Oldmeadow died and Joyce Oldmeadow set up the Dromkeen Foundation of children’s literature at Riddell’s Creek, Michael took an active role. He had always talked in schools, and was the long-term editor of the kids’ magazine *Puffinalia*. Reading him brings the thought ‘What a teacher!’ but he remained his own master, a full-time writer though always busy with other aspects of writing and books – like judging the Alan Marshall Short Story Award, or committee work (thirty-five years!) for the Victorian Fellowship of Australian Writers, and latterly at the Merchant of Fairness bookshop not far from his Surrey Hills home.

Michael’s earnings – including Public and Educational Lending Right payments – kept him. He was a successful writer, with advice worth taking: “You have to treat it as nine-to-five, buckle down every day.” Yet he was generous with his time, for instance sorting out others’ financial messes, and working for Jeshimon House, which helps people with mental illness. A typical comment: “The catholicity of the man. He was broad – not superficial. He was interested in other people, to his own detriment.”

Friends commented that Michael had hoped to fill a more prominent place as a poet. Yet a farewell

reading showed how eminently readable his 'light' verse is – which few write well. Children will have the last say!

With the 1980s came illness and clinical depression. Who can read the place in this of the lack of a long-term partnership and children – this man who reached so many children through words? There was no slackening in the publications, though friends were dismayed by the impact of treatment – he underwent electro-convulsive therapy. His own words: "It was like having a jigsaw taken apart and thrown together again". But at dinner after a recent book launch, he refused to discuss illness. "I don't want to talk about any of that. I want to have a good time." And the evening recalled the young Michael, who "knew how to party".

Michael Dugan's legacy is a generous one: the memories of an extraordinary number of friends from a life fully lived in many areas; his output of skilful and wide-ranging work in almost every aspect of children's and educational writing and book-making, his very great achievement as a communicator, his way to the minds of children – a way he opened to other writers as well. His foremost heirs are the many who will have a good time with Australian children's books.

Judith Rodriguez is a Melbourne poet. She would like to thank Kris Hemensley, John Jenkins and John Collins, who shared memories of Michael Dugan; and Sally Dugan, who gave permission to quote him.

DURING NOVEMBER 1974 the literary editor of the Melbourne *Age*, Stuart Sayers wrote:

Michael Dugan the poet and Jim Hamilton, Secretary of the Victorian Fellowship of Australian Writers and ubiquitous literary figure are the editors of *Bookmark* 75. Vane Lindesay is the designer. They make a formidable team.

Bookmark had its genesis in 1974 and a life of thirteen issues. It was a large, hardcover format annual 'Diary and Dictionary – for Writers, Libraries and Librarians, Publishers and Booksellers', a product of the Australian Library Promotions Council from the State Library of Victoria.

Initially, when the diary-dictionary was planned, we fretted about selecting a suitable title for the

design and format. The contents and direction were settled and agreed upon. Something 'bookish' was sought – it was Michael the literary researcher who suggested *Bookmark*.

Michael's role was the most difficult and responsible of the team, and deserves recognition. His task was to research detail, biographical and general, of every Australian writer and publishing event from the arrival of the First Fleet to the relevant year *Bookmark* was produced. As an example of his depth and devotion to this task let me quote an entry from Friday 17 January, 1895 in the first issue of *Bookmark* in 1974:

Printing office of *Nhill & Tartara Mail* burnt down, destroying some manuscripts of poems by father of John Shaw Neilson.

Working on *Bookmark* in 1974 was my first acquaintance with this greatly talented man, and again, at a later date, we were both board members on *Overland*, where Michael was invited to be poetry co-editor. And there was a period in between these events when Michael commissioned me to write an article about child characters in Australian comic strips, joining me with, among other literary figures, Barbara Giles, who was creating her rhymes for *Puffinalia*, a magazine for young readers edited by Michael.

Some years back, I discovered that which, after reading, went a long way to completing my understanding and total appreciation of Michael's humanity:

Thoughtful

*With all the drinks left out for him
and all the good food too,
there must be times on Christmas night
when Santa needs the loo.*

*So I've written a note to Santa Claus
in letters large and black,
saying, 'If you need it mate,
our dunny's out the back.'*

Vane Lindesay is a Melbourne writer, designer and artist.

Michael Dugan was in 1990 a founding member of the *Overland* board, formed after the death of Stephen Murray-Smith, and remained on the board until ill health forced his resignation in 2004.

ON TONY KEVIN'S POSTSCRIPT

I REFER TO 'SIEV X – an author's postscript', by Tony Kevin, as published in *Overland* 181, summer 2005.

Mr Kevin has been publishing increasingly insulting comments about me since I reviewed his book about 'SIEV X' critically in February 2005 *JAS Review of Books* see <www.api-network.com/cgi-bin/reviews/jrbview.cgi?n=1920769218>. Some of the statements and implications about me in the *Overland* piece are among the most insulting and misleading that I have seen – they seem designed to denigrate me and tarnish my reputation rather than deal with the facts. I will deal with the most blatant:

Mr Kevin states that:

1. "For . . . Clarke, it seemed difficult to understand the simple proposition on which my case rested: that in any decent society that places a proper value on protecting human life, there is an unarguable public-interest coronial obligation on government to explore these unexplained deaths of 353 people in Australia's Operation Relex maritime zone, at the time of an admitted Australian people-smuggling disruption program in Indonesia aimed at stopping such voyages, and an active intelligence-based maritime surveillance and interception military operation being conducted in that zone."

This statement is deliberately misleading and ignores the second paragraph of my review, which canvasses existing inquiry options and states that "there may be grounds" for an inquiry.

2. "Nor did any of these three critics [including me] mention the public history of the Senate's repeated motions over three years 2002–2004, demanding a judicial enquiry into SIEV X and the [AFP people smuggling] disruption program."

Again, this is deliberately misleading: I mentioned the Senate motions in my second paragraph. My review also canvassed in some detail *additional* reasons not mentioned in Mr Kevin's book for concern about the Australian Federal Police's 'disruption' program in Indonesia.

3. ". . . Clarke . . . skilfully misrepresented my case for a judicial inquiry, as nothing more than a series of speculative allegations against the ADF and AFP."

I have no idea whether Mr Kevin's allegations about the ADF and AFP are true. I only know that, on the present state of the evidence, they appear no more likely to be true than more benign accounts of these events. Mr Kevin's book does not provide evidence to support them – this is the core of my critique. This should all be fairly clear from the quotes he has extracted from my review, which describe it as "under-researched" and "over-analysed". I acknowledged that Mr Kevin's inquiries may have been hampered by censorship of evidence before the Senate inquiry, but I also think that he should at least have done some elementary research on legal issues and conducted interviews in the Indonesian departure port.

4. "I believe that these negative reviews were essentially written, not with intent to join in any real debate with me on the SIEV X issue, but to lay down clear exclusion markers for senior public service and defence professionals. The merits of my argument, or even its basic facts, were really irrelevant. As Howard had effectively made clear in Parliament, for senior government servants this was a forbidden book. The reviews by Frame and Clarke had substantiated that message."

I did not write my review "to lay down clear exclusion markers for senior public service and defence professionals" or to "substantiate" a message that they shouldn't read it, and I take extreme offence at the suggestion that I did. I started to write the review because I was – indeed I remain – very concerned about Australia's treatment of asylum-seekers, particularly any possibility that Australian authorities were in some way responsible for 353 deaths at sea. In other words, the possible merits of Mr Kevin's arguments were in the forefront of my mind.

After spending several weeks researching the issue, I could see holes in Mr Kevin's argument, and I was able to identify areas in which he had

done inadequate research or engaged in confused or incorrect analysis. In other words, I could see problems with what he calls his 'basic facts'. By the time I wrote the review, I was motivated as much by a desire to correct and supplement public knowledge about these events as I was by a desire to show that the book did not live up to what he calls its 'merits'. Anyone who reads my review will see that it goes into some detail on legal issues, which are poorly explored in Mr Kevin's book and other analyses of the sinking, but crucial to any proper understanding of how governments responded to it.

Mr Kevin seems unable to distinguish between concerns about the 'SIEV X' tragedy (which I and many others share) and the contents of his own book. I cannot help it if he can't distinguish between a robust critique of the quality of his arguments on the one hand and 'government-inspired' 'hostility' to debate about the sinking on the other.

JENNIFER CLARKE, Senior Lecturer, ANU College of Law.

ON PAUL GILLEN'S REVIEW

Regarding Paul Gillen's review of *Chronicle of the Unsung* in *Overland* 182: while I have no complaint with anything else he has to say, I can't allow that my book was "not written by an Australian".

Although born in New Zealand, I've lived in Australia since 1981 and have been a citizen here since 1989. Further, my grandfather came from Melbourne and was only shifted across the Tasman in order to protect him from the tender mercies of his Tasmanian father.

My next book, *Luca Antara: Passages in Search of Australia*, does consider aspects of this elective nationality, albeit from a fairly oblique perspective. It's to be published by East Street Publications towards the end of this year.

MARTIN EDMOND



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If modernism in its many manifestations was doomed to fail, forever; and if the aspirational apex of civilisation really is megamalls, gated golfing communities, faux Victoriana/Edwardiana/Georgiana/Federatiana, sanitised spa centres with forest-frog muzak, competitive corporate branding from pre-cradle ultrasound to post-pension prosperity – then why have the victors protested so much? Why are attacks by established commentators on contributors to Australian culture like Robert Connolly, Elliot Perlman, David Williamson, Stephen Sewell, Christos Tsiolkas and Mark Davis, when these artists and intellectuals expose aspects of today's Australian ugliness, so verbally violent and frequently *ad hominem*?

Natasha Cica, Overland lecture 'The Incorruptibles'

In the 1960s and 1970s the ruling classes of the rich countries had lost control of the culture, and their leadership determined not to make that mistake again. The bitter campaign against 'political correctness', still being conducted by neoliberal think-tanks and politicians, expresses the resulting hostility towards ideas of social justice, tolerance and cooperation. It is supplemented by endless rhetoric promoting enterprise culture, achievement, success, wealth creation, and just plain greed.

Raewyn Connell, 'Chicago Values'

M.J. Hyland's excision of Australia from her palette points to a sickness at the heart of our literature. We have lost the literary-nationalist confidence and bravado that came with the baby boomers and their cultural revolution. We are also pandering to the gods of globalisation and economic rationalism.

Ian Syson, 'Literary Publishing in a Nutshell'

A focus on the painting of the remote and more exotic landscapes of Australia, in particular on the internationally known and iconic images of the outback and Sydney Harbour, coincides with Brand Australia's marketing. This is not to say the artists painting these subjects are thinking about landscape in branded terms. Far from it. The aim of any good painter of the landscape is to respond in ways unique and compelling. But it does seem that buyers and collectors (and the galleries competing for their business) are likely to hold the view, now pervasive in our culture, that Australia's identity is revealed by the 'unique' landscapes of exotic Australia.

Mark Dober, 'The Branded Landscape'

At the end of Irvine's seminar, we split into groups for exercises. One was challenged to "assume the position of moral leadership", a lesson from Irvine's work with the biotech (GM crop) industry. When the GM crop industry faced health, environmental, economic, legal and social challenges, it mounted a higher moral ground campaign: GM crops will save third world children from malnutrition and starvation. The stratagem is to promote not with facts, said Irvine, but values.

Katherine Wilson, 'Grassroots versus Astroturf'

Errors such as these provide ammunition for a sleepless and unscrupulous campaign to discredit the historical grievances of Aboriginal people. Writers like Connor, Windschuttle and their ilk are not interested in a mannerly process of scholarly investigation. They are waging cultural warfare for Aboriginal land, an undertaking for which they can count on the support of prime ministers, pastoralists and mining companies.

Patrick Wolfe, 'Operation Sandy Track'

Temper democratic, bias Australian

"The pit bull of literary journals"
| *Australian Book Review*

"A rewarding mix of ideas, idealism
and tough-minded analysis"
| *The Age*

"One of Australia's loopy-Left
little magazines"

| Editorial, *The Australian*



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