

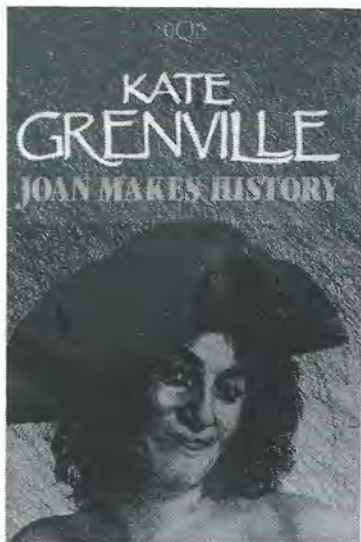


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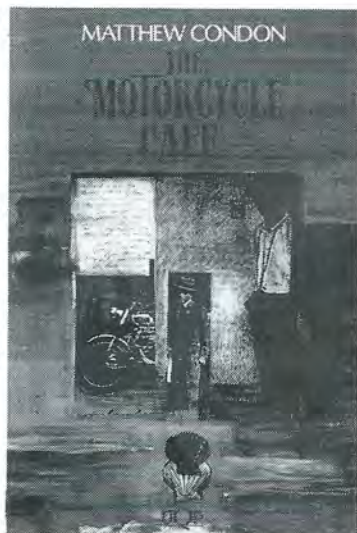
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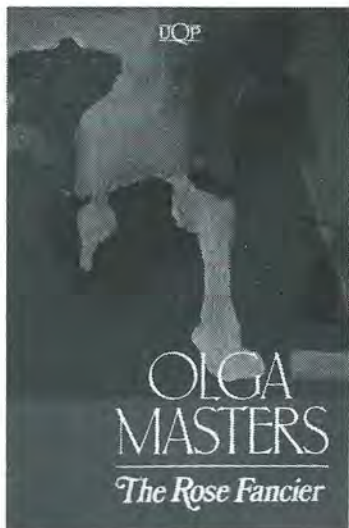
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KATE GRENVILLE

## Brothers in Law

from *Work-in-Progress*.

Silly Kitty, she was marrying a poor feeble mirror image of myself. My sister had always made a show of loathing me, for she could not admit to adoring me: she could not marry me, but she was marrying my likeness, and I was not fooled.

Forbes was another man with a splendid head and an authoritative moustache, another man with a decisive way with a fact. Of course Kitty had met Forbes through me: he was also in the retail line, though in a smaller way than Singer and Company, and I had made a small show of courting him, for I had long ago learned that competitors are better wooed and softened by friendship, than to have their judgement unclouded by sentiment. A man who considers himself your friend, and is a member of your own club, is much less likely to do you damage. So Forbes and I, over our whiskeys-and-water at the Club, had several times exchanged views on the future of the wing-collar, and of starch in general, and had agreed that celluloid, though not a thing any gentleman would ever have next to his skin, was the thing of the future as far as the mass-produced end of the market was concerned.

Forbes was a fool in flannels: the racquet stuck out awkwardly from the end of his arm, and balls fell out of his hands before he could toss them up in the air for a serve. This was contemptible, but what seemed worse to me was that he did not mind. "Oh, what a duffer I am!" he exclaimed and laughed, missing another easy ball from Kitty with a wild swing that made him stagger. "Perhaps if we used a football I would have some chance of connecting!"

He floundered, and ran after balls he had no hope of hitting, and I was embarrassed for him. I sat up in the umpire's chair calling out "Fault, fault," time and again: or, when the miracle happened and he got the ball over the net, "Out!" Kitty took his part, and protested when a ball was close to the line: "No, Albion, I saw it, it was in, it was definitely in." I did not wish to argue with her in front of Forbes, but sang out, "The umpire's decision is final, those are the rules."

Kitty called up, "But, Albion", her face unpleasantly

red from running to Forbes' wild balls and laughing, "we must give the poor fellow a chance, and turn a blind eye now and then, or there will be no game!" From my height, the top of my sister's head was odiously pointed where the hair lay flat on her skull: and what an idiotic idea, for if winning was not the point of playing a game, what point could there be? "Kitty, there is no point to a game without rules, and there is no rule about turning a blind eye, otherwise there would be no game."

I could sympathise with Kitty, for no woman should win a game of sport so easily and resoundingly against a man. It is not a good thing for a woman to show a man up, even a man as foolish as Forbes, and I softened at this proof that my sister had, after all, some sense of the proper feeling of things.

But although in defending Forbes she was upholding the dignity of one male, she was undermining the authority of another, and that could not be allowed by any woman. "If you go on disagreeing with the umpire, Kitty, he will have to leave," I warned, for I had no wish to look ridiculous, perched up in my umpire's chair umpiring nonsense. "I will leave, Kitty, unless you stop arguing with the umpire." Kitty looked up then, taking the threat to heart, but squinting into the sun I could not see her expression.

At the next ball I called again: "Out!" My voice was crisp: it was a pleasure to hear it cutting out so cleanly across the court. But Kitty was beneath me again: "No, Albion, I assure you it was definitely in, I must disagree with you." She stood there squat and foreshortened, prepared to argue with me all day, I could see. "Very well," I said in a very quiet way, and climbed down from the chair. "Very well, Kitty, you must do without an umpire, then." I walked off the court waiting to be called back, but Kitty was too obstinate, and Forbes too ineffectual, and in any case a guest, and no doubt reluctant to take the initiative.

I did not give Kitty the pleasure of looking back as I entered the house, but walked into the cool, blinded for a moment in the deep shadow of the hall. A voice came from the darkness, the voice of my invisible

wife: "That was a very quick game, Albion, to be finished already," and as we stood in the dimness and I slowly saw my wife's shape in the doorway I said, "Kitty must learn, Norah, that rules must be obeyed, and that a game without rules is simply not on." But in the silence after I had spoken we heard the hollow mocking sound of a tennis ball hitting one racquet, then another, backwards and forwards, and then the thin silly sound of people laughing out-of-doors.

"I will be in my study, Norah, until tea is served," I said, and went up the stairs without looking back, pursued by the sound of my sister making a fool of a man who did not appear to care.

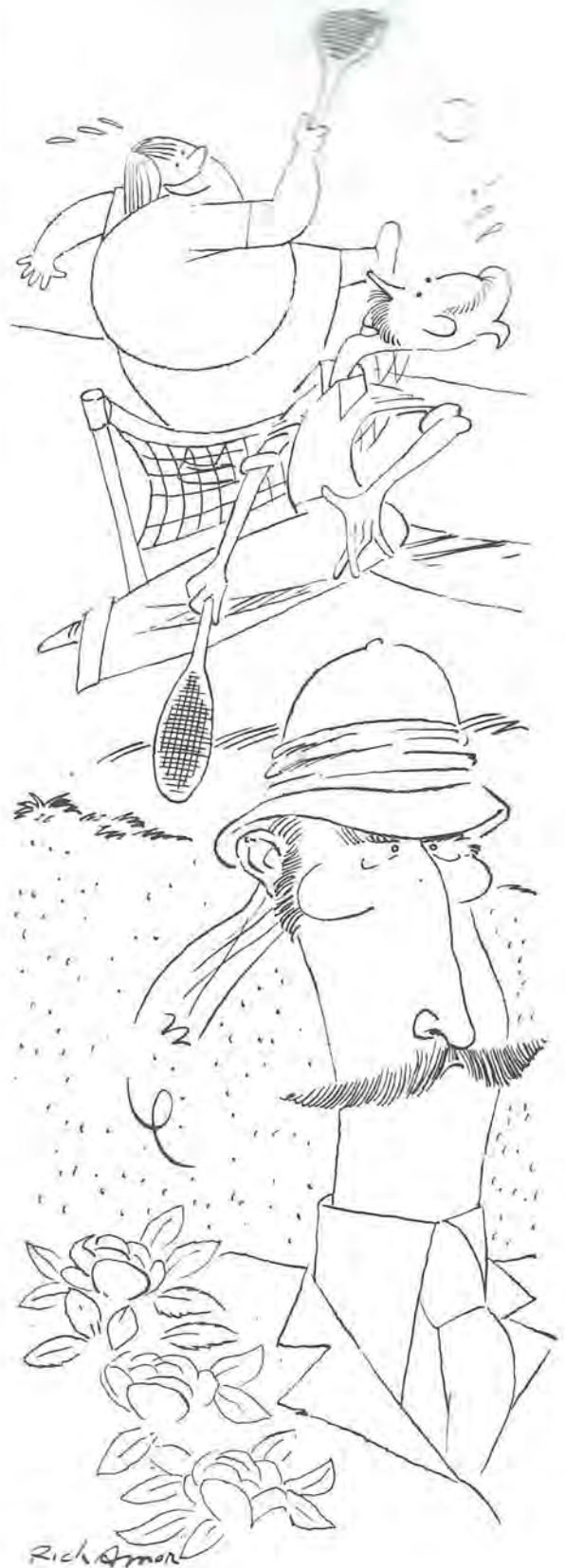
Later, when we were assembling for tea on the verandah, I did not wish to be close to Kitty and Forbes. Kitty was more red and freckled than I could believe, and her stringy rust-coloured hair was loosening itself in wild wisps around her face. I saw with distaste and mortification that there were large circles of sweat beneath her arms: surely this perspiring person could be no sister of mine!

At such moments it had crossed my mind before this that Kitty was in fact not of my flesh and blood: could it not be that she had been adopted, and no-one ever told? Poor simpleton, it would never have occurred to her to wonder why she was not more like her fine-looking brother. Be that as it may, however, there Kitty stood, swinging her racquet between two fingers so it bounced on her knee in its muslin: she stood grinning and bouncing the racquet and wiping the hair and perspiration off her face, and standing, I wished to let her know, too close to Forbes, who possibly had no more wish than I did to be too close to such an over-exerted female.

However, when I looked, I saw that he too was showing the signs of too much vigorous movement in the hot sun. He was still panting slightly, his lips—a touch too fleshy, I now saw, and rosier than a man's lips should ever be—his lips apart showing his teeth as he panted and grinned, not unlike a large well-intentioned dog: it would hardly have surprised me if he had begun licking things with a thick rough tongue. Yes, if my sister was a monkey scratching herself, this Forbes was without doubt the kind of dog that is always too eager.

What a sweaty animal warmth emanated from them! I seated myself in a dignified sort of way, not omitting to tweak up my trousers to preserve the creases, in order to encourage a return to the proprieties, and gestured to Norah to prepare the tea. I watched her pale hands among the teacups and cursed my stupidity in leaving the tennis-court, and playing into Kitty's hands. I watched them panting together: I had been tricked!

"By jove, Singer," Forbes told me when next we met at the Club, "She is a lively little person, is she not? And quite a little charmer, very fetching." I stared at the impudent fool, this brash grinning prattler: how



dare he? Every man wishes to have his wife admired, and certainly I did not wish Forbes to look at me with pity, thinking of some plain or shrewish wife at home with red hands and large feet, but Forbes was waxing more enthusiastic than any husband could wish. "She suits me admirably," I said somewhat stiffly, feeling the folds of my face close into my most magisterial expression. "I have never had cause to complain." He stared like a dolt, his mouth ajar, his idiotic forehead creasing, then he slapped his leg so suddenly I flinched, and he cried out in a great breathy gust of words: "Oh heavens, Singer, it was Kitty I was speaking of, not your wife!" He laughed, but watched me now with a touch of fear: "By jove, you do not think I would speak of your wife in that way, do you Singer?"

As a beau for my skinny sister I was not sure about Forbes. Forbes was too loud for my taste, too eager, too prone to laugh rashly and impulsively: in fact he was a man who found humour in altogether too much. The world was not as amusing a place as Forbes seemed to think. Kitty had tittered with him: now I remembered how I had heard them finding some old photo-albums amusing, with views of Minamurra Falls and The Entrance, seeming to find something so funny that Norah had had to raise her voice, and repeat herself when she called from the other end of the salon that luncheon was served.

There was a softness, a limpness, a woolly-headed kind-heartedness at the core of Forbes, that I despised. A real man would not have eyes of such a liquid brown, would not gaze with them in such a sympathetic way: why, I had seen Forbes' brown eyes fill with shameful tears, and glitter dangerously in his face while he bit his lip under his moustache, on the day that we had seen some cripple or other begging in the street.

"He is without a doubt richer than you or me, Forbes," I had warned him, "and you mark my words, a Rolls-Royce will pick him up at the end of the day and take him to Vacluse." But Forbes had reached into his pocket and given the man a pound—a pound, mind you, not a shilling or a half-crown!—and I had seen the way his eyes shone with tears as he walked

away with me, looking sheepish, but muttering, "Poor devil, poor wretched devil," in a voice that was not the voice of man simply expressing the proper sentiments. No, Forbes was a weakling with a heart like a woman's.

He was far from being the brother-in-law I would have wished, but I was beginning to be sure I would never have a brother-in-law of any kind at all, for my sister was so very plain and rock-like of feature. She was so altogether unsoft, unlovely, unfemale, with not a single womanly curve or grace, and with such a gingery red sort of colouring, and those freckles that were such a disfigurement, etched in now with all that lemon and cucumber.

And yet she had cultivated none of the shy attractive ways, none of the humble eagerness to please, that a plain woman does well to learn: no, she was as pert, as forthright, as quick to her loud laugh and her abrupt gesture as if she were lovely enough to be reckless: she had the bold frank stare and the overconfident willingness to speak at length, that in a woman is only made palatable by great beauty, and my sister was no kind of beauty at all.

I did not oppose then, although I could not enthuse either. "Well, Kitty," I said in my heaviest jovial way, "I suppose you will be asking me to say a few words before long, will you?" It was my way of saying, You need not think I am ignorant of your intentions, Kitty, although you have said nothing to me: but I do not need to be told, to know.

But instead of being startled, and blushing, as any proper woman would have done, and exclaiming: "Why Albion, whatever do you mean, and however did you know?" my perverse sister simply continued stitching away at some bit of white stuff, and said calmly, "Thank you, Albion, but we have decided to have the quietest possible wedding, and speeches are not permitted at the Registry." I had begun to frame an apt phrase or two in my mind, and it took me a moment to realise that she had decided that she had no use for my apt phrases at all: the freckled vixen, laughing at me up her sleeve and stitching away like the soul of sweetness!

BAIN ATTWOOD

## Writing the Aboriginal Past

An Interview with John Mulvaney<sup>1</sup>

ATTWOOD: *Australians to 1788*<sup>2</sup> has no Aboriginal contributors. Why is that?

MULVANEY: That's to my great regret. It was not for want of trying. In fact, back in 1979—I think it was—we had the biennial meeting of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and there were Aboriginal people present and we put the case. My view was that here was a marvellous opportunity for Aborigines to write Australian History. It was a thing we ought to do. I don't need to tell you that there wasn't much interest in this idea in earlier days. Our 'contract' with the publishers was a volume to 1788. We were trying to portray, if you like, an ideal world before the Europeans arrived.

It was something I expected Aboriginal people might object to participating in, but we explained at that meeting and at other times that they had the chance, if they wanted to, to be able to put their viewpoint—to have a book that was going to be fair. At the time there were a number of Aboriginal people who were going to contribute, either directly or in collaboration with other authors. In the end we didn't have a single one—they all dropped out on the grounds that they didn't want to be associated with the Bicentenary. All I can say is, I think there was brain-washing because at the time they *did* want to be associated, *not* to celebrate the Bicentenary (and I don't think our volume is that) but to celebrate Australia before the Europeans came. The fact that a number of Aborigines chose not to be involved was, I think, because they were dragooned, either by well-meaning Europeans who thought they shouldn't be involved, or perhaps by other Aborigines who told them they shouldn't. As a result the Aboriginal people lost a good opportunity, and I'm quite unrepentant.

ATTWOOD: Some Aborigines would argue that Europeans themselves should not be even writing Aboriginal history. What do you think?

MULVANEY: Well, I take a very strong view because it seems to me that one of the tragedies of society of the last 300 years has been rampant nationalism,

very often based on race. If you are going to say that your *race* determines whether you know anything about anything then that troubles me. I don't deny, though, that an Aboriginal interpretation will add something, some empathy, but I am very proud to be an Australian citizen and I deny the right of anybody to stop me writing about my own country. If Aboriginal people don't like it, I say "well, that's too bad, they shouldn't read it", but I believe I've tried very hard to show how much Aboriginal people matter. In fact, I can claim to have written the first full-length book dealing with Australia before Europeans and only about Aboriginal people.<sup>3</sup>

In time it may well be that the majority of people who write about Aboriginal history are Aborigines—I'd be very happy about that, but I think for Aborigines to say that nobody else may write about their history is totalitarian. Some would say that's an exaggeration but I don't think it is. Freedom of thought is the most important possession we have in Australia; we have denied it to Aborigines in the past, but that does not justify their denying it to us in the future.

ATTWOOD: In *Australians to 1788* some Aboriginal perspectives *are* evident, aren't they?

MULVANEY: Yes. We had hoped that we would have direct Aboriginal contributions but we had a fallback position. In an attempt to cover a totally Aboriginal viewpoint Peter White and myself as editors chose to include myths, or stories (better call them stories) which we thought were appropriate to various sections of the book. But of course there was one very big proviso, and that would have applied to Aboriginal authors as well: so much of Aboriginal society—in fact the vital part of Aboriginal society—is secret and sacred and so we had to leave out all sorts of things. In that sense the book has limitations.

ATTWOOD: This seems to point to quite different attitudes to knowledge and, beyond that, to different historiographical understandings. What are those differences?

MULVANEY: Speaking as an archaeologist, a

fundamental one is that all archaeologists believe, and will have to go on maintaining, that people came to Australia from elsewhere, that their arrival in Australia was very late in human times. Aboriginal people say they were created here in 'The Dreaming', quite independently. To my mind, quite apart from concepts of human evolution and so on, that is unacceptable and dangerous because it seems to mean that the Aboriginal people are not only a separate race of mankind, but they were created separately to every other race of mankind. At a time when we are trying to get a more just approach to Aborigines, I think it's very dangerous if they claim they have no human kinship with all the rest of us. Now that's a pretty esoteric argument but I don't think it's insignificant. Indeed, it came up very strongly in the American Civil War period as an argument against the Negro people.

Another fundamental difference of course is that Aboriginal people have such a close identification with place. Everything is significant whereas to the European I don't think anything is quite as meaningful. We've got to admit that Aboriginal spirituality is very different from ours. This makes it difficult for a European to interpret, but I suppose at the same time one would say an Aborigine must find it hard to interpret European ways of thinking. Aboriginal historians have got to come to grips with that problem. It's all very well to say they should be the only ones to study their history; at that rate Europeans should be the only ones to study European history, and we end in nonsense.

ATTWOOD: I wonder whether Europeans regard the past as somewhere 'back there' and closed, while the past, for Aborigines, continues to live in the present. I wonder whether history has a different purpose in their communities than it does in ours. Do you think that is so?

MULVANEY: Oh yes, I thoroughly agree with you and I think, with increasing age and more contact with Aboriginal people than I had forty years ago, I'm beginning to realise this. I was one of the first archaeologists to introduce radiocarbon dating into Australia and I triumphantly claimed 10,000 years, 20,000 years, 40,000 years of Aboriginal life here. To us that is meaningful and important, but to Aborigines 'The Dreaming' is something that happened at the beginning but it's still with them. Whether or not 'timeless' is the right word, it is for the whole of time, and Europeans just don't think in that way. Yet, somehow or other, one certainly has to conceive of that. Yet one notes that, when the most severe critics of the archaeologists debate in public, they say, "We've been in this country for 40,000 years". Now, where in the hell do they get that? They don't say we've been here from 'The Dreaming', so I think there are times when Aborigines choose to use European concepts of time.

ATTWOOD: Can we talk now, John, more specifically about *Australians to 1788*—what do you see as its main themes?

MULVANEY: Well, one aim was to indicate the tremendous diversity in Aboriginal culture—that's one of my hobby horses: that since 1788 governments (and most people) think of Aborigines as some amorphous lump of 'others'. And so all administrations have failed because they haven't taken account of regional differences. Incidentally, this is one of the things which worries me about pan-Aboriginal movements in Australia at present. Of course one can't hold them back—that is the course of history—but when the Aboriginal Arts Board jets Aboriginal dancers from Arnhem Land and didjeridu players from somewhere else and they all appear on the stage in Melbourne I think you're getting not Aboriginal cultures but a pastiche. Over the next ten or twenty years it does worry me that everybody will tend to do the same thing. I've heard an Aboriginal leader, for example, open a conference by saying "My brother will now play our national instrument", and he blows the didjeridu. The didjeridu was probably blown or listened to by five or ten thousand Aborigines before Europeans came, but now it's *the* national thing.

So one of the ideas behind this book was to show that Aboriginal Australia was made up by many people and that, for example, Aboriginal society in Victoria differed very much from Aboriginal society around Alice Springs. Another theme that we wanted to emphasise is what archaeologists are calling an intensification in economic terms. Recent studies provide much more detailed and reasonable insight into Aboriginal society than all the generalisations about them being nomads and never staying in the one place twice and so on. Certainly one of the important messages of this book is just how much the Aborigines knew about their environment and how much they controlled it. Another theme is a fairly controversial section where Peter White and I estimate that in 1788 perhaps there were 750,000 Aborigines here or perhaps more, rather than the conventional 300,000.

ATTWOOD: What are some of the implications of your new findings for the study of the history of Aboriginal-European contact?

MULVANEY: They reflect some of the tragedies of that contact. So many of the conditions could have been alleviated had the early settlers not come here with all kinds of preconceptions brought from Europe—philosophical ones, but also assumptions that they were entering virgin territory and so forth. If only they had understood the Aboriginal land tenure system, its seasonality and the intensity with which it depended upon particular food and water resources. Perhaps it wouldn't have made any difference, because of course

the settlers had guns and they wanted the land. Yet, I like to believe it would, because when one reads a lot of the historical sources there were far more people of goodwill in Australia than most historians of Aboriginal society allow. A great many of them were very worried but they didn't know what to do. I like to believe that if people in 1788 had been equipped with the knowledge which we provide in the book, it might have assisted a great deal. But, on the other hand, I'm afraid that the history of colonisation right around the world is that the powerful ones, the armed ones, take over land. It is, of course, an open question whether it would have been worse had other nations arrived in Australia; a theoretical question but one which must be faced. Although Aborigines might consider, quite rightly, that our treatment has been bad, one wonders what French treatment would have been if France had been the occupying power.

ATTWOOD: You've worked in this field for something like thirty years. What's your opinion of some of the recent writing?

MULVANEY: When I started work in Melbourne in the mid-fifties I had never met an Aboriginal person. I mean they just didn't 'exist', just as in Tasmania until recently they denied there were any Aborigines. That's how one was brought up. In one sense it was good—one wasn't so racially conscious. But of course that was all wrong and I've become well aware of it. What historians like Henry Reynolds have to say is very important, even though a lot of what he said in his first two books<sup>4</sup> prehistorians had been saying for quite a long time and some has been published.

Reynold's recent book, however, raises entirely new questions.<sup>5</sup> He makes the point that in the 1820s-40s the British Colonial Office was well aware that the Aboriginal land tenure system had to be taken seriously. It could not just be ignored. That's very important. My own worry at the moment (and this

may not be a popular view) is that I'm not at all convinced that what he is saying is true; for example he quotes a number of sources from the eighteenth century which support his line, but he doesn't examine—and this would be a major thing—how many people were saying other things, and how influential each camp was. And the fact remains that the same Colonial Office disowned John Batman's so-called treaty on the very grounds of sheer expediency—in other words when the practical crunch came they wouldn't allow the things which, in theory, they said existed. On the dust jacket of Henry Reynolds' book there is a painting of Batman signing the treaty—presumably his publishers chose it—but as far as I can see there is no discussion of that treaty in the book. I know you can say it's bogus, that Batman was trumping it all up, but it is the only instance in Australian history where there was some kind of specious attempt to negotiate a treaty and it comes bang in the middle of the period when Reynolds says the Colonial Office was aware that Aboriginal land tenure needed to be recognised. To be fair, though, it does seem to me that Reynolds is raising enough material in his books for several Ph.Ds. and I think they need to be done before conclusions are made.

*John Mulvaney is Emeritus Professor of Prehistory, Australian National University; his most recent book is Encounters in Place: Outsiders and Aboriginal Australians 1606-1985 (University of Queensland Press, \$44.95).*

*Bain Attwood teaches history at Monash University; his The Making of the Aborigines will be published in the middle of this year.*

1. This is an edited transcript of an interview recorded at Melbourne University, 29 April 1988.
2. John Mulvaney and J. Peter White (eds), *Australians to 1788* (Sydney, 1987).
3. *The Prehistory of Australia* (London, 1969, Ringwood, 1975).
4. *The Other Side of the Frontier* (Ringwood, 1982), *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land* (Sydney, 1987).
5. *The Law of the Land* (Ringwood, 1987).

Here is another first-rate Australian biography.

All lives have much of mystery for us, even those lives within our own family. Martin Boyd's life had rather more mystery than usual. Few novelists are men of simple essence. Martin Boyd's life, inner and outer, was complex even for a novelist, the professional in the tangles of living. Brenda Niall has gone as far in penetrating the mystery or sorting out the complexity as a biographer is likely to reach. She has spent years in running down the facts, in Britain and Italy as well as in Australia, and she has brought to the pursuit, and to the interpretation of the facts, sensibility, intuition and maturity of judgement and taste.

The book runs to 268 pages and is divided into twelve chapters. They cover Boyd's family and origins; his birth in Switzerland in 1893, and why there; the family's life in Melbourne before the First World War—that chapter is rightly entitled "Arcadia"—the War itself and the part played in it by Martin and his two surviving brothers; his post-War return to Australia in 1919; his leaving Australia for England in the following year and his years there until the Second World War; his part and pacifism in that War; his return to Australia in 1948, after an absence of over a quarter of a century; his leaving Australia for good three years later, in 1951, and, disillusioned with post-War England, his moving to Italy in 1957. For the 15 years until his death, in 1972, Italy harboured a man who had become irrevocably homeless.

Of the 79 years of this Australian author's life only 27 were spent in Australia; of his adult life, say from his 21st year, only six years. These few years were enough, however, to put an ineradicable Australian stamp on his writing. The phenomenon recalls the case of Kipling. Born in India but leaving it in infancy Kipling returned to that country at the age of 17. He left it for good at 24, seven years later. The force and the persistence with which Kipling's writing recreated India is common knowledge.

Brenda Niall's achievement is to re-create Martin Boyd for us. Her formal qualifications for the task

are notable. Lecturing in the English Department at Monash University in Australia and in American literature, she became known to a wide audience for her book on Ethel Turner and Mary Grant Bruce in 1979 and her book on Australian fiction for children in 1984. Already too, in 1977, she published the scholarly *Martin Boyd in Australian Bibliographies*.

In this book there is no parading of the meticulous scholarship behind it, and there is no academic heaviness in the style. The text is buttressed with 26 pages of Notes, 2½ pages of listed interviews and a Select Bibliography of 8½ pages. There are 33 lots of manuscript sources and there is also a genealogical table of the Boyd and à Beckett branches, much needed because the families tended to be fertile and names like Arthur and Merric repeat themselves confusingly. An opulence of illustrations unusual these days increases the liveliness of the lively text. The index is helpful.

Future researchers are not likely to add to or subtract anything of substance from Brenda Niall's facts. Facts are sacred in a biography. She has heeded this commandment to the full. But she excels too in getting behind the facts, not only of Martin but also of his colourful father and mother and siblings. It is doubtful if any family in Australia has thrown up such a harvest of genius, and in such variety, male or female—painters, potters, architects, writers, religious devotees, heroic fighters for public causes, gifted with physical distinction and beauty as well as with mind and spirit, indifferent to the low sights and trifling orthodoxies of the tyrannical majority, often with the impress of a commanding authority. This book throughout has a ring of veracity and authenticity; and a ring too of the good breeding and other civilized values to which Martin Boyd himself attached so much importance. She has never shunned the truth, for instance what might be the truth about an alleged convict forebear or what was his own nature or whether he was or was not a homosexual. The pursuit of truth causes no faltering in her delicacy. Nor is there a tittle of meanness or triviality. Humour when appropriate is not missing but the tone of the book

tends to be grave; a tone in my opinion right for Martin Boyd.

She examines his writings sympathetically but also critically. His output was not exiguous. There were poems (early), three pieces of autobiography, in the last year of his life an essay booklet on modern youth, and in between the juvenilia and the final essay there were six early novels published under a pseudonym, and, from 1934, fifteen novels published under his own name. There were also five short stories.

In addition he wrote articles on a variety of subjects, being from time to time much exercised over public issues, such as pacifism, cultural decline, faults of politicians, ecumenism and the failures of the capitalist system. She lists 17 between 1915 and 1976, including "E. Phillips Fox", "Prayer Book Revision", "Early Australian Humour", "Vers Libre and Free Love", "Domestic Architecture in Australia", and "Why I am an Expatriate".



Martin Boyd in 1928

I have little competence for discussing Martin Boyd's work, but now that such high competence is available in Brenda Niall's biography perhaps my impressions of him as a human being might have a little interest—a footnote, so to speak, to her biography. During the last five or six years of his life I happened to be in close touch with him.

Until then I had read none of his novels; the little I knew of him and his work was at second hand. In the flesh he turned out to have manners, deportment and a sinewy erect figure which were engaging. He also held strong views which often coincided with my

own. A friendship soon developed and was cemented by our prejudices some of which, out of loyalty to the Government I was serving, I could not express in public or indeed to anyone other than a very few reliable intimates. We both had heretical views on Churchill, on the war raging in Vietnam, on the recognition of Communist China, on the profession of politics, on social climbers and on Pope John XXIII and ecumenism. We had our differences too, enough to add spice to our interchanges. I liked some of his literary views but thought he sometimes went too far, for instance in writing off T. S. Eliot's poetry as "a hoax" (his own words).

Mr Whitlam, Leader of the Opposition at the time, when in Rome together with his wife wanted to meet Martin Boyd. What the renowned politician thought of the meeting I don't know. As for what Boyd thought of it, he left me in no doubt. He wrote Mrs Whitlam off as "a juvenile delinquent". The Whitlams must have got on to the permissive society, or the Catholic Church, or Australia's connection with Britain or pop music or such like topics. The meeting a little earlier with Sir Paul Hasluck possibly sharpened Boyd's disapproval because by contrast Sir Paul's feeling for Europe and European civilization gave him much pleasure.

During the late 1960's I was struck with, and puzzled by, Boyd's penury. He was living in a small rented flat out at Ostia, above a barber's shop if my memory is not at fault. He did all the cooking, washing and other household work himself. The heating in particular was inadequate, the more so because he occupied the flat only during the 'off' or winter season, cold months at Ostia. He then moved up to Rome and so moved into the disagreeably hot summer months there, housed in pokey quarters without air conditioning or a fan. His Italian neighbours, like Italians in general, were a friendly unxenophobic people, liked him and, though they allowed their children to beg sweets from him, were kind to him. They too were puzzled how a *vero signore* (real gentleman) could be living as he did. Later when I came to look into some of his accounts I saw that there was no doubt about the penury, though it was not clear how a successful novelist could have got into this plight. Mismanagement seemed likely enough. But publishers, and at least one literary agent, seemed to have meted out shabby treatment, not to use a harsher term, to him. I discovered later that he had not given me all the facts, but the total facts were harsh enough.

I was struck with his loneliness as well as his indigence. His contacts with Italians, a warm people difficult to dislike, were sharply, cruelly, limited by the fact that though then living in Italy for a dozen years he hardly knew the language. He read a little in the press but knew too little for the Italian classics or for a normal conversation. His linguistic

performance was not as dismal as that of Max Beerbohm, who after living 20 years or so on the Ligurian coast had not learnt Italian, but it was dismal enough. It cut him off from Italian life and made him an isolated foreigner. He once confessed to me that he had gone for days without talking to anyone, a sad deprivation to a man who hated solitude. Brenda Niall has a quotation from his diary to the effect that in a stretch of 55 days in Rome he had spent 36 days without talk with anyone.

As for non-Italians, in effect speakers of English, he got company mainly from a small group, mainly British but occasionally augmented by Americans and by Australian visitors (not always to his taste), in Babbington's Tea Room at the bottom of the Spanish Steps or at an unattractive tea room attached to the church of S. Silvestro. He had also been made welcome at the house of Marie, the Duchess of Caracci, and her Sicilian husband and at the palazzo of the mother of the Duchess, the wealthy convert Lady Effie Millington-Drake. This daughter of a self-made business magnate ennobled held a salon every Tuesday. There Martin Boyd could always count on elegance, interesting talk and something to eat; and as Lady Effie cultivated the Roman curia assiduously, giving generously to Church funds, he could count on a Cardinal occasionally and several Monsignors frequently. He liked ecclesiastical company, not excluding that of the Scottish Presbyterian Minister accredited to Rome since the time of Pope John XXIII. But though he did not have to whistle for this dinner he had to pay a price. Marie, for instance, was a drug addict, a woman of brilliant endowment—she was fluent in four languages, widely read and widely travelled, and with a special knowledge of India—she was also unpredictable and her life had too much of tragic waste. Not being a convert, perhaps not a believer at all, she could be awkward company when she took to criticizing the Church in her mother's presence. Lady Effie, kind and bountiful as well as with her feet on the ground as regards worldly concerns, lived mainly for her church, or her vision of it, always ready to do battle for it, not least against Boyd's advocacy of ecumenism and the values of Pope John XXIII. And she lived with a husband, Millington-Drake, a former British diplomat, his one ambassadorial post being the minor one of Uruguay. He had education, benignity too, but, alas, he was a bore; not one of your ordinary headache-producing bores, but a towering, flaming master bore. In the British service he had acquired, not affectionately, the nick-name "Bluffington-Duck"; to familiars in the know the nickname carried undertones of alarm and despondency. His speciality at Rome was to spout poetry at any vulnerable gathering available, in a stagey voice and with gesticulations. Lady Effie's salons always risked one of these outbursts, when time no longer counted, the tea got cold, the sandwiches

left uneaten, the servants becoming rebellious. On one occasion when Lady Effie happened to be in Poland—she had adopted Poland—Bluffington-Duck went on for so long that the servants cleared away the tea things and Boyd had to return to Ostia with a full resentful mind and an empty stomach. Nor did he enjoy Bluffington-Duck's oft-told tales of his diplomatic years, though merciful in comparison with the poetry recitations.

In the years I knew him at Rome, probably the most burdensome years of his long life, at the Embassy or the places I took him to he seemed cheerful and was often humorous. In any case his code would have debarred him from showing in public any feelings of depression. Yet he rarely showed wit or *espieglerie*, qualities associated with him in his youth and middle age. I had heard complaints about his moodiness and quick temper, even about the unlovely qualities of touchiness, but I saw nothing of them except occasional quick flashes of temper. Commonly he had a smile on his face, a characteristic in fact often going with quick temper. What was undeniable was, for all his outspokenness, the quality of reticence and the related quality of reserve; both qualities, like good manners, make the commerce of life so much easier. It was evident that though he was not averse to gossip, his gossip was only occasional and was never malicious or derogatory: it came from his interest in the human predicament, not in slander.

Though attracted to company and to elegance since his early forties, when he took to writing seriously, he would, I felt, have agreed with Ruskin's advice to a young artist regarding 'society': know how to behave in it and then keep away from it.

I was struck with the fact that he spoke little if at all about his friends in England. One of several revelations in Brenda Niall's biography was his habit of 'compartmentalizing' his friends. Thus I had no idea of his long friendship with Gordon Waterfield (a biographer well known in his day). As it happened, Waterfield and I had been in the British Army together. We shared a tent at the Commando Training Centre in Scotland in 1940. Again, while he knew of my interest in music he never said a word about John Alldis, already famous for his choir. Brenda Niall reveals that when living at Cambridge during World War Two he used to hear Alldis, a boy chorister in King's College Chapel, befriended him and the friendship endured for years. Nor did he say a word about Faussett the English *litterateur* who helped him considerably over the years.

Until I read Brenda Niall's book, I had no idea of his quasi-adoption of the Italian boy Luciano Trombini. I am pretty certain that people with whom he was closely associated in Rome, such as Lady Effie or her daughter Marie, had no idea of it either.

The Trombini story began soon after his move to Italy in 1957. The son of an uneducated shoemaker,

Luciano was a 16-year-old schoolboy. According to Brenda Niall he soon became "the centre of Boyd's life", and remained "the main preoccupation of his first five years in Rome." She quotes letters, Boyd's beginning "My dearest Luciano", Trombini's ending "I am your son." Elsewhere Boyd wrote of the relationship as "the truest friendship of my life." His will, later cancelled, made Luciano his heir. He took over the expenses of the boy's education. The denouement brought no comfort to Boyd. The boy showed little gratitude, became off-hand and self-absorbed, and visited, or remembered, Boyd "at ever widening intervals." In 1964, seven years after their first meeting, he married. Neither his character nor his career developed the way Boyd had been counting on.

This affair raises the question of homosexuality. Marie di Carcaci once expressed her opinion to me that Boyd was born with homosexual tendencies but probably abstained from homosexual practices. He did have some traits often going with homosexuality, but for my part I am as certain as one can be in these things that he went in for no homosexual practices. His fastidiousness and code of honour would have precluded them. So too would the inhibitions imposed upon him by his sincerely held religion, they in turn being reinforced by memories of his remarkable, and remarkably beautiful, mother.

Whatever impulses he might have, or not have, had towards homosexuality he was not without an interest in the opposite sex. There was a belief, which Brenda Niall repeats, that in his younger days he wanted to marry his cousin Nancy Weigall. There were rumours too, for whatever they might be worth, that he had a mistress relationship for several years in the 1930's. My own impression was that he had the normal male interest in women providing they combined brains with a degree of elegance, but that after his forties he had a horror of the sexual tie. How far he carried this is suggested by his relations with Ursula Somervell. Having known for some years this Quaker heiress, who had brains and culture as well as wealth, he suddenly thought she was weaving wiles to snare him sexually and took fright and panicked. His behaviour in this affair seems to have been not without irrationality at the least.

His loneliness, which would have predisposed him to friendship of the protective kind with boys like John Alldis or Trombini, also led him to want feminine company. The company had to be on his terms, a main item in them being that he drop the company whenever he felt like it and that the women always kept a distance from him. Brenda Niall writes with penetration and convincing instances on this mixture of his thirsting for company and his desire for being alone. He dropped people ruthlessly, even brutally, as soon as he wanted to be alone. He also dropped houses, flats, places, with a brusque alacrity. Did any

author not actually absconding from creditors change abode as much as he? His restlessness had something of the abnormal about it, and it grew with the years. Even in the last twenty months of his life he was talking of moving from Rome—to England, to Australia.

If one may risk quickly skating over a mine field, my impression was that he had some elements in his make-up more commonly found in women than in men. Jung's ideas of the *anima* are relevant here. For instance he was strong in intuition but far from strong in logical reasoning. His mind tended to the pictorial, and subjectivity played a bigger part than objectivity in his judgements on certain public issues or personalities such as King Edward VIII, Baldwin, Montgomery. Some of his views, such as on economics, were astonishingly naïf. Astonishing too was his ignorance of how the whole system of government works, or his tendency at times to damn science. Strong as his family feeling was, subjectivity misled him about some of its members. Did he fully appreciate Arthur Boyd's generosity which was more than financial or Robin Boyd's thinking which he tended to dismiss as faulted by 'puritanism'? As Barrett Reid and others have pointed out, the thinking, even the writing, of the two men had much in common.

Was the illogical element in him exemplified in his belief in astrology? Divining my distaste for astrology he did not pursue the subject with me. (Another case of his 'compartmentalizing'?) He professed to be sure that Satan existed, that there were demons, and that the battle between God and the forces of Satan was still raging. For Boyd, God was a real presence in the world; as real for him as it had been for his fundamentalist mother.

His formal education had been defective by modern standards. He had had a good secondary education but little tertiary. His classes in architecture had, like his later classes in theology, been elementary as well as brief. His knowledge of history was spotty in the extreme, shallow and over-populated with stereotypes. His strongly pejorative use of the word 'puritanism' was illustrative.

But of course he had what is more important than formal education—a fact overlooked in an age of the neo-literates and the proliferating diploma: he had culture. He had culture, and he had it abundantly—a compound of reading, art, tradition and *milieu*. Brenda Niall recalls his shyness of, and suspiciousness about, literary people. The *Eng Lit*, especially the Leavis, approach was anathema to him. At Rome I once arranged a luncheon at the Embassy for two very different men of letters, Morris West and Mario Praz. I invited Boyd together with some other men of the pen. He sat silent throughout the meal. Though the two men had much in common in their theology he was wary of Morris West, who as always was friendly, exuberant and interesting, even when he

flaunted a touch of Irish blarney. After this encounter I found it tactful not to invite them together again, nor indeed any other literary figure, not even the charming erudite Mario Praz.

What were the real reasons for his being an expatriate? This is a big question and space is available only for touching on it. In the last two or three decades of his life he had something like a love-hate attitude to England. This also seemed to be his attitude to Australia. His attitude in both cases cannot be understood without an understanding of what England, and also what Australia, were like in his first 40 or 50 years, above all in the formative years of his childhood and youth. Both countries were then very different from what they are today; their position in the world, and that world itself, were also very different from what they are today. In the last two or three decades of his life, when the British class system had largely crumbled away, he came to loathe its relics. But he loathed too the Welfare State and the egalitarianism and the anti-élitism which were taking its place. Nor had he always disliked the English class system. Very far from it. He went to England, stayed there for over twenty years, and returned to it after a final trial of living in classless Australia, largely because of that class system and the culture and the complex social standards going with it. From youth onwards, correctly too, he saw himself as belonging to it. His descent was predominantly from the British upper classes, from the officer segment class too—Boyd's, à Becketts, Weigalls, were all county families—he was born into a family which was rich with the Melbourne Brewery wealth inherited by his mother, he grew up expecting never to have to earn his living and so he declined, as did his brothers decline, to learn one of the professions. More than once he declared his full allegiance to aristocratic values. And he looked the part throughout his life, unconsciously and effortlessly English upper class.

Moreover, from his twenties he felt he belonged to European civilization and above all to the branch of it represented by British culture. Right to the end he attached enormous importance to British culture, including its social and class structures. His disgust with the Britain of the 1960's rose from his sense that Harold Wilson and colleagues, Harold Macmillan and colleagues, the new money men, the emancipated playwrights, novelists and the rest, were betraying something precious.

Why did he who wrote nearly a score of novels largely based on members present and past of the Boyd-à Beckett-Weigall-Mills families, his families, write so little—some would say nothing—based on the Mills great-grandfather who had been a convict and, on emancipation, had built up the wealth which gave Martin Boyd's and the related families their economic independence? That would have been a fascinating theme for any novelist: why did he not

pursue it? I can't answer the question. I can only say that I believe that Martin Boyd had, like Lord Casey, another descendant of a convict, enough of the aristocrat in him as well as enough understanding of life, not to be disturbed by a convict connection. He was always above being a snob. Possibly he had inhibitions out of considerations for another member of the family. Geoffrey Dutton went to Rome in 1971 to talk to Martin Boyd about a book he wished to write on the family. Not long after he gave up the project. He told me he gave it up because of a member of the family objecting to publicizing the convict connection.

Whatever the truth, Boyd's basic under-pinning became increasingly the Christian values. More and more he was aware of the transitoriness of life, of the hollowness of worldly success, of Christ's saying about the rich man and the eye of a needle; his thinking got him nearer and nearer to the Elizabethan poet on

The glories of our blood and state  
Are shadows not substantial things . . .

Like any other writer Martin Boyd had two *personae*—that of the artist and that of the human being.

As an artist, he achieved success by his forties together with the sense of fulfilment which creativity confers on the artist. As a human being, his life knew alternating stretches of happiness but as the years went by the stretches of unhappiness grew—recognition was fading, tensions inside himself were unresolved, the values which formed him were becoming alien to the new civilization taking shape, and a particular anguish was that Britain, once with so much of the *grande dame*, was becoming slattern, outwardly and inwardly. His loneliness deepened, at times unbearably.

Brenda Niall's early chapters evoking the arcadian life of a family independent of the need to earn a living, serenely confident in a secure upper class in a secure world dominated by Britain, a family too, blessed with an environment of body, mind, aesthetic creativity and spiritual balance which made it the highly remarkable family it was, make delightful reading. A happy story if ever there was one.

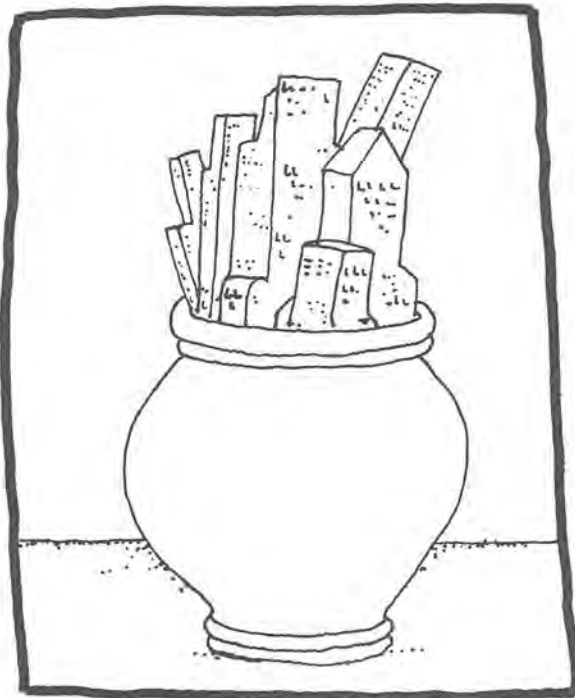
In real life happy beginnings, alas, may have less than happy endings. Martin Boyd was a good man as well as a gifted writer. His writing brought, as he intended, refreshment and it illuminated the great permanent values. Troubles did heap up towards the end. Yet they were mainly troubles of change and of the disappointments common to human life and usually resulting from our own mistakes. There was no catastrophe. Gloom towards the end of life is normal. Let us leave the last words to the person who knows most about Martin Boyd, Brenda Niall. After describing his reception into the Catholic faith, his

death soon after, and his funeral, she ends a fine book, so accurate and so sensitive, with words that come like a burst from Verdi's Requiem:

Boyd is buried in one of the most beautiful places in Rome, where Shelley has his memorial and violets grow on Keats's grave. Having been an Australian among the English, and an Englishman in Australia, he made his final

choice of resting place as a Catholic among Protestants in Catholic Italy. An inconsistent ending which was consistent with Boyd's whole life. It was a triumphant way of asserting his right not to be classified: to be a stranger and yet to be at home.

*Sir Walter Crocker became a friend of Martin Boyd during his years in Rome as Australian Ambassador. He revisited Rome to spend time with him a few months before Boyd's death.*



*David Greenfield*

NONIE LONG

## John Mills, Emma and the à Becketts

Martin à Beckett Boyd, the novelist, whose fascination with his family history permeates most of his mature work, seems to have displayed an unusual lack of curiosity about one of its most colourful characters. John Mills, his beloved à Beckett grandmother's convict father, whose brewing activities and land deals had provided most of the fortune upon which his family's favoured social position was based, is barely hinted at in Boyd's work. Even in his two autobiographies not a mention is made of the Mills' story.

Yet Martin had briefly used the Mills' name as a pseudonym for his first three novels. Perhaps he was ignorant at the time of the name's associations, but later made discoveries about his great-grandfather Mills which had been discreetly kept from the family, and would certainly have affronted the social class to which he belonged. The harsh winter of John's reality could not be permitted to chill the golden summer of that fragile Edwardian enclave, where as Manning Clark wrote, all "must observe the rules of the bourgeois game, or be reduced to wrecks". Martin chose to play the game to the end.

Melbourne, 17th September 1855. A fine but hazy spring day, slightly overcast. In the cathedral church of St Peter's on the Eastern Hill a marriage was taking place. The bride was Emma Mills, the only child and heiress of John Mills, one of the first brewers and publicans of Melbourne, and the groom was the eldest son and associate of Sir William à Beckett, the first Chief Justice of the young colony.

Emma was one of the first white children born in the raw young settlement at Port Phillip, while William had been born in London. His father, the elder William, by breeding and calling a member of the upper classes, had emigrated to Sydney in 1837, and moved to Melbourne in 1845 as Resident Judge, later rising to the position of Chief Justice and the honour of a knighthood. Sir William had persuaded a brother, Thomas Turner, a solicitor, to join him in Melbourne, hence the à Beckett families were well established in a town which had rocketed to world fame with the discovery of gold in 1851. Not that Sir William appreciated the effect of gold on the area under his jurisdiction.

He said many harsh things concerning the manners, morals and makeup of the goldfields population. This then was the groom's father. What of the bride's?

The bride's father belonged to just those lower classes about whom the Chief Justice had unburdened himself. John Mills had come from Gloucestershire, but the initiative had not been his own. As a sixteen year old labourer he had pleaded guilty to stealing "four geese and other poultry", not his only offence, and had been sentenced to seven year's transportation, arriving in Hobart Town on the *Andromeda* in 1827. He was free from servitude in August 1834, and had learned brewing from Mr Stallard to whom he had been assigned.

He became a publican in Hobart and later moved to Launceston where he married young Hannah Hale in December 1836. Launceston in 1836 was in bad economic shape, and like many of his peers, John looked to the new settlement at Port Phillip, where he managed to arrive just in time for the first land sales in June 1837, and to bid successfully for land in Flinders Street. At the second land sales he acquired the block on the N.W. corner of Elizabeth and Bourke Streets, opposite the block reserved for the G.P.O.

On the Flinders Street land he built the Melbourne Brewery, and flanked this later with two public houses, the 'Dundee Arms' and the 'Adelphi'. He also added the 'Crown Inn' in Lonsdale Street. These prospered, so that when he died his only child, Emma, born in 1838, was left heiress to a substantial fortune.

By disappearing so early from his daughter's life, yet leaving her his fortune, John made Emma's transition from convict's daughter to a young lady of property much easier. But how she came to meet young William à Beckett is not clear. Legend has it that they met at her 'coming out', that William fell in love at first sight, and they rode off one day and were married with only the groom's brother and cousin as witnesses. In other words, they eloped.

A runaway match it probably was, but not in the usual sense, for the bride was a Ward of the Court. This is how it happened. Soon after her father's death, Emma's mother remarried. Her new husband was

Thomas George Washington Johnston Robinson, a goodlooking Irish gentleman, probably a remittance man. Almost certainly a rogue, he immediately laid hold of John's estate, and set about the wheeling and dealing which was about to come to an abrupt end with his step-daughter's marriage.

When she was only fifteen years old somebody had taken Robinson to court on Emma's behalf, presumably over Robinson's handling of her estate, with the result that Emma was made a Ward of the Court. Documents show that she was "married with the consent of Frederick Wilkinson, Guardian of Minors", and go on to affirm 'articles of agreement' signed by both parties. The elopement might have been a convenient ploy winked at by the families to avoid the difficulties arising from social disparity.

Eliza Chomley, a daughter of Thomas Turner à Beckett, has left a delightful description of the young couple's first post-marriage encounter with the formidable à Beckett entourage. "I can see her now coming up the room on her husband's arm, a slight little figure in a dark silk dress, a charming girlish face, beautiful big dark eyes, masses of dark hair simply done, and with so frank a smile as she held out her little hand to my Uncle, that then and there I believe he adopted her as a daughter, and gave her a place in his heart that she always retained."

So Sir William, that "fanatical temperance man" to quote Manning Clark, accepted this convict brewer's daughter with a fortitude born of her fortune and sweetened by her charm. It has never been questioned that William married Emma for her money. But might it not be that Emma, with the lesson of her mother's second marriage before her, looked about for a partner whose family professionally were powerful enough to protect her estate, and socially prominent enough to negate her origins? And found William. The union of new money with established social position is time-honoured, but Emma was no victim. Her marriage settlement shows that she received two-thirds of the income from her estate, while William received only one-third.

And just how had John Mills made so much money in such a short time? When John appeared before the Gloucester Assizes it was not as the result of one isolated youthful lapse. He was one of the six sons and six daughters of Job and Unity Mills, feltmakers and hatters of Yate. At the committal hearing in the town of Wickwar thirty other people appeared with him. They included his parents, two sisters and three brothers. This group of alienated and impoverished cottagers was one of several gangs which had been operating in the southern part of the county, stealing from farmers growing prosperous under the enclosure system, and generally terrorising the neighbourhood.

Someone informed, and Thomas Mills, the eldest surviving brother and a leader of the gang, turned King's evidence. As a result all the family were

acquitted save John and an older brother, William, who had so many charges against him that he was hanged with another gang member at Gloucester Goal. John, by pleading guilty to the lesser charge of larceny, rather than the capital offence of burglary, escaped a similar fate.

So John Mills arrived in Hobart. He was alive, and this was a second chance. He did not waste it. He learned the brewing trade and like most Melbournians of means he dealt in land. But something went wrong, and in July 1841 he drew up his will. Probably he was aware of approaching death, for his will was written only five weeks before he died on the 25th August 1841. He was buried in the Wesleyan section of the Old Melbourne Cemetery. His burial certificate gives his age as forty-two, but if the Gloucestershire Gaol records are correct he was closer to thirty-two.

John's will is the lynchpin of the Mills/à Beckett saga. Briefly, John left his wife Hannah a life interest in all of his Flinders Street land. After her death this was to be shared equally between Emma and John's siblings or their heirs. The rents from part of the brewery and the Elizabeth Street/Bourke Street corner block were to go to Hannah for Emma's care and education. Surplus money was to be reinvested in real estate.

John's youngest brother George was to receive a Lonsdale Street property, the site of the 'Crown Inn'. His other brothers, Thomas and Job, were to receive jointly the residue and remainder of the real estate, which was unspecified, an omission which was to cause recurring problems and litigation.

The original trustees were Hannah Mills and two wellknown Wesleyans, John Jones Peers and William Witton. But within a very short time there was only one trustee, Hannah's second husband Thomas Robinson. It seems that Peers and Witton fell for the Robinson guile, and not only appointed him sole trustee, but also conveyed part of the important Elizabeth Street/Bourke Street corner to him, a suspect deal which was not clarified until Emma brought the à Beckett legal might to bear.

In the meantime the Mills' brothers arrived in Melbourne in high hopes of substantial legacies, and what did they find? George found that his Lonsdale Street land had been sold to cover a debt against the estate. Thomas and Job found that their residual real estate seemed to be non-existent, Robinson having laid claim to that. The brothers took court action, but the results were inconclusive. Leave to appeal was freely given, so that cases dragged on. But they persisted. George was the first to succeed, although it took him three attempts. The judge who handed down the welcome decision in 1850 was William à Beckett. His Honour was now aware of the Mills' estate and had encountered some members of the family.

Encouraged by George's success Thomas and Job made yet another attempt to gain their legacy. Again



*Emma à Beckett, c. 1860*

it was William à Beckett who presided over the case. This time His Honour ruled against them, and no appeal was granted, as it was held that the whole of the disputed block had been let at the time the will had been written, and therefore no residual land existed. Whatever the legal merits of the decision, this was the beginning of the Mills/à Beckett feud, and the Mills' belief that "we wuz robbed".

There is no record of any other residual land which might have gone to Thomas and Job without litigation. But they and many others were about to become embroiled in litigation not of their choosing when a scant three weeks after Emma's marriage Sir William issued writs to all beneficiaries of John's will to answer claims concerning the management of the estate over the fourteen years since John's death.

Emma's stepfather, Robinson, refused to answer the writ and was promptly gaoled for contempt of court. He seems to have been gaoled on several occasions during the course of the trial which dragged on for at least four years. Eventually, in September 1859, Robinson issued a sworn statement in which he claimed that the Mills' estate was in such bad shape when he married Hannah that Peers and Witton, the trustees, had considered sequestration. His, Robinson's, expenditure of some £14,000 alone had saved it. He also claimed to have spent £1,000 over and above the amount specified in the will on Emma's care and education. Far from owing her money, the reverse was true. But Hannah gave evidence that at the time of John's death there was £5,000 in bills of exchange in the Bank of Australasia, and a bond of £6,000 redeemable from the lessee of the brewery, more than

enough to have cleared any debts against the estate. The case dragged on until December 1860 when Robinson was finally discharged and vanished from the scene.

The result of this case brought no joy to Thomas and Job Mills. However, with Wickwar Gang resourcefulness, they sold their interest in the estate and managed to raise some £1,000, which enabled Job to return to England and bring out his family which had been languishing there as paupers for fourteen years. Emma too was tying up loose ends. Describing her paternal uncles as "elderly and indigent" she offered them annuities for life on condition that they made no further claims against John's estate. They accepted. The £500 per annum is quite clearly stated to have come from William's one-third share of her income. Emma by this time was twenty-two years old, her fortune was secured, her position as William's wife was enhanced by two of the six children she would bear him, her stepfather was vanquished, and she had broadened her horizons with travel overseas. With her turbulent uncles quietened, she was on her way to becoming the redoubtable matriarch of later years.

The annuities had the desired effect of preventing further Mills' onslaughts while Thomas and Job lived. William and Emma got on with their lives, leaving the handling of the estate to the new trustees, Thomas Turner à Beckett and his son-in-law, Theyre Weigall. In 1886 William and Emma went to London, where William was admitted to the Inner Temple, and was successful in gaining permission to bear the à Beckett arms. Nor was that all. Through his exertions Emma was granted a personal coat of arms, bearing millrinds for the Mills' name and scallop shells as symbols of pilgrimage or distant journeys. This gift to his wife was a way of transcending her origins. On that imposing roll of parchment John Mills, labourer, Wickwar Gang member, convict, brewery and public house owner, is transmuted into John Mills, Esq., a suitably anonymous and sanitised sire for the wife of the Honourable William Arthur Callander à Beckett, J.P.

Back in Melbourne all was quiet on the Mills' front until the deaths of Thomas and Job ended the annuity amnesty, and the stage was set for the next generation to carry on the fight. A narrow right of way off Little Bourke Street, part of the contested Elizabeth/Bourke Street corner had been overlooked in the final transfer after the à Beckett v. Robinson case. The consent and signatures of all William's and Emma's children were needed before a new title could be issued, and it was undoubtedly due to Emma that this was done and finally the 'residual land' was sold, bringing Thomas's widow and Job's son almost £500 each, a godsend at that time of bank crashes and general economic disaster.

William died in 1901 and Emma in 1906. But

Hannah lived on. After Emma's death she was persuaded to allow John's estate to be finalised in return for one of those useful life annuities, but she died in 1911 before this was done. She had outlived John by seventy years, and had seen Melbourne grow from the tiny settlement of Victoria's early reign through the boom and the bust to the time of George V, leaving behind her eighty-one descendents.

There was great excitement at the news of her death, for the lady had taken an unconscionable time dying as far as the beneficiaries of the will were concerned. She had outlived all those of her generation with an interest in the estate, and many of the next generation were no longer young.

There was a partition suit, *Brett v. Mills*, before Mr Justice à Beckett, which established the legality of selling the legacy, the Flinders Street property, as a whole, and dividing the proceeds. Constance Brett was one of Emma's daughters, and she was represented by her brother, William Gilbert à Beckett. The à Becketts were out in force. When the land was sold the six branches of the family which had been traced, including the à Beckett branch, each received with interest, more than £6,000. This long-awaited legacy, a substantial sum in those days, did not entirely appease the Mills' clan. They still felt they had been cheated.

The problem concerned the exact location of the 'Dundee Arms' public house which John had bequeathed to Hannah for life. After her death it was to be divided between Emma, and John's siblings or their heirs. But in 1889, at a time when William and Emma were overseas, Malwyn à Beckett and Robert Ker, who were the current trustees, were issued with a title to the whole block, no doubt in Emma's name. They claimed to have found witnesses who swore that the Melbourne Brewery took up the whole of one block while the 'Dundee Arms' was on the adjoining block. It is to be hoped that Hannah was recompensed for the loss of her interest.

What rankled with the Mills' clan however was the fact that they had never been informed of the transfer, although they were potential beneficiaries. What made them even more suspicious was that their solicitors

in 1926 were not permitted to see the title which had been issued in 1889, though they were assured by the head of the Titles Office that there was nothing in it to help their case. Considering that in 1889 Malwyn à Beckett was not only a trustee for William and Emma, but also an Examiner of Titles and later became Acting Chief Examiner of Titles it is not surprising that suspicions were raised. An abortive attempt to mount a claim to the property petered out in 1927, almost eighty-six years after John's death. The legend still remains that "we wuz robbed".

There is a literary connection to this saga. Emma and William's eldest daughter, Emma Minnie, married the artist Arthur Merric Boyd, and their sons were Merric, Penleigh and Martin. Martin adored his grandmother Emma as "the source from which all blessings flowed", but would his aristocratic aspirations have survived the shock of discovering the source behind the source—his greatgrandfather, John Mills, labourer and convict brewer? In Martin's world "it did not seem to me that it was admirable to work for one's living". None of his male relatives worked, for on the Boyd side too they had had the foresight to acquire an heiress. They could afford, as Paul de Serville has said, to stand aloof from the business of making money. Could the Montfort and Langton novels have been written without wilful ignorance of the sordid realities which supported this fragile society?

In middle life Emma began writing a diary. These volumes passed to her grandson, the late William A. K. à Beckett, who lent them to Martin as source material for his autobiographical *Day of My Delight*. They are now held by Mary Boyd, Lady Nolan, who is understood to be making them available to the National Library. It will be interesting to discover whether they throw further light on John Mills, Emma, and the à Becketts.

*Nonie Long, a Melbourne librarian, is married to a descendant of John Mills. Over a long period she has pursued research on the Mills family and its connections. Nonie and Harcourt Long's current research is acknowledged by Dr Brenda Niall, biographer of Martin Boyd.*

BILLY MARSHALL-STONEKING

## “Yab-Yum, By Gum”

from *Taking America Out of the Boy*

I didn't go back to the States expecting wide-open vistas, and for the most part I didn't find any. The megalopolis my high school teachers predicted had become a reality. The orchards, the vineyards and hop fields were gone, replaced by shopping centres, motels, movie theatres and restaurants. The familiar nooks and niches I remembered, most of these were filled up with tourists like Chris and me.

I wasn't surprised by the changes. It was more like meeting one of my old girlfriends and thinking she'd aged pretty much like I thought she would; and knowing, yeah, she probably thinks the same about me. I guess you could say America and I had reached some sort of understanding about each other. I wouldn't expect it to be beautiful, or humble, and it would treat me like a guest, an overseas visitor—an Australian, in fact—who could be excused for not possessing any allegiance to Dairy Queen.

Sacramento had changed too, strangled by cliché freeways and housing tracts. It was like Los Angeles had been fifteen years earlier.

I didn't feel like hanging around the place, and Chris didn't either, so when we got the chance to escape the smog and congestion of the valley and head up into the Sierra Nevada mountains for a week, I said: “Let's go!”

Song and Kolin Kowbell—Chris' hippie aunt and uncle—had a place up on the ridge overlooking the Yuba River, and they were ‘just itching’ to have us come up and stay awhile. “A good place to get your head back together,” Kolin assured me.

Now, the Yuba River has always been one of my favorite places, and if you're going to understand why, I better tell you something about it.

The Yuba flows down out of the high country north of Emigrant Gap, near where Lewis Keseberg made meals out of three or four of his travelling companions from the fated Donner party in the 1840s. It runs through some of the most wild, majestic country you've ever seen—around giant boulders and into large pools with sandy beaches; the water so crystal clear you can see fish swimming thirty feet below the surface. Then, rounding a bend, the river will suddenly dip,

turning to white water rapids and swirling whirlpools, fresher than a Coke commercial; and it'll go along like this for a few hundred metres, the smooth, rounded river rocks clicking against each other under the surface; then dumping itself over a small waterfall, spreading itself out again, running flat and swift until it deepens and slows once more with big granite slabs jutting up, huge grey chunks of mineral washed soft and comfortable by a hundred million years of rain and snow—so inviting, you climb from the water onto one of the rocks and stretch yourself out to bake lizard-like on stone. And the river continues like this, alternating between shallow and deep, fast and slow, all the way down to the Sacramento Valley, 40 or 50 miles away.

In the 60s we'd go up the Yuba following the old gold panners' trails, carting watermelons on our shoulders. Hiking two or three miles upstream or down, we'd spend the day naked, swimming and smoking dope, and spitting watermelon seeds at each other. You'd just let the pink juice drip all over you 'cos all you had to do was roll off a boulder into the river and you were instantly clean. It was ‘hippie heaven’—one of the few places in California where even I could get stoned and not think cops.

If you've never been to Song and Kolin's place before I'll tell you right now, you can't just drive there. Not easily, anyway. Even with a map you'll have problems. The shot is to drive to a crossroads about thirty miles out of Nevada City. The crossroads is called North San Juan, and there's this place there called “Mother Truckers”. It's a hippie general store selling everything from essential oils to beer. Hari Krishna or Hell's Angel, it doesn't matter—they have something for every taste. These days, if nothing else, hippies are damned good business people. Least they know what people want to buy.

And the folks there are, well, ‘just folks’ . . . and when they get to know you—which is almost immediately—they always call you by your first name.

“Hi, you must be Billy!” and “So you're Chris. Howya doin' Chris? Welcome to Mother Truckers, Chris!”

Jesus, after five minutes I was beginning to feel right at home. It was frightening.

Actually, when you get to Mother Truckers you've got three options. First option: turn around and get the hell out; or second: wait for whoever you're looking for to turn up, 'cos everybody in the area does at least once or twice during the day; or three: see if you can persuade one of Mother Truckers' staff, or any one of the locals who's come in to check the mail, to guide you to wherever you're going. Whatever you do don't let anyone draw you a map. I let them make me a map the first time, and ended up driving around in the woods for nearly an hour. The problem is, a trip is something you do on drugs—and a lot of the folks you bump into at Mothers are usually too stoned or spaced out to remember how many roads there are between you and your destination, so you turn left when you should've gone straight, and you go straight when you should've hung a right. Fortunately, one of the guys at the store had to see Kolin, so second time round he offered to come along and point out the way.

After the first 200 metres the sealed road ends and you travel along this dirt and gravel track. The country's beautiful, of course, but you don't see it 'cos the track's scarred with deep ruts and potholes big enough to have you for breakfast. So you take your time, and wind slowly through three or four miles of oak, pine and scrub until you come out into a clearing—a flat, tabletop plateau nestled on the side of a mountain—like Nirvana-on-Earth.

Song and Kolin's place sits in the middle of the clearing, shaded by a couple of old oak trees that look like they've been there since the gold rush . . . as does the house itself, which is a big, rambling miners' shack—a weatherboard affair with plenty of windows, a rusty iron roof, and no electricity. And because it's the end of the road, there's no traffic, no engine noise from passing cars, or trucks roaring by in the middle of the night—just the wind in the trees at 5,000 feet above sea level, and the sound of invisible insects buzzing in the poison sumac.

In the summer, Song spends a lot of her time outdoors, tending the animals (a couple of horses and a cow), or working in the garden. Almost all the food Song and Kolin eat comes from the garden. A huge garden with enough food to feed a couple of NFL football teams in search of samadhi in the high woods for a month or two. Corn, silverbeet, pumpkins, beans, cauliflower . . . and twenty or thirty different types of herbs. The herbs, naturally, are for medicinal purposes.

Next to the garden is a genuine, regulation-size teepee—Song's 'moon-hut' as she refers to it. A cone of canvas with a view of tansy and rosemary bushes.

Song emerged from the teepee trailing streams of incense and wrapping a sarong around her tiny body as we pulled up next to the gate.



"Howdy!" she said, flashing her big-as-all-outdoors grin at Chris and me. "Welcome to the farm!"

We went into the yard and Chris got a big hug; then she hugged me; and then the bloke from Mother Truckers; then this other guy I'd never seen before came out of the teepee carrying a halfa lid of grass, and she hugged him, and then we all went into the kitchen for cups of herbal tea.

Inside, it was Indian bedspread wall hangings; bundles of dried comfrey leaves strung on twine, drying in the bedroom; God's Eyes and carved wooden Buddhas; original psychedelic acrylics of American Indians, painted no doubt during journeys into or out of LSD land; and a couple of skulls from some large animals.

In one corner, there was a 'Randy' ventriloquist's dummy propped up with a Hopi Indian doll sitting on its knee. From the centre of the ceiling, a large mobile of eagle feathers covered with dust. It was the total look—a hippie shrine to the 60s, only it was Now.

But don't get me wrong. I'm not down on hippies. Hell, I'd been one. Somehow, all the paraphernalia made sense—that was the problem. Being at Song's place, everything seemed so familiar; it was like I'd been there my whole life.

"Bill's been living with the Aborigines in Australia," Song explained as she poured the tea.

"Far out!", the guy from the teepee said. "Do they have dope there? I mean, like the Indians?"

"Sure," I said, "Pitjuri."

"Picture-ree?"

"Sure," I said, "they chew it."

"All right! Righteous!"

I nearly choked on my chamomile tea. God, I'd nearly forgotten—the hippie rave, those words, those certain words—I thought they'd vanished years ago like the Tasmanian tiger or the dodo, but here they were.

Up on the ridge, it's difficult having a *real* conversation without chucking in a few of these words or phrases. People start to distrust you, even though you're Australian, or maybe *because* you're Australian. No, you gotta use the words. Like 'wow' . . . the garden's a big 'hassle', and the weather's been 'a real bummer' . . . I mean 'a real downer, man' . . . but growing your own creates 'good karma', and anyway—I mean 'really'—no-one who's 'into' cans 'digs' nature, right? And you talk like this for days, and you smoke dope and fuck when and if you can, and you visit friends who talk like this and have read all the same books you've read, and they visit you . . . and your 12 and 13-year-old kids hang around, totally bored, thinking "God, these guys are *so* straight."

We hadn't been there very long when Song said she had to go down the hill to take Kolin his lunch. Kolin was helping someone put a roof on a house. Song said we could stop off and see Helen on the

way. Helen is Song's big Earth Mother mentor who lives alone and raises horses. Song was sure she'd just love us to death. So we piled into Song's truck and drove to Helen's place.

Helen wasn't there when we arrived—she was feeding the horses—but a few shouts from Song brought her up the hill. Helen's about 45, and when she arrived was dressed only in shorts and hiking boots. She wasn't all that glad to see us either—I mean Chris and me. She quickly slipped into a shirt and shook hands, then suggested we go down to her 'moon-hut'.

Helen's moon-hut is about 200 metres down the hill from the main house. It's next to her genuine, regulation-size teepee. Same as Song's, only Helen uses her teepee as a sauna—'a medicine tent', she calls it.

"What's all this about moon-huts?", I asked on the way down. There'd never been anything like moon-huts up in these parts back in the days when I was a hippie. But Helen wasn't interested in talking to me about it. Instead, she flashed me a look that told me exactly how stupid I was.

"A moon-hut," Song explained, "is where a woman goes during that time of the month when she shouldn't be around men. It's an old Indian custom."

"Helen's moon-hut was made of bits of timber, carpet, corrugated iron and clear plastic sheeting. Inside, it was stocked with jars containing various substances; books (mainly mystical or feminist); and a few basic necessities like dishes, kitchen utensils and kerosene lanterns. It was very cosy, but moon-huts being what they are, I couldn't understand why I'd been allowed in.

I didn't have too long to worry about it though, because quick as it takes to say 'dandelion root', cups of herbal tea were being passed around. Chris and I blew on our tea, and took a few sips while Song and Helen caught up on the local gossip and discussed the latest herbal cures for herpes.

Song was learning all about herbal medicine from Helen. Helen, evidently, was a very good teacher.

"She's died twice and brought herself back to life both times," Song had explained on our way down to the moon-hut. In any case, you could tell this large woman from the woods—who looked at me like I was some reject ingredient from a homemade poultice—was a very powerful person.

Helen was instructing Song in the art of ecstatic living—which she claimed the Indians knew everything about thousands of years ago. But her basic philosophy of life sounded more like something that would've been printed in *The Oracle*—one of the popular hippie newspapers of the 1960s.

Her rave went something like this: "By transformationally returning to the love-play-work of advancing the Queendom of the Trees, like butterflies and birds that help the trees grow earth into Paradise, that's how the human spirit will reestablish

itself over the material greed of Men. Instead of having these rangers running around dressed as cops there will be people ecstatically dressed who take responsibility for Life . . . like the Indians did, creating myths that nurture instead of destroy . . .”

No-one was sure exactly what she meant, but we all agreed with her. To argue would have been to commit one of the most basic sins—the sin of “turning ecstasy into semantics”.

So, trying to keep my end of the conversation moving, I started to tell her about what I'd learned from living with the Australian Aborigines . . . but she wasn't at all keen to hear about how much they liked driving Land Cruisers, or about the 'jealous fights' I'd seen numerous times when two women would square off and take turns hitting each other over the head with a five-foot-long crowbar. With Helen, everything was either ecstasy, or it was shit. Land Cruisers were 'shit'; jealousy was 'shit', and I was shit for bringing them up. I thought about some of the old Aboriginal men I'd become friends with during my time in the Australian desert, and wondered how old Tutama or Nosepeg or Jimmy Tjungurrayi would look dressed in flowing robes and beads, and decided to shut up.

Part of the new mythology—which as far as I can remember is more of the old jargon—is the idea of complete orgasm. Or, as *The Oracle* once instructed us: “He who never experiences complete orgasm never experiences Nirvana; never knows religion, or the communion with the Universe.” Helen was very big on orgasms. Controlling orgasm, channeling orgasm, using orgasm, orgasm as a healing process. Her technique, called 'yab-yum', involved the male sitting in a lotus position with the female sitting in his lap, facing him, her legs wrapped around his trunk. And ideally, there is no movement—just quiet meditation and the feeling of one-ness. Yab-yum, by gum, that's the path to ecstasy!

Up in the woods, among the patchouli oil and hand-made ankhs, life really did seem simple again. It was like Ronald Reagan didn't exist anymore; or the bomb; or voting; or Libya; or 'the heartbreak of psoriasis' . . . There just wasn't any room for them—they'd confuse the vibe. Nope. There was no way they figured in the overall cosmic picture at all.

Walking back to Song's truck with us, Helen stopped and looked up at the sky, squinting at some object I couldn't see at first. Then she pointed it out to me—a tiny speck of silver moving south. “That's nuclear warfare,” she said, in the same way an ornithologist might identify a sparrow. But it was a B-52. They made regular flights over the mountains from two or three different bases, so regular you could keep time by them.

Down in Nevada City they referred to the people up there on the ridge as 'the lunatic fringe', and after a few hours with Helen and a couple of other locals

I could understand why. But then Americans, generally, have an appalling sense of humour. These hippies were living in a paradise, and they were living pretty well, without any need of electricity, TV or Bankcard. They were still on their own personal journey to the East, and the older ones, like Helen, had persevered with their dreams and ideals, and that aged naivety sat very lightly on their shoulders.

That night, back at Song and Kolin's place, we sat around with a few of the 'neighbours', and Kolin played guitar and sang protest songs—his own, original compositions—and Song made a big vegetarian stew just like her sister—my ex-wife—used to make on those wet, windy days in Cobden, Victoria, when the marriage was falling to bits. And we ate and talked, and then Kolin played some more, and Chris and the other kids who were there kept running in and out saying they'd seen a U.F.O.

Next morning, after breakfast, we trooped down to the Yuba River. About ten of us. And we walked back into what old Tutama would've referred to as 'ngurrara nyuntupa'—my 'traditional country', my own 'dreaming' place.

Kolin brought his guitar, and we took a couple of bags of oranges and apples and some cool drinks, and we spent the entire day in the water, feeling the current, flowing with it, jumping off boulders into crystal pools. For the first time, I was beginning to feel homesick. Not for Australia, but for America.

Some of the old spirits were coming back. Memories of summer days and old girlfriends, of drinking Red Ripple on a riverbank with Johnny Spivack, and another hot hot day of cavorting with waterfalls, running naked free—great efforts in the face of eternal hopefulness.

The place was filled with spirits, and for the moment it seemed as if I was the only one who had aged. Song, though she was now 27, still looked remarkably like the 13-year-old I remembered, sitting naked and suddenly shy a few feet away.

Then I found myself looking out for faces from the past—just behind that tree, or around that rock over there, beyond that turn in the trail—remembering them there. Like Jake—the boogie man—who'd sung and played harmonica in a blues band in Sacramento, and who I'd met by chance one summer on the river. He'd just appeared, like a leak in the scenery, and he'd entertained us all afternoon and half the night with boogie-woogie, stopping now and then to talk about it like it was the meaning of life.

And what about that hiker—the guy we'd seen one afternoon tramping along the other side of the river? He was walking upstream, wearing nothing but hiking boots, coming out of the wilderness, coming out of nowhere and disappearing into nowhere, like the archetypal inspiration for the eternal and most holy cross-country trekker.

Or the stoned, nameless hippie we'd met on the

trail down to our favorite swimming hole? He'd spent too much time lost in the sun, and was nearly black. "Man," he'd said, passing us, "I'm really toasted."

All of these were still here, the spirits of these, and it was like they'd stayed here waiting for my return, to verify them, to sanctify them, to use them in some way to get back to where I'd started from, to tell me where I had been. They were all here, not as atoms or molecules—as Ruykeyser once reminded me—but as stories.

But it was different, and the biggest difference was that this time I had come with a son, and he was learning about the river for himself, and hearing the stories I was telling him.

In Australia, Chris had never been able to swim, but now, in California, back in his old man's traditional country, and buoyed up by history and that silent flow

of energy through the father from the land, he had no trouble swimming. Just like that.

Maybe it's all hippie bullshit. In a world that counts its profits and losses in terms of a cumulative cynicism, maybe it's all crap. But maybe it's true. Maybe life could be a lot easier and a helluva a lot more satisfying than most of us would ever suspect. The son learns from the father, the father from the son . . . and not all the spirits are bad.

"Don't you worry," John Stokes told me, "the Sixties are coming back again. Yahoo!"

*Billy Marshall-Stoneking is a poet and scriptwriter. His most recent book was Lasseter, The Making of a Legend (Allen & Unwin) and most recent film Nosepeg's Movie (A.B.C. TV). Winner of the 1988 Bill Harney Poetry Prize his new book of poems Singing the Snake is to be published by Angus & Robertson.*

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1.

Often in the long dry season he had seen them, the high spiralling clouds to the south east. At night sometimes when there were those lying clouds that brought no rain it was like a separate sunset, so that if you stood on the headland and looked west you saw the layered clouds all streaked with red. And then to look southwards was just the same. There might have been two suns disappearing, one on either side of the sky.

The old men said it was not another island like Oraru, a full day's journey off and resting securely on the horizon to the east, the island to which he would be sailing tomorrow to arrange the trading. That smoke was from the whirlpool that went down to the Cloud Man. Every three years or so one young man or another would set his raft in the waves against all signs of the weather and be taken. They had no chance. But already while still a young man and only three years with a woman Joogoomoo had seen the fires on nearby islands, the fires like their own, cooking fires with the smoke at their lighting and climbing in the same directions. The fires to the south east were bigger, you could not see the fire beneath which made climbing clouds of smoke, but they were fires even so.

Tomorrow at sunset the old men would be waiting for his signal, a cloud from Oraru, to tell them all was clear for the half year trading. He would be speaking to those men over there in their own dialect and watching them put the green branches on the fire. His woman, and the young ones too, would be there also as a token of trust. The trade had always demanded this. The people of Oraru were invariably suspicious and it sometimes happened that their heads were filled with strange stories in which Joogoomoo's people were transformed into evil spirits. On these occasions the messenger would be driven back from the beach and no signal sent. Once, only three years ago, the messenger had not come back at all and there had been talk among the elders of retaliation but with the signal from the second messenger it became clear

that the first had been taken by the Cloud Man and not slain in the surf on his arrival.

For some weeks now Joogoomoo had not seen the fires' shadow on the clouds nor the smoke clouds themselves but he knew that the land on which the fires had burned must still be there. The old men in their campfire talk would have the smoke rising from the sea itself, as if there were no difference between mist and smoke. He'd always found that hard to believe. It might be that the Cloud Man actually lived on the island of the great fires and not the sea but that too seemed unlikely. The only spirits he knew in the sea were Kadja, the shark, and Noori, the porpoise, and how could they have any connection with fire? he asked himself. There were creatures he had heard of, but not seen, which blew a mist up out of their heads. The old men had often talked of these but none of them had actually seen one in his own lifetime. They had not seen the island of the great fires either but he would see it, he knew that much. The rains were not due till the next full moon. This second trading of the year always involved some risk. Ten years ago when he was fourteen and had first gone with the traders they had had to stay on Oraru for eleven days before the weather eased enough to risk the journey back. It had given him time to learn the dialect and it was a gift which stayed with him. Sometimes he would speak in it as a joke with the other young men just to annoy them; he enjoyed making the meaning dance along just beyond their understanding. It was partly this too which had led the old men to give him the job now as messenger—or was it simply to test him out. Although he'd been careful never to mention his theories about the island of fires they could probably read the doubt in his face. Some of them certainly had powers like that. If he set the Cloud Man at so little then let him prove himself out there by himself in the Cloud Man's element, they would be saying to themselves. It was no small thing to set out with no other raft beside you and ride the currents all the day for what might be a hostile island with the hour of your arrival being more in the hands of

the Cloud Man than your own. If the currents for some reason moved unseasonably the paddle would hardly save you. He smiled just slightly to himself. One way or another, he knew now, this would be a year requiring the second messenger.

Checking and tightening the vines round the bamboo poles, he wondered how much he might tell Woniana. She was a good woman and no trouble but she did not question the elders. Nor did she question him. She was glad, he could see, that he had been given this honour but she would rather have been among the women who crowded the canoes on the men's return than have been going with him. The women, he knew, had been preparing her for the trip and advising her about the children. A few of them had also had this honour in their youth. The little girl was still at the breast and the boy, fortunately, was of a steady temperament. He had taken them on small rides for their amusement and not far from the beach but this would be different. It would be different for him too. A raft with two men on it moved easily enough to the force of a paddle. With one man and a heavy load it would be much harder though he had on those small trips with his family near the beach attempted to disguise this. He would take a second paddle but it would not be the same. Woniana was a good woman. The trip to Oraru was enough for her to worry about. Once he had spoken to her of the island of fires but she had hardly seemed to understand. It was not in her nature to understand it. He looked up from his work to the north east and just edging in over the palm tops he could see a line of high cloud.

At this hour it was hard to tell whether it meant nothing or whether it was the first finger of the rains. If so they would be early. But not too early for his purpose. He had thought once of telling his mother but since, as the youngest of his family, he had already taken his own woman she had her own shelter on the other side of the camp now and it was no longer appropriate for him to talk to her as he had once done. He concentrated for a moment on the breakers behind him and thought about tomorrow. The horizon he knew would be empty of smoke but he knew exactly where it rose. Later, much later perhaps, and on a different tide, he would be returning, that was always how it was from the other islands, and this could only be one more island. There might be the trouble of cutting bamboo but that too had never been difficult. He was handy enough with the stone axes, one of which he had already jammed into the rafts's bindings. It seemed at twenty four he had made one raft for every year of his life. It was simply a matter of being careful with materials. He gave the rough-edged vine a tug and, turning round, looked up and out towards the south east. Two days, he thought; three at the most. There seemed to be a slight echo of light in front of the advancing darkness but quite unlike that

made by the shadows of the fires. In his mind there was an exact point at which the smoke columns had cut the horizon. There was a slight rasping movement of wind now in the palms behind him. It was as if the weather from high in the north east was pushing him already on his way. Tonight he would leave the campfire early and Woniana would be already waiting in the shelter. And just before dawn his old mother would be a dark shape against a new sky calling him softly and he would already be awake and moving and one of the children, the little boy, would be whining softly as if he knew where they were going.

2.

It took her quite a while to realize what had happened. From the moment they were beyond the breakers they had been heading for the island, dark blue and squat on the skyline. As the swell built and the clouds overtook them from behind the island seemed to rise and fall ahead of them. At the point when she could just distinguish individual trees on the horizon the raft, she now realized, had begun to veer imperceptibly away towards the south east. She thought at first it was the current, that it must curve at this point and swing back later to bring them back on course. On those short trips, more for amusement than for fishing, she had never had cause to question him. On a few of these the swell had been greater than it was now but he had never had trouble in regaining the breakers and the beach. On some of the lazier days she had dozed on the bamboo in front of him and glanced back at the strength of his muscles and the broad determination in his face. Some of the other men smiled more but she found his seriousness more interesting. She noticed at first he had been using the paddle only intermittently and letting the current do the work. Now he was using the paddle more often, and on the left hand only, pushing the raft of bamboo poles away from the bay where she'd been told they would land. Joogoomoo's mother had been on the same trip many years before and had in the last few days been mentioning it often, the way the other tribe had come down into the water as they landed, their spears at the ready and she had told her of how her presence and that of the young boy, Joogoomoo, had satisfied them and had changed their hardness into smiles. Woniana had imagined in their first few hours on the water that she could hear the voices of the tribe already. Joogoomoo had often teased her by speaking in their dialect and leaving her to guess at his meanings. She had laughed, relishing his infrequent humour, and knowing that there was something in it about her bottom and her breasts but she could not quite tell what. The little girl was asleep in front of her, resting her head on her mother's crossed knees. The boy whose head came just to her shoulder was beside her staring

into the distance. The spray from the waves which broke over the front worried her. She could see that if they rose much further the whole family was in danger of being swept off the raft.

The sky was grey all over now and though the sun would, she thought, be straight overhead she had no way of knowing. She knew the trip would take all day. Joogoomoo's mother had told her this. It was always in the evening that the messenger arrived. Certainly the mother hadn't mentioned this round-about line of approach but from the women's gathering of fruits and tubers on the island she knew that a direct route was not necessarily the easiest. The paths of the sea were like the paths of the jungle, perhaps. She looked back over her shoulder now as her man completed a long, determined stroke with his paddle. She looked at him questioningly, as though a smile might be an answer. A smile to tell her, yes, this was the way, they would be there by nightfall and not to question. But he had no smile. Under his broad, overhanging brow the eyes stared south eastwards with a kind of fixity she had never seen before. There was a satisfaction there too which she couldn't explain. It started from the same satisfaction she'd seen in his eyes sometimes when he had drawn her to him and entered her at dawn and then turned back towards her for a moment from the shelter's opening before walking down to the surf. But it went on from there and seemed this time to have nothing to do with her. He had not even noticed her looking at him. She turned away and reached into the woven bag with its fruits and roasted yams for the journey.

The sun would be falling behind them now. They were more than halfway. It was surely time to eat. They had more than enough for the journey. She did not need to check his authority here. She and the mother had been collecting and preparing the food the day before. He had only to eat it when it was given. She slowly stripped one of the fruits and handed it to her son who took it wordlessly and went on staring at the horizon. She had thought with this swell they might both be sick. The little girl had been crying earlier but was sleeping now. Woniana took a piece of the soft vegetable and passed it back to Joogoomoo who also took it without smile or comment. Then, a little later, she passed him the water gourd but this too he accepted without thanks. It made her nervous but a little angry also. He was not normally so uncaring. That had been another thing she had come to like about him, that he understood the work involved in collecting and cooking and showed an interest when she handed him such things. As she did, likewise, for him when he brought in the fish he had speared. The island, she could see, was closer now but they were clearly not heading for it. Unless they turned north very soon they would pass by its southern tip. The wind as well as the waves had risen now; she felt it pushing squarely against her back and, through her,

pushing the bamboo poles beneath her. It would be doing the same on Joogoomoo's back and still he made no move to turn the raft towards the land. The wind and the sound of the whipped spray were crowding her ears but even so she imagined she heard the sound of surf breaking on a beach she could not yet see off to her left. Having watched what could happen to a raft coming in on a big surf, the way it could slew sideways and then spear upwards through a broken wave, tossing its riders like sticks into the air, she was already wondering yet again what chance they might have with the two children in their arms and possibly a rip sweeping them backwards out to sea. Maybe that was what Joogoomoo was doing, heading for the leeward side of the island where they might land away from this constant push of waves and wind. She had seen that before when fishermen left the camp by one track and returned by another, talking of how they had left their rafts on the other side of the island.

She looked back to Joogoomoo thinking to say something of all this over the wind and water. But his face looked even more impassive, almost as if she and the two children might not even be there on the raft. In his deepset eyes she could sense some other destination. He did not look at her and neither did he look left towards the island, towards the visible trees they were beginning to pass now. The raft was heaving and plunging more than she had ever seen one do before, even from a distance when she had watched them from the sand running homewards from a storm. She gathered the little girl, who had woken now and begun to cry again, under her left arm and pulled her son in to her with her right. Then she dug her feet firmly again under the loops near the front. She was confused now but angry even more. She wanted to grab the man by those broad, silent shoulders and shout into those eyes which were so distant from her, "What are you doing, man? Where are you taking us? We'll all be killed! What about the children?" and knew that in a short while she would be doing this and that it would do no good. She would set the children aside instructing them to hang on tight to the knots and try to paddle herself on the right hand side of the raft to turn them a little toward some cove on the lee shore of the island and he would seize the paddle from her and toss it away. It was then she began to remember the evening about two moons back when he had pointed southeast at the shadows of fire on the clouds, at the second sunset, and spoken just once of his doubt in the Cloud Man and what it might be like on the island of fires.

3.

It was a total black now and even above the clouds that must be rushing over him up there he knew there could be no moon. Invisibly the waves smashed down

on the raft, threatening each time to wash them away. It was so black he couldn't even see Woniana and the two children in front of him though at first he could hear them clearly enough, the girl with an intense hopeless cry, the boy initially with a few shouted questions—then silence. Sometimes Joogoomoo would put his arm out to touch her and feel her shiver away from it in anger. He could feel the way her arms went out around each child and even through her shoulders the strength with which she set her toes into the knotted footholds. Though he could see nothing he knew that the wind was taking him still in the right direction.

He was so sure of it the fires might almost have been there on the horizon drawing him on. It was simply a matter of keeping the raft end on to the wind, of keeping the wind straight on to his back. An occasional corrective stroke with the paddle was enough. He might have been calmly stroking through a nightmare; there was a kind of detachment, a solidity of purpose that even the regular lashings of the water couldn't shake. To listen to the old men he would be approaching the vortex of the Cloud Man at any moment and yet the current bore straight on to the south east and did not circle. Once he wondered if he might not in fact be making a wide circle as one can do in an unfamiliar part of the jungle. Could the wind perhaps be sweeping around in a wide arc and taking them with it? The movement at the edge of such a whirlpool would be slow but insidious, the coils of a snake that dragged you in. But still that point on the horizon drew him.

The argument with Woniana had been unfortunate. He had predicted it but not its force. The struggle over the paddle, for instance, which had almost sent the children overboard. It was only at that point that she had let it go and turned to grab them as they slipped toward the edge. He had not known she had such strength—nor such resistance in her eye. Although he'd won, he knew also he had lost. She would never again be so innocent, so unquestioning. The years between them had been wiped out now. It had happened when the sun was setting somewhere in the clouds behind them. She had turned her face away into the darkness before them and, as far as he could tell, had not looked back since. She would be sitting there still, an arm around either child, angled out from her shoulders like two strong mangrove roots. He wondered whether it would be this sunrise or the next that he would see, beyond the sullen outline of her shoulders, beyond the wildly shining crests of the waves, across the chaos still remaining, his island of fires.

4.

It was just after sunrise on the third day that he had seen it. The wind was easing, though still from the same direction. From the crest of an exceptional wave

he had seen it spread suddenly across what seemed like half the skyline. A low shore with what were perhaps scattered trees, a sudden strip of grey and silver rather than the deep green he was used to. He had the impression that it might well have been floating too, that it had somehow been drifting north to meet him. It was not till the sun had gone another fist up the sky that he saw it again.

The first time he'd not been sure enough of himself to call out—and Woniana, he knew, would hardly have believed him anyway. She sat there stolidly in front of him and though the boy and girl both looked warily back at him over their shoulders and moaned a little from their thirst, Woniana continued to stare, without forgiveness, at the vacant, shifting line of sky and sea. The swell had dropped enough for him to risk standing up and when, supporting himself on her shoulder, he did so he saw it again, much closer and yelled. And in another part of his mind noticed the distance in it, as though it were pure sound only and stripped altogether of meaning. She made no move to get to her knees and remained seated with an arm firmly around each child as they struggled to stand up and look. "No!" she shouted. "No!" and pulled them down at the same time. She shivered away like a fish in clean water under his hand. He knelt down again on the bamboo, carrying the image with him. A low irregular skyline stretching unthinkably in either direction. There were individual trees now, very short, and a hard shimmering ridge of whiteness, of what he assumed was sand but higher than the beach, low hills of sand which he had never seen before on the northern islands, mottled with a greyish silver, some kind of grass or running vine.

And now the land was close enough for Woniana and the children to see it sitting down and this time Woniana too called something out, a simple cry filled with their two days and nights at sea and what Joogoomoo took to be her sheer pleasure that she might once again sink feet in the sand and walk once more on a steady surface. She held the children tightly round their thighs as they stood up to see. Joogoomoo, on his knees, made long cruising strokes with the paddle fluently down either side. He could sense their four sets of eyes observing the low white hills and the four sets of ears registering now the first intimations of surf. He started to wonder whether the breakers could be the same here in this new land; it was so different in every other way. Back on his island a swell like this would tell of a moderate surf and a good chance of a long ride in without mishap. It was the best he could hope for.

If the island were green, like Oraru, there would perhaps be other problems: a tribe knee-deep in water to welcome him with spears. But not on this land on the other side of the Cloud Man, on the other side of the vortex. The white backs of the waves were visible now and he called out to Woniana to steady

herself and hang on to the children for the ride in. He paddled with a sudden strength to bring the raft in line with the shoreward sweeps of the waves and after a short hesitation drove himself onto a breaking wave with something of the same exhilaration he had felt as a youth, ten years before, as he'd fought his way out with all the others through the breakers—then ridden them, laughing, back to the beach. The wave collapsed in white foam behind him as the raft slid down its curved face and began to run for the shore. He had to drag hard with the paddle to keep the raft from spilling but the sideways pull was less than he'd feared and the wave brought them on steadily to scrape on the sand. As soon as Woniana and the two children, despite their hunger and exhaustion, jumped off into the ankle-deep wash, he took the raft by one of its handles and dragged it with some effort up the beach, surprised at its water-filled heaviness. The boy and girl ran up across the damp sand towards the sandhills. As he saw the children diverging, and Woniana running and laughing straight on, unable to decide which to pursue, Joogoomoo felt a sudden panic sweep through him as he thought of the tribesmen who might possibly be watching, their arms drawn

back to send down spears. But he saw now, as he had at the top of that first wave, that these footprints forking in three directions were the first to be made on the island of fires. Slowly and at ease with himself he walked up the beach to join them. Now, he knew, they would walk on inland, searching out the water and running their fingers hungrily over the rough surfaces of the new plants, trying out the roots. Back on the island they would already have seen the smoke from the second messenger and there would be women collected round his mother, laying their hands on her skinny shoulders. There might be bamboo somewhere on this coast, there might not, but he could not easily see himself returning against the thrust of such a wind and the force of that current. He overtook Woniana who was standing with the two children looking back towards him and the beached raft. He could see in her face that these past two days and nights would never be forgiven but also that they were overlaid already by the light of this new land and this first morning. Joogoomoo allowed himself a smile and went to stride past them but instead took them with him up the low slope of sand towards the sky and even before he reached it he knew what he would see.

**COMING IN OVERLAND 115  
WINTER 1989**

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Poetry: Robert Adamson, introducing Campbell Thomson, and much more  
An Australian in Mussolini's Italy: Roslyn Pesman Cooper  
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## Vincent Buckley 1925–1988

The poet Vincent Buckley died of a heart attack on Saturday, 12 November. His books of poetry—*Selected Poems* was published in 1982—and literary criticism were followed by two notable memoirs *Cutting Green Hay* and *Memory Ireland*. He was also a remarkable editor and teacher. He was Lockie Fellow at the University of Melbourne (1958–1960) and subsequently professor of English there, a post from which he retired a year before his death. The following pages, which include a late poem, are our tribute to the poet and the poetry.

### AN EASY DEATH

Death makes its sweep over the grass,  
wind rolled in leaves, a torn wing.  
An answering fickle beat  
flaps at the ribcage.  
Get rid of these cups and saucers,  
the transistor, the pattern-rugs,  
this dull heap of necessities  
I saved up for once. Recycle the poems,  
clean off the margins of these books,  
give them back to the poor  
from whom they came.

Heart jerks in its black triangle.  
It's too hot for change, too late  
for wills and testaments,  
too dark for growing up  
into the strain of the new life.

If I could go blank  
as the crow's picked bones,  
or burn out, quick as pine branches,  
and be finished with it,  
men and women,  
friends, the work half-marshalled,  
the squalor of deprived places,  
the flayed and reeking countries,  
and care for nothing  
but the sun on this brass ring,  
those dead breast bones.

But I've been down so deep  
there's no strength to wish  
anything, even that blankness;  
I have let go;  
already  
I am falling from their picture.

Catholics, we were trained for it,  
the maze of words, the candles  
unrolled from years of tissue paper  
for this moment, the petite firm  
forward-leaning priestly movements,  
necessary as the dying itself;  
trained to compose the soul  
for all crises: death cancer, waste of summer,  
insolence, neglect, humiliation,  
the drying-out of friends,  
the uncouth stroke of money,  
the ordeal of home-going,  
the rising mist of time,  
this priest packing his cold oils.

And Thomas Hardy, dour optimist,  
thought they would all be thinking of him  
at that moment, murmuring like leaves  
about the leaf of his passing,  
quiet strong people communing, 'He was a man  
who used to notice such things'.

But think of your name as something  
burnt up in a moth-flight,  
thrown off by a self which has learned  
to seize its oblivion  
for the sake of memory.

VINCENT BUCKLEY

## WINTER RAIN

*In memory of Vincent Buckley*

Two weeks after the funeral, and yet  
I catch myself reaching for the phone,  
about to dial your number. God in heaven,

what will it take for me to realise  
that you aren't there? Your photograph, perhaps,  
stuck on the kitchen cupboard, and several years.

I used to think that death was some dark thing  
that followed people round. You've taught me this,  
in dying, that it's human, almost shy.

This fraying collar, that hair on my sleeve—  
neither has anything to do with you,  
yet now I'm strangely tender toward them

as though in death you took me by the hand  
and turned me to a larger, calmer world  
where everything is loved for what it is.

I want to stay here, in this other world,  
a moment longer—caught in a ray of light  
with only dustmotes floating up and down,

I want to be at peace, accepting loss,  
and feel that you're now home, like winter rain  
that falls all day upon its mountain stream;

then suddenly that old poem comes to mind  
(one that I never cared for until now)  
where Tu Fu writes to his dear friend Li Po,

regretting the vast distance that separates them,  
and wondering when they will meet again  
and argue verse over a cask of wine.

KEVIN HART

## A LITTLE MIDNIGHT ELEGY

Vin Buckley's gone, and Chopin  
winding down again  
Too many

Fifteen below  
Lovely, the dark snow  
covering the house

And Philip bleeding  
in a room, high over Sydney  
not blood, but something else, you see it

falling from his eyes  
Why, once again  
do I think of my pimpled youth, and Helen

who wound a scarf of light about my days?  
And Jenny gone, and Paul  
with a brutal suddenness

Too many  
Five blessings on us all  
Whom have you loved?

Britt, certainly,  
back straight as a broom, who kicked  
the nonsense out of me Elizabeth

her roguish heart still 'dansand merrie'.  
Lovely, the dark snow  
tumbling in the lilacs

It's cold, it's late  
Vin's gone, rewind the Chopin  
tomorrow and tomorrow

These beings in our blood, these echoes  
Lovely, the dark snow  
covering our eyes

KEITH HARRISON

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

## Vincent Buckley: The Poetry of Presence

Vincent Buckley, so recently lost to us, was a poet who stood resolutely against dismantlement, and against any diminution of lyric poetry. His work always concerns itself with manifesting some kind of numinous *presence*, but what kind of presence that might be changed considerably over thirty-odd years. Still, the title which he gave to his third book of literary criticism, *Poetry and the Sacred*, is a deliberate sign, a signal which can remind us of how all his poetry asks to be read. Early or late, this poetry is solemn, elevated, hieratic: a poet who proclaims his identification with the text he has made, through a particular musical eloquence, keeps proclaiming the sacred character of the named experiences. Over and again these poems are like charms: they lay claim to magic or to epiphany.

The early poetry which Buckley published in *The World's Flesh* (the very title an appropriation of the figure of Christ incarnate) was expressly religious. Poems treated explicitly of the Holy Ghost, the Virgin Mary, St Catherine of Siena, eucharist, ritual and the Flight into Egypt. The language is richly overwrought and self-assertive. Uneven though the poems are, there is everywhere an impression of verbal *force*, as though the very language were being bent toward some gnostic apprehension of reality. Phrases like "the dewy fallen universe", "a hard nothingness", "her murdered covenant" and "the thundering/ Of axles on their tombs" might be said to cut themselves wilfully adrift from contingent experience, from what R. P. Blackmur called "behaviour". Connotation runs rings around mere denotation: transcendence is everywhere. Attention should be paid, though, to the last quatrain of one of the tightest poems in the book, "Death by Cancer":

And we, to whom time was familiar things  
Moulded by friendly hands, a presence curled  
In light, recall how once and fierce it stings,  
And shudder with this shuddering of the world.

Time here is not process nor abstract concept, but a presence. Before the death it was "a presence curled/

In light" but even after it has been darkly metamorphosed it is defined as a fierce or stinging presence, a force which has helped to engender the world's new shuddering.

Whether Buckley had much of an impulse to persist with a diction so often marked by archaism and incantation I do not know. Many factors were certainly against it: the main currents of Australian poetry in the 1950s, Buckley's increasing wish to particularize the details of eloquent landscapes, his growing sense of an expressly Australian art, and the stress in university literary criticism at that time on specificity, concreteness and enactment, the last two being great hurrah-words. His second volume of poetry, *Masters in Israel*, was published in 1961; the title, in which irony wars with triumphalism, would be unthinkable nowadays. "Borrowing of Trees", a lyric celebration in five quatrains, epitomizes the new mimetic particularity of this book. It looks back in some measure to the tree images (I almost said, the tree-spirits) of Judith Wright's early poems, "For New England" and "South of My Days"; it also brings to mind the fact that Les Murray and Geoffrey Lehmann were to publish their first book of poems, *The Ilex Tree*, only four years after *Masters in Israel*. Buckley's reafforestation of his childhood landscape in Romsey, Victoria, is a worthy precursor of Murray's poems in praise of Bunyah, New South Wales. It is Buckley, too, who is clearly the more concerned with aural intensities in the landscape of memory as in "Borrowing of Trees":

I was born under a continual  
Movement of trees, bred in their gathered light,  
In the high scything rhythm, the stopped flight,  
The sea-sound urging through the timber wall.

And have been held. The laurel's dense glitter,  
The elms at random over the hill's shoulder,  
The willows with their hidden taint, the bolder  
Cherry dying of isolation, fritter

Their substance, are cut one by one, and burn  
Sharply or fragrantly so I'll remember.

A heritage, surely. Something which every limber  
Landlord of wings must emphasize in turn,

Even the unremarkable plum, or the peppercorn  
Too normal for the secretive child. And the hush  
Of pines, pines, their dominant slow rush  
Rides on all my summers. I was born

Under this usury of trees: Their noise  
A lent wisdom of guardians talking together  
Blent like husband and wife in the rusty weather  
Or wound like a vine about this timbered house.

A historical point should be made at this point about Buckley's dealings with landscape, natural objects and the local habitation. As his early critical essay, "A New Bulletin School?", signals, he kept his distance for a long time from those poets who saw it as their prime task to depict the natural environment; he liked to detach himself from the work of Stewart, Campbell, Robinson, and even in some ways from Judith Wright. Yet some impulse gradually brought him back closer and closer to plants, local waters, air-smells, earth-smells, to the wish to lovingly inscribe details of

                  a land that in its steeped  
Peach-dark fruits,  
Resin,  
Pods,  
Is warm as blood.

  ("Places")

and often to evoke them as here by seeming to draw the land into the speaker's own body, earth becoming blood, perceptions quivering in the nerve-ends, synaesthesia everywhere.

About "Borrowing of Trees" I would note just a few other things. First, the delicacy in the title of the participle, "borrowing", in which the poet reveals an awareness that he cannot actually *take* natural objects for the sake of a striking text, but can do something more provisional, more qualified, more clearly circumvented by life itself. Secondly, like Adam in Paradise, the poet is at his business of naming things in the garden, in his own first garden. Observe how plainly the nouns are assembled in their catalogue: laurel, elms, willows, cherry, plum, peppercorn, pines. Can the names of particular species themselves function like tiny poems? Specificity is always attractive.

The other striking thing about the poet's borrowed trees, however, is that none of them is native to Australia. This is both a comment about Australian farmyards in the old days and, more broadly, about Australia's colonial inheritance: linguistic, cultural and horticultural. Except for a scarlet bottlebrush in one poem, Buckley's textual world does not contain indigenous plants. Even the peppercorn tree was imported from Mexico, all the others from Europe

like the language which holds them. It would be hard at this point not to remember that Buckley's geographical *axis mundi* has two poles, one surfacing in Australia and the other in Ireland, as many recent poems and one book of prose have testified. Perhaps, too, like many poets before him he has found it hard to celebrate the names of plants which do not have the literary mulch and tilth of centuries heaped around them.

In the poetry of his next book, *Arcady and Other Places* (1966), Buckley had recourse again to those trees and to the role they played in embodying childhood memories like wood-spirits. Reading the harsh, seven-part sequence called "Stroke" which traces the process of his father's dying we come upon this epiphanic recovery of the country childhood in section III:

Oaks, pines, the willows with their quiet  
Terror; the quiet terror of my age;  
The seven-year-old bookworm sitting out  
At night, in the intense cold, the horse  
Tethered, the stars almost moving,  
The cows encroaching on the night grass.  
The frost stung my lips; my knees burned;  
Darkness alone was homely. The hawthorn tree  
Glimmered as though frost had turned to language  
And language into sharp massy blossoms.

Those last two lines remind us that the poet was in no wise innocent of modern subversions of linguistic verity. The phrase about "the intense cold" (in a region where it doesn't even snow, as a rule!) will remind us of one of the most striking preoccupations of Buckley's poetry, early or late: a concern, almost amounting to an obsession, with the temperature of the air about him. His almost neurasthenic sense of heat, cold, smog, draughts, humidity, creates a peculiar theatre of consciousness: that of a man who seems ill at ease in his body, frequently stirred, easily put out—and one who has to place great reliance on the magical verities of earth, water and air. Place and atmosphere keep being depicted as parts of a salvific presence. As in Hopkins or Lawrence, landscapes are valued not only as repositories of aesthetic pleasure but for the ways in which they testify to the immanence of spirit. Buckley remarked in an A.B.C. broadcast, "I think at a certain psychic level Australia belongs to the Aboriginal people."

Frequently the poetry testifies to Coleridge like reciprocity between this immanent spirit and the perceiving poetic consciousness. We find both that "Scent forms/ at the brain's base, from a twig of/ oakbuds, tiny, clustered,/ seedlike as pearls" ("Write") and that "One more day of my life/ was dying: the yellow bloomed in every pavement/ and the cool rang through every/ nerve and surface", toward the end of "Golden Builders", indeed at the very point where



anguish begins to give way to a pastoral coda. The poems keep positing two delicately interacting presences, that of the natural scene, which tends to be the more active as well as providing spiritual succour when the self falters, and that of the self, hypersensitive, pained, responsive, but capable of giving names to non-linguistic depths or sources of experience.

"Golden Builders" may be the place to which one should go to see how these transactions are played out in the social and historical fabric of a known city, but I prefer to turn to a recent poem "Theories". Nowhere before this has Buckley dealt so explicitly with questions of the generation of language, with pressing towards the roots of any possible text. It should also be noted that in the title of this poem he is partly fending off the pressure of 'literary theory', which in the academies presents itself as the handmaid (or perhaps ringmaster, depending on your sense of gender and priority) of post-modernism. At the same time, the two sections of the poem begin with phrases which are significant variations on William Carlos Williams' dictum, "no ideas but in things": the poem is both mimetic and speculative, both local and locating itself in a modern tradition. Williams' phrase comes from book one of *Paterson*, a transcendently local poem, like "Golden Builders": and Buckley has expressly praised Williams for his ease of language, for his "sense of meaningful factuality".

## I

Those are not selves, but things.  
The summer nights begin to float  
machine noises weird as kites  
over the balconies of the Home Units  
in which some transient, motorbike-crazy,  
slamming and starting, revs the whole house.

Nor are they symbols. But, dribbling  
precious water into the scoops of earth  
around the shrubs that burst and die  
of sheer scent, you might call them  
metaphors, they stick so close to the mind.

To the mind, and to the real.  
Most urgently in mid-evening  
when, hot still under the fern,  
the sparrows cling to the water  
and the front garden shines dry as bran.

## II

No things but in words.  
Scandalous the leaves rustling  
hot and hoarse, not in but against  
the lisp of my language:  
rolls like a pebble  
on the road, stark coming  
down with its dogs  
all barking, and the man's voice  
working set as a ratchet.  
Here or in Kildare  
that's how the world wags:  
No X but in Y.  
The roots of language  
definite as the wind-cry.

Not only does the poem's questioning of signifiers waste away to the minimalism of "No X but in Y", but syntax collapses in the last part of this poem in a way which it almost never does in Buckley's writing. Yet the last two lines defiantly assert an affinity between language and nature.

How does one talk about *personality* in poetry? How would one ever demonstrate that it was there? I do not know a practical answer to this question, but I would suggest that the authorial presence in Buckley's poetry is constantly asserted, early and late, in good poems or bad. It is felt in the suasive rhythms, in the high rhetorical tone, in eccentrically braced adjectives (ochreous, drowsed, peach-dark, superb, cancerous, foxy, slimed, glare-lighted, hairless, faunal, androgyne, thrawn . . .), in the poet's insistence on his threatened individual body, and in his almost complete uninterest in dramatizing alternative viewpoints. The poems have changed over thirty years but they go on bespeaking the same author—as sufferer, impressionist, bard, prophet, magus:

And hard-faced men, who beat the drum  
To call me to this Cause or that,  
Those heirs of someone else's tomb,  
Can't see the sweeter work I'm at,  
The building of the honeycomb.

That's how the voice of assertive presence sounded in the metrical cadences which he employed in the mid-1960s. By the mid-eighties those metres have given way to an easier kind of voice, lightly built out of angular phrases; but the authority is still very much in evidence:

If peoples were still named after their weapons,  
we would be called  
the Projectile-people, or those who kill from afar,  
or Spitting Poison-people, or Anthrax-minders.  
On the great lowlands rugged with grass  
we squat beside snout and muzzle,  
we are growing moustaches  
and learning laws of trajectory.

The inventions in those last lines, from "Soft War Poems", are akin to the kind of thing Les Murray's imagination might have come up with; but in a Murray poem the invention would have come across as broadly good-humoured, even carnivalesque. Buckley's preoccupations are darker: he may well remind us of E. M. Forster's observation that modern poetry tends to be minatory.

Two general paradoxes seem to me to emerge from this discussion of Vincent Buckley's work, paradoxes which also bear upon the poetry of Murray, Harwood and Gray. In the first place, I am struck by the fact that details of landscape, foliage, sky, water and light are frequently valorized by writers whose outlook is primarily a humanist one. Secondly, material objects are remarkably often foregrounded, depicted, lovingly lingered over and insisted on as real lumps in what is, after all, a text by poets who are not materialists. These are, I'm afraid, questions which belong to the general history of post-Romantic literature, and we can all think of the ways in which such terms as *symbol*, *epiphany* and *image* have been used as desperate hinges to close up such dilemmas of emphasis.

There is a much larger problem about poetic mimesis which both troubles and entertains me, however. It is one which will also return us to the much-nibbled field of post-modernism. It goes something like this. If poets believe that they can depict or imitate the brute matter of existence through language, why does that language need to be worked up into elaborate artistic arrangements? In what ways

does a poem release the signified life to us? Can it be the case that ordinary language is opaque and cannot really signify any clear presence, whereas highly crafted language becomes somehow transparent and therefore makes the world available? Surely at the base of the modern poet's craft we have a choice of two positions: the atavistic one, that poems are a form of magic and thus have powers to transcend the ordinary limitations of discourse; or the sceptical one, that no language consists of accurate signs for parallel units of experience so that all one can do is to construct whole poems, contraptions whose elaboration is so subtly done that it can mime a block of experience as merely linear language can never do.

So at the end of my tale there is no clear ending, but two paths leading on. The poet is both archaic and sophisticated, both god-botherer and linguist, both a lucid namer of the world's things and a desperate magus, well aware of the ambiguity of his/her signs and gestures: their doomed inadequacy. In such an ambiguous role, Buckley signals that he's aware of post-modernism's Nietzschean messages (if not enamoured of them), but he continues to write in a high romantic posture, imprinting the poems with signs of his personal presence (we call these his style) and claiming to display on a printed page the presence of named objects, winds, clouds, people and creatures, not least among them being racehorses.

Buckley's reliance on a mimetic contract with the non-verbal world, as well as his passionate regionalism, has been declared in his remarks on Ireland and Australia in a radio interview. His comments here are so natural as to be very strange indeed:

I feel a distinct linguistic break between my attempts to get Australia into poetry and my attempts to get Ireland into poetry. One difference for example . . . is the matter of smell, because all through the spring and summer in Australia you're surrounded by smells of the most powerful and delicious kind.

It was particularly daring of Buckley to single out smells for comment, for of all kinds of sense experience they are the most powerfully connected with promptings of the *mémoire involontaire* and at the same time they are the experiences to which linguistic signs bear the most arbitrary and unsystematic relations. They are presences without fixed names, even in a thoroughly conservative linguistic world.

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## An Expatiation on Expatriation

First a quiz, Gentle Reader. Which expatriate writers penned the following words about Australians? Pin each quotation to a writer. Do it carefully, for if you prick them, do not even expatriates bleed? Nevertheless, pin each paragraph to one of the following: Germaine Greer; Peter Porter; Kate Jennings; Christina Stead; Shirley Hazzard; Dale Spender.

(a)

Australians now impress me, almost invariably, as very immature. You are unfortunate in having a consciousness—though not a clear one—of how barbarous life in Australia is. If you had, like all other Australians, no consciousness at all, you would be happier.

(b)

There is but one word to use in regard to them—vulgar, vulgar, vulgar. Their ignorance—their stingy, defiant grudging attitude toward everything [foreign] . . . these things glare at you hideously . . .

(c)

I would say that I felt the situation [back home] for me was becoming impossible. I couldn't grow up.

(d)

There is another question, asked, in my experience, only by Australians: "Do you mean what you write?" Often the speaker will quote a passage that has offended him, not for what it says, which is plain, but for some unstated disparagement of Australia and Australians he feels must be lurking behind it. He thinks there is more than meets the eye, and in a sense he is right: fiction, like painting, consists entirely of more than meets the eye; otherwise it is not worth a second's consideration. The interrogation is a settling of accounts with an Australian who has failed to "paint Australian." No division is allowed between the writer's citizenship, with its statutory and emotional ties, and his wider allegiance as an artist.



(e)

I could come back to *die*—but never, never to live.

Before I let you check your score against the master sheet, let me digress for a moment to describe a now famous educational experiment. A group of professors was given a set of undergraduate essays to mark. The papers were identified by the names of their student writers, male and female, but none of the students was known to the graders of the papers. A few weeks later, the same control group of professors was given the same set of papers to mark again, ostensibly to ascertain the degree of variance occasioned by time and mood in the assigning of grades.

Unbeknownst to the professors, however, those papers which had been designated by female names were now adorned with the names of male students; and the former 'male' essays were now 'female'.

The findings, of course, are history. The professors consistently gave a higher mark to the same paper when they believed it to have been written by a male student.

I leave you to ponder the relevance of that experiment to mine.

None of the above quotations, in fact, was spoken by an Australian, lapsed or otherwise, though all were the words of famous expatriate writers. The correct answers are as follows:

(a) T. S. Eliot, writing from England to his brother in America. (Yes, I cheated and inserted "Australians" into the text; substitute "Americans".)

(b) Henry James, American expatriate in England, writing to his brother William on the subject of Americans.

(c) W. H. Auden, in an interview with the BBC, explaining his decision to live permanently in the USA.

(d) Mavis Gallant, most polished of living Canadian writers, who has lived in Paris for 30 years and whose stories have been appearing regularly in *The New Yorker* throughout that period. (Substitute "Canadians" for "Australians.")

(e) Henry James again, writing to his sister Alice, on the possibility (or rather, the impossibility) of returning to the USA.

And what of the home country response to these famous expatriates? That, of course, has varied. It would seem that countries with a clear sense of identity and destiny are never threatened (though they may be bewildered) by the idea of expatriation. Both sides of the Atlantic, for example, have always been eager to claim Eliot and James and Auden, though a kinsman of Eliot's expressed stupefaction that the young poet could "forego the privilege of living in the genuine American atmosphere—a bright atmosphere of freedom and hope."

Is France reluctant to claim Marguerite Yourcenar, though she has lived in America for thirty years? Quite

the contrary. But then France could never be accused of national or cultural self-doubts.

In the cultural colonies, however, it has been, and continues to be, otherwise.

Ireland was happy to say good riddance to Joyce, relieved that he had flown its nets and was writing his dirty books in Paris. Even so, there was never any suggestion from the critical Establishment of Ireland that Joyce, in spite of long expatriation, didn't know his ashplant from his Bloomsbrogue.

For a long time, Canada ignored the existence of Mavis Gallant. Year after year, she appeared in the annual "Best American Stories" but was not mentioned in Canadian anthologies. Then there was a mad scramble to claim her, to absorb her, toward which her response has been one of dignified reticence. Over the years, once Canada stopped ignoring Gallant, I have read much ambiguous—and occasionally downright hostile—press coverage about Mavis Gallant the *person* (as someone who arrogantly chooses to go on living in Paris, who wantonly satirizes Canadians in her stories), but I've never read a negative review of Gallant the *writer*, or any suggestion that she does not portray the Montreal of either the 50s or the 80s with anything less than devastating accuracy.

Salman Rushdie has spent far more of his life in England than he has in India. His books may be banned in the country of his birth, but the reasons are political and theological. No one in India is claiming that he does not depict Indian life and speech accurately. In fact, no sooner had Rajiv Gandhi announced a ban on *The Satanic Verses*, than Swami Agnivesh, a Hindu, promised immediate publication in both Hindi and Telegu.

It is interesting then (is it not?) to speculate about why some Australian literati (admittedly, an insecure minority) feel such agitation when a non-resident Australian writes about his/her native land.

*Regardless of what James Joyce or Henry James might have done, these people seem to be saying, as far as we're concerned your memories are off-limits for subject matter. You are under a ban. We're not interested in the expatriate masterpieces of Salman Rushdie or Marguerite Yourcenar or Czech novelist Josef Skyorecky (who's lived in Toronto for 20 years). Australian expatriates are a different kettle of fish, and we forbid you to write about your past or your present shuttlings between two worlds. We believe that the only trustworthy expatriate is a dead one, and thus Christina Stead can now be forgiven but the rest of you are under a cloud.*

Silly, isn't it?

And how far from the bemused letter of Eliot's kinsman is the advice I was given in Melbourne recently: "I wouldn't get nostalgic, if I were you. Expatriate nostalgia doesn't go over well here. How can you expect us to take it seriously when you've escaped?"

Ah. Is *that* the sub-text? The old two-step, cringe-step, Inferiority Rag? Not a confident *Australian is Australian is Australian, wherever the bits and pieces blow*. But: *I'm Australian, and I'm gritting my teeth and staying here, and I bloody well don't forgive any traitor who's nicked off*.

That's the tone of snide hostility one sometimes picks up in reviews. I've been thumbing through the Aussie journals on my shelves. Here's a quick sampling of comments where the judgement is not on the quality of writing *per se*, but on the fact that the writing is *tainted*, that it carries the expatriate germ.

1982, Fay Zwicky on Peter Porter: "Randall Jarrell, speaking of Wallace Stevens, said he was 'like a fossil imprisoned in the rock of himself—the best marble but, still, marble.' Porter's poems read in an Australian context strike me as similarly marmoreal."

1988, Keith Russell, reviewing Les Murray, in a throw-away aside: "Like many famous Sydney University students of his generation, Les Murray has found it necessary to beat on the drum of return . . . 'back to Bunya' is as huge a move as Greer's 'search for the lost father' or Clive James's bouts of slumming in posh Australian eating-houses and appealing for local recognition."

1988, Carole Ferrier on Dale Spender: "Even if Queensland University Press or Hecate material somehow never finds its way to Sydney, between which and London, we are told, she divides her time, these are far from the only sources she is ignorant of."

I do think such reviewing attitudes, happily, are declining and to be fair I should quote from Bruce Bennett on Peter Porter in a recent ABR: "The Australian poems in *The Automatic Oracle* confirm the metaphoric force of Porter's country of birth in his search for meaning . . . It is high time we had a selection of this outstanding poet's work which properly recognizes his importance to Australian readers."

What about those times when the old two-step cringe-step still makes itself heard? Does indifference or hostility from one's own country matter to the writer? Not very much. Writing flourishes in that very crucible of friction and rejection.

Here's Mavis Gallant on the subject: "I have sometimes felt more at odds in Canada than anywhere else, but I never supposed I was any the less Canadian. Feeling at odds is to be expected; no writer calls a truce. If he did, he would probably stop writing."

Henry James, dislocated by numerous transatlantic crossings because of family obligations back in Boston, wrote to William: "I felt then, as I felt after subsequent returns, that the only way to live in America was to turn one's back on Europe; that the attempt to *mix* them is a terribly comfortless business." It was also the stuff of his greatest novels, that very *mix*: the American in Europe, the European in America.

And for me personally?

Some things I observed on this visit:

(1) **The E Word**. Although almost every Australian reviewer of *Charades* was under an apparent compulsion to slip in the E word, a mere handful of people mentioned it in conversation. When it *was* mentioned, the degree of venom was intense. The attackers were writers severely down on their luck (with critics, publishers, finances, or all three) and though their hostility was unpleasant, it was easy to understand, and thus easy to forgive.

(2) **The Arbiters of Reality**. When Galileo dropped two balls from a tower to demonstrate that one pound of lead fell as fast as ten pounds, the scientific authorities of his day discounted the evidence of their own eyes. Their *a priori* beliefs were unshakeable, they could prove from Aristotle that the thing was impossible—though from this distance, they made asses of themselves.

Similarly I was never really aware of the stranglehold, the benign tyranny, of urban Oz over rural Oz (for example, the whole tone of Keith Russell's review of Les Murray) or of the Sydney/Melbourne presumptions to universality, until my most recent trip home. When I was a kid, or even an undergraduate, if a Sydney newspaper said a certain Brisbane expression was not the way Australians spoke, I *believed* it, in spite of the evidence of my ears. Sydney and Melbourne (the S&M routine?) had at least the weight of Aristotle. Now I'm fascinated and amused by the Melbourne and Sydney people who felt it necessary to tell me, earnestly, and ever so nicely, that I "wasn't convincing" when I wrote about Australia, that I didn't get Australian dialogue quite right. How long had they stayed in North Queensland or at Mt Tamborine? I was curious to know. Oh, they confessed blithely, without a trace of embarrassment or self-consciousness, they'd never been to Queensland.

I do feel, now, that this accounts for the otherwise inexplicable under-appreciation of Thea Astley's work. It's significant, I think, that *It's Raining in Mango* received the Steele Rudd award at Warana, but was not included in any short lists to the south. Thea has a higher profile in America than she has in Australia. (It's all those years in Kuranda, Thea. It's not really Australia, way up there. You might as well have been an expatriate!)

(3) **Filthy Lucre**. I collected fabulous tales of the supposed wealth that enfolds writers in North America. Pure myth. The writers I know in Canada and the US are poorer than the ones I know in Australia. The Canadian Writers' Union did a survey: annual average income, from writing, of all members is \$5000 (and that includes the handful of millionaires and near-millionaires). It's harder to be poor in a cold country. For one thing, heating bills alone for a modestly-sized apartment cost well over \$1000 for the winter. (We're not talking about comfort, we're talking about

survival.) Those of us with children in university (we have two there) have to mortgage our souls (and take on extra jobs) to pay for their education.

(4) **Grants.** "It must be nice," someone said to me with undisguised malice, "to be able to live off the pickings of two governments."

For the record: I was almost 40, still trailing heavy debts from the combined graduate school expenses of my husband and myself, living very frugally indeed, teaching, parenting two children, taking in extra typing on the side, scrounging for extra part-time jobs, and writing my first novel in the cracks of time that were left, when I applied for a Canada Council grant. My application was returned marked "ineligible" because I was not a Canadian citizen. I have never had a literary grant in Canada.

I then applied for an Australia Council grant. I was hopeful because I had had a number of short stories published in prominent US, Canadian, and UK literary magazines, and had won a prestigious American award for a story in *The Atlantic Monthly*. I was rejected. The brief form letter was sent surface mail, so it took more than three months to reach me. Ironically, it reached me in the very week that I learned my by-then-completed first novel had won Canada's biggest literary prize, the Seal Award of \$50,000. Prizes in Canada are fully taxable, nevertheless the Seal Award got us out of debt and bought me two years of writing time. I then applied for an Australia Council grant so that I could afford to get back to Oz. This time I was successful, and I used the grant to spend a big chunk of '85 back home, eavesdropping on conversations in Cairns, Brisbane, Tamborine, Sydney, in buses, ferries, and pubs. I began work on *Charades*. That one-year grant is the only one I've ever had. I haven't applied for one since.

Of course I've had to teach again, and will need to go on doing so.

(5) **Writers' dinner parties; a comparative observation.** Boston, February '88: A dinner in a friend's apartment. Six women, all writers, all in their 40s or older. Outside the snow was deep, the apartment was drafty. Plastic sheeting was taped over the windows in an effort to cut down the cold, so that the room looked a bit like an arctic explorer's base camp. We still had to keep our sweaters on. Partway through the meal, snow on the roof began to drip down through a ceiling in urgent need of repair. We had to move the dinner table and place a bucket to catch the drips. None of the women was on a literary grant, or had any expectation of getting one. All had low-paying, temporary teaching jobs, with no security of renewal. We drank cheap wine from cardboard casks, and ate a meal of curry and rice. We were in high spirits; we joked and laughed; we had intense literary discussions; we kept talking about how lucky we were to be in Boston and to be writing. We were, I suppose, almost indecently happy.

Sydney, September '88: A dinner party, 10 women, mostly writers. I was the oldest person present, most were in their 20s or early 30s. I enjoyed myself thoroughly, and I certainly enjoyed the company of those women, who were lively and intelligent. I was, however, puzzled that much of the conversation was focussed on the unfairness of not having money, on attacking writers who'd got grants but shouldn't have, on discussing grant applications. Much bitterness was aired as we sat in that elegant house eating gourmet food. The cutlery was real silver. We were drinking champagne.

I think a lot about those two dinners.

The truth is, I am so happy to have a room of my own and to be writing that I feel indecently lucky all the time. I've been poor, I've been rich (well, I've had enough to live on, I've *felt* rich, which is just as good) and rich is better, but poor's O.K. too, which is just as well since the statistics for writers indicate that that's probably what I'll be again.

And the truth is, expatriate or not, I had a wonderful time in Australia this September and October. I felt (except for the handful of exceptions mentioned) warmly and generously embraced by the literary community. Melbourne was especially welcoming and gracious. There were luncheons, dinners, parties, carousings. If I begin to list occasions, I fear I might leave someone out, but I do have to mention the PEN luncheon, the Carlton breakfast, the *Scripsi tête-à-tête-a-tête*, Dinny's dinner, the Premier's Bash with its long coda at Mieta's, and the *Overland* dinner.

That last dinner was not, of course, as planned. Stephen Murray-Smith's letters had reached out and pulled me into the *Overland* fold for a year before my visit. A few weeks before his death, he wrote: "I hope to be able to press a copy [of the September issue] into your hand personally, as I'm arranging . . . for you to be the guest of our annual editorial board dinner . . ." We were never to meet, and I regret it deeply, but he was very much present in anecdote and reminiscence at the wonderful evening hosted by Barrett Reid.

And then there's the veritable snowstorm of letters from Oz, from other writers, critics, editors—witty, literary, gossipy, scintillating letters which continue to nourish and sustain me here in Canada. And thank you, Laurie Clancy (in your review in the *Age*) for detecting my own homesickness for Brisbane curled up inside that of *Charade*. (I've climbed the Glass Houses three times in the last four years, and hope to go on doing so every year for the rest of my life. It's an obsessive need, a ritual, like my disappearing into the rainforest at Mt Tamborine and Mt Glorious, close by my old high school.)

Anyway, my contacts with the literary community are now so many and so constant, that I'm beginning to feel like a regular insider, a novel experience.

But outsider's O.K. too.

Recently, I was at a party at Harbourfront in Toronto for the International Authors' Festival. Frank Moorhouse, in top form, deadpan, was regaling me and Antonia Byatt and Alison Lurie with tales of the Barcelona readings he and Morley Callaghan had done before the war. Antonia Byatt and Alison Lurie were looking slightly dazed, probably casting about for the portrait of Frank as Dorian Gray. Then Salman Rushdie, fresh from London and newsprint fisticuffs with Rajiv Gandhi, blew in and gave me a bear hug and whisked me off to one side to talk. It felt as though an absent cousin had arrived. We'd last seen each other in Adelaide, our lives keep bumping us together.

And I thought: Maybe this is the country I belong to now, the *In Transit* Lounge of the Wandering Scribe-

Tribe. I do know that when I talk on the phone to Anita Desai or Kate Jennings, when I dine with Dale Spender in Montreal and Brisbane, when I stay with Glenda Adams or Bharati Mukherjee in New York, there's that easy comfortable warmth that comes from being with family. Expatriates all, we belong with the Ones Who Don't Belong. We live in limbo.

And limbo's O.K.

*Janette Turner Hospital's novel Charades was published by University of Queensland Press and is now in paperback. US and Canadian editions were published in March. Currently she is teaching in The Writing Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and commuting between Boston and her home in Kingston, Ontario.*

## STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH MEMORIAL TRUST FUND

All readers of *Overland* will know how much of his life Stephen Murray-Smith put into supporting Australian writing and Australian writers.

His friends want to continue his work and keep alive his memory. To do so, we have established

## THE STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH MEMORIAL TRUST FUND.

This fund will be used to support Australian writing and Australian writers. Most specifically, it will provide money to support young writers and the publication of new writing.

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This fund is administered by a Committee comprising Ken Gott, John McLaren, Shirley McLaren, Max Marginson, Ray Marginson and Barrett Reid.

### MOODS OF THE BLUE MILLIONAIRE

You know how it feels to bite air  
and find it delicious?  
Get clichés in the mail  
which seem nutritious?  
Ask the blue millionaire.

He's in the hallway, talking  
serious blue vases.  
A fugue of anecdotes  
is fogging his glasses  
which he wipes while walking.

"Is everything," he thunders,  
startling the lounging guests,  
"therefore true because it's Blue?  
While my dog in its death  
throes turned blue, one wonders

why its teeth are still yellow."  
The host pours a whisky,  
froths politely to a chair.  
"I feel blue tonight; frisky,"  
the blue millionaire bellows,

"as a hat on cortisone!"  
Which he takes off and eats.  
"Brimful of vitamins, too."  
The party leaps to its feet  
en masse, stampeding home

while the millionaire puzzled,  
"The night is getting late  
earlier and earlier.  
Was it something they ate  
or the air I've guzzled?"

You know what it's like to eat air  
and find it too soggy?  
Swig your own sweet juices,  
get gradually groggy?  
Ask the blue millionaire.

### HEAT

Under aspens with their white flowers falling  
silently as snow, a boy and a girl,  
maybe seventeen, leaning through stale air  
towards  
each other, across a table in the packed  
Athens square where waiters with silver trays  
swerve and swoop, bringing beer, ouzo, mezethes.  
"I love you," says the boy with believable eyes.

Smooth as pebbles in the sea's mouth, one  
bleached phrase  
amongst endless collisions of speech, his words  
flame towards originality, barrel  
through the soft mulch of overuse in centuries  
of verse, ballads and popular songs, sliding  
between bed sheets rancid with rhetoric  
to touch down softly in the pit of her stomach.

Evening with its white locks falling open,  
a shady Athens square with its girl and boy  
like two cauldrons carrying the same hot liquid  
dissolving everything—the square, the tables,  
their bodies—into one delicious urgency.  
In the evening cool they rise and disappear  
down a narrow street where, still burning

they knock at my lit door and find it locked.  
Laughing, they walk away quickly, choosing  
night with its pale flesh slowly opening.

## PROFESSIONAL JEALOUSY

And what was so special about this trumped up  
godlet  
who learned his bag of tricks from an out of work  
muse  
in a seedy down-town cosmic conservatorium  
where he took the lute as his second instrument?  
It was a dingy place where composers lolled about  
in choirs or desultory orchestras waiting for their  
time.

Some took two hundred years to get their first  
degree  
(and still sang out of tune when they were born).  
We were the lot scheduled for Earth, third planet  
from the Sun,  
an infant world, notoriously unkind to composers,  
(which is why they got so few good ones).  
Some, such as Beethoven, (clever, but a  
monumental bore),  
would thunder away at his piano, complaining all  
the while  
(a virtuouso whinger), because Mozart was getting  
there first,  
would grab all the best musical ideas going at that  
time  
and be, amongst other things, a hard act to follow!  
A century or so in that 'well-tempered' purgatory,  
(don't talk to me about Bach, he's got a lot to  
answer for)  
and I'll tell you, you'd change your mind about  
musicians.  
Orpheus, (trust him) got out fast (a goddess or two  
did the trick).  
He jumped the queue and caught the mythic  
grave train.  
The funny thing about Orpheus was, (how can one  
say it?)  
He was better at 'seeing' than making music.  
His music searched you out.  
He probed, like a spiritual surgeon  
with delicate eye fingers, for the essence of you.  
He saw you, intensely, recognised you and affirmed  
you.  
That's really what no one could resist—that  
'seeing'.

Psychic 'buttering up' I call it!  
Well that's not playing fair is it?  
It's not 'playing' at all actually!  
All that tarding about, bowing and scraping,  
plucking and blowing on various instruments!  
It was just a disguise for a tricky 'Peeping Tom'  
to look into your heart and show you who you are.  
Now, has that got anything to do with music, I ask  
you?

NADINE AMADIO

## CLIVE JAMES

There was this book, see  
by Clive James—you know.  
Anyway, it was about the telly  
and the stuff that was on it  
in the nineteen-sixties  
when I lived there. When  
I was English.

There were all the names  
of the people I watched.  
Some of them I knew  
like brothers  
and sisters.  
Some of them I knew *in person*  
when I was young  
and ambitious  
and so were they.

Most of them  
my mates from those days  
weren't successful.  
They failed all right, lots of them,  
only a few made the top;  
actors, directors, writers.  
I didn't fail  
no sour taste in my life  
me, I came to Australia  
and I read Clive James.

DORIS LEADBETTER

## WRITER IN PRISON

I heard a voice say  
'Write', and I wrote.

A cell door slammed shut.

Outside, the bird of day  
Cries out. And now the night-bird.

No paper. But there are walls.  
But there's no light. I carve

These words upon the brain.

PHILIP MARTIN

## MANDELA PLACE

In unequivocal recognition of the fact  
that not a great deal can be done within  
the framework of sound economic management  
& the attendant multiplicity of benefits  
accruing from that sound economic management  
not just for the Bonds & Hawkes of this world  
but also for those tens of thousands of toddlers  
eagerly awaiting their first day's Child Care—  
the change from Rhodes Place to Mandela Place  
*isn't* tokenism, but an act of principle & yep  
The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in  
Custody

will *continue* to scrutinize all the evidence  
that hasn't already been cremated & yep  
Mr Keating & I have *regular* discussions on  
the balance of Australian trade with South Africa  
& *regularly* come to the same conclusion & yep  
my Rhodes Scholarship is a matter of history  
& yep, in respect of Mandela Scholarships  
I can see no possible objection—provided  
they don't jeopardize either my forthcoming  
Guluwuy Yunipingu Scholarship Programme  
(tribal) or  
my Charles Perkins Scholarship Programme (non-  
tribal).

GRAHAM ROWLANDS

## CRAIG NOOK

*for Jim & Wendy*

You shake off the city mechanism  
& put on the country dust

the horses take you later  
across the brown valleys & hills  
to a dead cow

Charley with the authentic bush smile  
& a thousand acres & who rides like a god  
not for money  
but the quality of life

yet even there  
one can't do without  
gossip and the macabre

a modern businessman for instance  
with a touch of class suns himself  
in the courtyard of his property  
with some prostitutes

until a police helicopter  
chases him and his entourage  
across the wildflowered fields  
into the wind  
(which is part of the process)

and a bush local gives this advice:  
'If you have some money put it into the bank  
in this country you don't have enough water  
to wash your wife.'

next morning nobody cares what the poet  
who lives beyond a Fred Williams Hill  
thinks

RUDI KRAUSMANN

## PROTOCOL

Mr Dakuvula,  
you must agree:  
I can't see you, and you  
can't see me.

We can't meet because  
I'm a big gun  
back in my country.  
I'm number one.

I'm Prime Minister.  
As for you, Sir,  
you're Bavadra's boy,  
and he's a loser.

Here at the Tonga Forum  
I can't spend  
my time on history's jetsam.  
I might offend

this Ratu Mara joker.  
Now there's a man  
who won't take no for an answer  
—understand?

Here in Nuku'alofa  
I've only time  
for men like Ratu Mara,  
for men who climb

their way to wealth and power  
on others' backs,  
the men who sign trade deals  
and defence pacts,

the men who drive to golf  
with an armed escort,  
the men who can't be moved,  
but can be bought.

Well, Mr Dakuvula,  
don't be a goat.  
Do yourself a favour:  
don't rock the boat.

And don't forget what your mob  
had to cop  
when the guy with the big moustache  
gave you the chop.

I seem to recall that several  
were made to sit  
up to their zealous necks  
in Suva's shit.

You, Mr Dakuvula,  
just don't have power.  
Now piss off! The Forum meets  
in half an hour.

GUY MORRISON

## A WEIGHT FALLS ON ME AT GUNYAH GUNYAH

Earplugs swell in my brain holes,  
bubbles of silence lock in the meatus,  
passing on by small bones—malleus, incus,  
stapes—  
into a shell of listening.

Somewhere outside, the chainsaw purrs  
affectionately, its teeth honed on stone.  
At the end of my arm it hisses & swipes  
with its claws, playing the adolescent pussy.

Together, we are a butcher, allocating fence-posts,  
rib-rafters, the odd fillet of mantle-shelf.  
Vibrations shake me loose & the sudden screech  
grates on the bone of my brain. I repack my ears.  
We are

the Dept. of Resourcefulness: eucalyptus globulus  
falls apart,  
limb from limb, eucalyptus regnans for telephone  
poles,  
acacia melanoxylon for softer sofa glows on love-  
making rumps—  
the saw is given its shuddering head. I know you  
will purr.

I am a philosopher of trees,  
raking the portions, the bark, the leaves, to burn.  
I am struck on the left hemisphere with the idea  
that  
the ash you end up as barely fills a dinner plate.

TERRY HARRINGTON

KEVIN HART

## After Poetry (1): Questions of Strength

*After Poetry is a new series of quarterly accounts of recent poetry. It will be written alternately by Kevin Hart and Graham Rowlands.*

*'The history of fruitful poetic influencing, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.'* If this makes Harold Bloom appear a bleak and uncompromising reader of poetry, it is a fair indication of his beliefs. For all that (and often precisely because of that) he is the most serious and rewarding critic of poetry that we have today, someone who does not allow his deep and abiding love of the art to decay into academic criticism or, what often amounts to the same thing, an idealisation of poets and their ways. It is easy to concede the value of an acute and stringent critic, but far harder to read one (especially this one) with cheerful equanimity. After all, it is Bloom who teaches that to live in the late twentieth century is to be a latecomer, that one must write in the full knowledge that Milton, Pope, Wordsworth and Shelley have solidly occupied the creative space one longs to possess. And it is Bloom who repeatedly reminds us that nothing is got for nothing, that poetry demands as much as it gives, and that one thing teachers of 'creative writing' cannot do is teach people how to write creatively.

Poetics is the study of the laws by which a text is composed, and in calling his selected criticism *Poetics of Influence* Bloom leaves us in no doubt of his main contention: a poem is always a response to another poem. It may be an anxious response, trying to suppress the precursor's originality, or it may be a strong response, a bold rewriting of a poem that almost makes one believe the *earlier* poem is the derivative one. Poetic influence here is not a simple matter of accounting for verbal echoes; it is a struggle between two writers. "Life to him would be Death to me", confessed Keats of Milton. Like it or not, the strong poet is always fighting for creative life with the very poet who gave that life in the first place. It is a queer sort of fight, for the younger poet veers away from the precursor by misreading the older writer's work: "This appears as a corrective movement

in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves". The history of poetry then is a dialectic of major poets misreading other major poets: a story of deviation and perversity, in which creativity is compounded from error and will, and in which only the strong survive.

Poets and academics alike have continued to find Harold Bloom an infuriating and outrageous writer. No poet cares to be told that he or she is writing about other poems, not life as it is, and no one likes to think that his or her psyche is quite that devious. Traditional academic critics (whom Bloom calls "mouldy figs") cannot bear to think that criticism must be judged by the same demanding criteria as poetry, and are likely to find Bloom's high claims for certain writers—the J writer of the Hebrew Bible, for example—as maddening as his firm conviction that T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath are vastly overrated. Marxists and post-structuralists cannot abide Bloom's insistence that "Individualism . . . is more than ever the only hope for our imaginative lives", while feminists take exception to concepts such as "father text" and the Oedipal model of poetic influence. Still, with all his crotchets, Bloom is never less than stimulating—which means readable and amusing, as well as instructive and provocative. Edited by John Hollander, who supplies a lucid and searching introductory essay, *Poetics of Influence* is a book not to be passed by.

"Latecomers. We are all/latecomers" observes Gwen Harwood in her most recent collection, *Bone Scan*. It takes considerable poetic strength to acknowledge one's own belatedness, and only someone as strikingly original as she is can afford to do so without losing face. No Australian poet has created characters as convincingly as Harwood in her Eisenbart and Kröte poems, while over the past decade no one has composed lyrics quite like hers (think of "Naked Vision"). *Bone Scan* is a stunning collection of such lyrics, a more potent book than *The Lion's*

*Bride.* In the opening poem "Slate", Harwood refers to her "morbid, chronic/nostalgia", yet the self-recognition found in the best poems here is neither morbid nor clouded by nostalgia. Her characteristic note is struck in "The Twins", which ends with this memory of not sharing sweets with two motherless twins:

Good angel  
give me that morning again  
and let me share, and spare me  
the shame of my parents' rebuke.

If there are multiple worlds  
then let there be one with an ending  
quite other than theirs: leaving school  
too early and coming to grief.

Or if this is our one life sentence,  
hold them in innocence, writing  
*Our Father which art in Heaven*  
in copperplate, or drawing  
(their work being done) the same picture  
on the backs of their slates: a foursquare  
house where a smiling woman  
winged like an angel welcomes  
two children home from school.

Without pausing for clinical details of guilt, or merely decorative imagery, "The Twins" instantly evokes the "original darkness" that every reader knows all too well. If poetry for Harwood is sometimes a mode of analysis, whether of the self or "the deep structural elements of the world", it can also move swiftly into phantasmagoria. "Night and Dreams" opens a dream world where a Brisbane mud crab, eaten sixty years before, remembers the event then takes in a pirate movie with the dreamer: "What dreams will come? Who else but Crab". And who else but Harwood could combine in the one poem a wicked sense of humour with a heart-rending tenderness?

Stephen Edgar has the sense of humour, as his biting poems on Ronald Reagan amply demonstrate. Yet the hub of his finely accomplished second collection, *Ancient Music*, is the more serious and meditative pieces. Several elements link Harwood and Edgar: the pressure of past events on the present, the appeal of philosophy (as an exemplary discipline rather than as a set of answers or doctrines), and music as a figure for the life of the spirit. Nevertheless, Edgar is his own man—and on the evidence here, one of the most vital and durable of our younger poets. Resisting the impulse to quote the whole of "Rapunzel" or "Civilization", I will have to content myself with the second part of "Tenebrae":

So what is left? I listen to Roy Goodman sing  
Allegrì's *Miserere*, a sound  
Of disembodied beauty so pure

A Nero would have killed it, envying  
A flawlessness he couldn't let endure.  
But having found  
A heartless perfection what else could he choose,  
Lost in what he'd lose

When his voice broke? Like a light you've focused  
for too long  
The last note clings. I hear the chant  
Soothe and perturb the dark devout  
When candle after candle is unsung  
And a brief voice flares above them and goes out,  
For at last they can't  
Keep what they are and will endure the cost  
Of being what is lost.

This has much of the panache and polish one would expect of Richard Wilbur or Anthony Hecht, and reading *Ancient Music* one begins to expect such mastery. Yeats wrote in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley that "a poem comes right with a click like a closing box", and one can just about hear that click at the end of "Tenebrae". It's rare to find a young poet—someone under forty—so much at home with an abstract vocabulary, but it suits Edgar's purposes perfectly. Like most meditative poets, he is not primarily concerned with seeing, and when he appeals to the senses it is, more often than not, to touch ("sharp and scathing/As holly leaves") or hearing ("Their dead mouths singing, singing, round and stretched,/Two opposite dry lines of O's"). In any case, Edgar is not so much interested in sound as what's "preserved/In negatives, unplayable . . .", what the final poem poignantly calls "The whole weight of silence".

It used to be a shibboleth of the seventies that poetry revolved around Sydney and Melbourne, but after reading these new collections by Harwood and Edgar I'm inclined to think that over the eighties there's been a quiet though definite shift of balance in favour of Hobart. Margaret Scott's *The Black Swans* can only support that view. Nothing showy here, these poems are as disarmingly casual and direct as their titles: "Making Redcurrant Jelly", "Polishing the Step", "Doing the Washing", "Cleaning Windows". Some of the best—"The Party", "Unknown Causes" and "The Bomb"—recall childhood memories of England in the second world war. We hear of a Christmas party that had been planned "for over a year", with hoarded treats "high on ration-book points" kept in "an old tin trunk". After the party, everything has to be cleared away, and the house looks "as though the Germans had finally come/and stripped the house of everything that mattered". At times one can hear nuances of Robert Lowell or Craig Raine, though Scott eschews the saccharin Martian imagery that would attract a lesser talent.

More commanding, I think, is a sequence of elegies for her husband. There are better passages than this one, but here we can see both the sentiment Scott

is able to summon and one or two stylistic problems that beleaguer even her finest poems:

It's autumn again, a year since the ambulance came,  
two hundred and thirty-five days since the day you  
died.

I keep track you see, striking away the dates like  
children or prisoners counting down to freedom.  
But time's reversed in this world that's run without  
you;

all I can do is twist round in a back seat and watch  
your new white shirt, your smile, your upraised arm  
dwindle to nothing while I speed on in the grip  
of impassive strangers. Or not even that.

Under this new régime images now are very hard  
to come by. There's no such luxury as settling back,  
knowing you've left the road and gone inside  
our house to pour a scotch . . .

That opening conceit about time's reversal is nicely turned; even so, there's a failure of imagination about half way through the passage: 'impassive strangers' is a cliché; 'now' is redundant, as is 'our house'; and the enjambed phrase 'to come by' is somewhat limp.

In "Why Write?" Sartre observed that "whatever the subject, a sort of essential lightness must appear everywhere and remind us that the work is never a natural dictum, but an *exigence* and a *gift*." When Robert Gray's *Selected Poems* appeared a few years ago it was easy to see just what Sartre meant by "essential lightness". For all their density of imagery, Gray's poems seemed artless, and while they certainly sought to mirror experience they also succeeded in enlarging it. Arresting images are still part of Gray's repertoire in *Piano*, as when we are told that "The moon is resonant on the sea as though a gong-face had been flicked/with a fingernail", or when we see a Tokyo skyscraper's "ice-cube tray of office lights". This sort of brilliance brings us fine lyrics like "A Port of Europe" and "Byron Bay: Winter". Yet these poems are more ideological than we've been used to from Gray. Zen Buddhism has always profoundly informed his writing, supplying him with an aesthetic as much as a world-view, and there have been earlier statements about Zen, though not so doctrinaire as these. "A Garden Shed", for example, ends by telling us that "the less we think we are/the more we can bear; and someone who sees/he is nothing, lightly will bear it all". In other poems, the rhyme—something new for this writer—tends to make the verse somewhat sententious. Whereas lightness was once a feature of Gray's style, it now threatens to become his theme and place that style in jeopardy.

There are points of similarity between Robert Gray and Andrew Lansdown. Both are firmly committed to particular belief systems (Zen Buddhism and Christianity), and both are imagists. At their best, the

lyrics in *Waking and Always* are as compressed as they are colloquial, as in this zoo vignette: "Gibbon—arms like chewing gum./Voice sort of stretchy, too". It's like treading a tightrope, writing this sort of poem, and all too easy to fall into sentimentality, as in "Absence":

And daddy, you know what?  
I'm a bit lonely about you.

From 3,000 miles away,  
her voice so sweet and clear.

"We must consecrate the particular" writes Peter Gebhardt in his first book *Killing the Old Fool*, and those two notions of consecration and particularity run throughout the collection. Of special importance is the consecration of the self: "the old fool", must always be killed to liberate the new, strong self. Emerson is an enduring influence, and the endless movement "between a possible ecstasy and a probable shrewdness" that Harold Bloom finds in Emerson's journals also indicates the limits of this writer's world. If Gebhardt's syntax is sometimes unwieldy, there's no hint of that in "Shooting the Quail" where the movement between possible ecstasy and probable shrewdness is readily traced:

A bird would fall and one of us would fall with it,

Our flight severed while the other, still riding the  
bird,  
Would fly off across the paddocks to find new cover,  
Never believing that another hunter would be  
waiting.

*Footwork* is Geoff Page's seventh collection of poetry. His previous book, *Collected Lives*, displayed a fresh authority over his materials—the sorrows of war and age, the consolations of the Clarence river—and a new confidence with more expansive forms. Perhaps because of that recent achievement, this new collection is a disappointment. Not that there are any bad poems: when there's no sparkle, everything is at least well-turned. Even so, there's something inert, almost mechanical, about the whole thing. And it's hard to praise even the best poems—"Memories of the Living Memories of the Dead", "My Mother's God", and the one I'll quote from—without thinking of better performances in earlier volumes. For at his best Geoff Page can touch a nerve, while this book's finest lyric, "Cheap Coffee and the Moon", seems, even as it ends, still to be travelling in a well-worn groove:

no cellared wine  
nor Sauce Béarnaise  
can match cheap coffee

and the moon  
failing in the morning light.  
Phone books

in out-of-town motels . . .  
as someone stretched  
in sleep beside you

half-hears the phone put down.

The strong poet, Bloom tells us, makes a decisive swerve away from the authentic precursor, while the weak poet remains dominated by that writer. One poet who looms large over Gray, Lansdown, Gebhardt and Page is William Carlos Williams who, Bloom assures us, directly answers to Keats. It may well be, as Iris Murdoch once suggested, that imagism is no more than a stripped-down version of late Romanticism. One would not have to be a Bloomian to see that Mark O'Connor is a Romantic, going back to Wordsworth through D. H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes. This new book, *Poetry of the Mountains*, reads like a very slight revision of recent illustrated books by Hughes such as *River* and *Flowers and Insects*. As with Hughes, this poem uses its title as its first line:

#### The Giant Barrel-Gum at Mt Wilson

—has lost its top three times. The core  
is a hollow hotel  
of a thousand tenants.

Cautious possums take an hour  
to climb its stairs; then  
from an upper branch the glider leaps

to land two minutes away  
in bushes of another hill.  
Its surface roots flow horizontal, broad as barges.

Hughes would doubtless have flexed more muscles if this were his poem. Be that as it may, O'Connor has got his formula down pat. It enables an utterly undemanding kind of poetry, for both reader and writer, and for that very reason we are likely to see a good deal more of it.

"About this woman . . . exultant, inharmonious, full of trouble . . .": so Judith Rodriguez characterised herself (or maybe one of her selves, for the self is always a rendezvous of many persons) in what remains, I think, her most pungent book, *Water Life*. Those poems now occupy the centre of her new and selected poems, *The House by Water*. Rodriguez's poems are celebratory, often with the air and zest of being occasional. There is that bold assertion of the individual self and its choices in the early "Nuplastic Fanfare Red" with its striking opening: "I declare myself:/I am painting my room red".

Elsewhere that energy finds expression in more familial contexts, as in that strange, wonderful chant, "Eskimo Occasion":

I am in my Eskimo-hunting-song mood,  
Aha!  
The lawn is tundra the car will not start  
the sunlight is an avalanche we are avalanche-  
struck at our breakfast  
struck with sunlight through glass me and my  
spoonfed daughters  
out of this world in our kitchen

There's similar flair in "Mudcrab at Gambero's", a jubilant lyric about eating crab in a Brisbane restaurant, about being devotees "of smooth encapsulated/flesh, the tingling white/of beachsand at daybreak". A love poem, "Mudcrab at Gambero's" asks to be put alongside Harwood's darker, wilder "Night and Dreams" where the ghost crab sings,

Come live with me and be my supper  
where colours have no boundaries,  
where every word is writ in water,  
I'll put my arm around your waist.

If Judith Rodriguez likes to affirm the inharmonious and troubling, Antigone Kefala is far happier with poise and calm. *European Notebook* gives the reader a fair idea of her scope and strength, since it includes—without any explanation—several lyrics from her earlier books *The Alien* and *Thirsty Weather*. The following stanza, from "Family", indicates her usual mood and mode:

In the dark house behind the shutters  
they were waiting  
with the bread and the olives.  
Marble dusted, ancient faces  
with eroded eyes,  
shell eyes of statues bleached by time.

The simple syntax, the appeal to tradition, the insistent adjectives, the sense of timelessness—all this goes to make the poem seem, as Sartre put it, "a natural dictum". Or to put it less kindly, there's no *exigence* here; no pressure is put on anything, as the cliché "bleached by time" all too eloquently testifies. Not that Kefala cannot strike a memorable image: in "Beer Garden" we hear that "the heat/brushed against us/with fur hands", which is exactly the sort of thing missing from "Family".

In some ways Vera Newsom is akin to Kefala: there is the same drive for clarity which tends to converge with a trust in the familiar. For all that, several poems in *Midnight Snow*, her first collection, show evidence of a sharp eye and a receptive ear. Here is the opening of "Bearings":

Stretching out arms for balance, I'm stumbling  
through fog  
like a fisherman wading a creek.

Mist swirls round my body.  
The air, thick with the hum of invisible insects,  
is holding me up.

Accurate and evocative; still, compare these four lines  
with these from Judith Rodriguez's "Towards Fog":

The quality of fog is that it has style but no detail.  
Though detected in a state of nuance, it cannot  
be caught at it.  
I try with a 2B—softly—with a 6 or 8B—I am  
gradual as growing—  
still there are lines, parts, separations. Fog has none.

The difference is that whereas fog is a poetic *given*  
for Newsom it is a poetic *problem* for Rodriguez, and  
poetry thrives on problems, not on solutions.

With the publication of her *Selected Poems* in 1984,  
it became clear that the New Zealand poet Lauris  
Edmond was someone whom we could no longer  
afford to neglect. *Summer Near the Arctic Circle*, her  
ninth collection, is in some ways a more sobering book  
than we've so far had from her; yet, as always, her  
poems win us first by their sensuous observation, then  
by their calm wisdom. One of the finest lyrics here  
is "Train Song":

Deep in the night they call out from the mountains,  
they are stirring the bowl of black winds in the  
mountains,  
now they blow a long braying thunder beside me,  
they elbow and stamp through my pasture of sleep;  
the eternally purposeful even-keeled trains, how  
they conceive absolutely their duty, their scope,  
how they bow their great heads to be timetabled,  
tamed,  
with what giant composure they all measure up.

If it's a long way from this high rhetoric to the opening  
of "Death by Accident"—"I hear it first in her, the  
slow perplexity/that does not know a vocabulary of  
loss"—that gives some idea of Edmond's range and  
tact. Death broods over some of these poems, though  
not so powerfully that it can overcome what she calls  
"the violent 'I'", for there are still things that "even  
death cannot take away; I hear a familiar cadence,  
see a still tenderness".

"You just go on your nerve", Frank O'Hara said. "If  
someone's chasing you down the street with a knife  
you just run, you don't turn around and shout, 'Give  
it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep!'" Or as  
Bloom would say, in very different terms, "There are  
no methods. There are only our selves". John Tranter  
would probably endorse Frank O'Hara's *jeu d'esprit*

with more glee than he would Harold Bloom's pathos.  
Be that as it may, the kind of poetry O'Hara wrote,  
and Tranter admires, must go on its nerve, without  
a preconceived method. One question that hangs over  
any evaluation of Tranter's work is the degree of  
indebtedness he still has to writers like O'Hara,  
Ashbery and Berrigan. In *Under Berlin* he writes of  
it with his usual irony:

yet in the end it is our fault, i.e. my fault  
not to be born Frank O'Hara and cursing  
a whole culture for it—it's no excuse  
not to be run over at thirty.

But when the stakes are high—and for a poet nothing  
is higher than originality—one needs more than that  
sort of irony in one's hand. Tranter seems to have  
realised this, and that may be what makes *Under Berlin*  
such a change from his earlier collections. Much of  
the book is a popular comedy of manners: street wit  
and style, an air of sophistication that breeds cynicism,  
and no plot worth speaking of. Hardly Restoration  
London, "Debbie & Co." pictures a council pool  
"chockablock/with Greek kids shouting in Italian",  
yet Tranter is as intensely interested in the bitchiness,  
studied indolence and flair as Congreve would be.

Always a polemicist, Tranter insists on a sharp  
distinction between the ancients and the moderns. In  
*Under Berlin* this is nicely registered in several poems  
that allude to the Alexandrian poets Callimachus (a  
stern formalist) and Apollonius (a modernist, happy  
to let the poem breathe a little) who flourished in  
the third century B.C. There's no mistaking  
Callimachus's poetic programme:

I hate the epic poem  
nor do I like the public highway.  
I abhor the wandering lover,  
I will not drink from the common spring,  
and despise everything popular.

It's not always clear whether Tranter actually likes  
"the public highway" or the "wandering lover", but  
his verse certainly draws from popular culture as freely  
as from high literature. The appeal to Callimachus  
and Apollonius has two effects: to establish a parallel  
between contemporary Sydney and ancient  
Alexandria, two large cosmopolitan cities in the  
colonies; and to make the distinction between the  
ancients and the moderns seem natural and inevitable.  
It's an odd thing that just as Tranter reifies the  
"absolutely modern" into an ideology his own verse  
moves into more traditional forms, and along more  
traditional lines. (One or two poems, like "Country  
Veranda", would not seem out of place in a book  
by Geoff Page.)

There are impressive successes—"South Coast  
After Rain, 1960", "North Light"—and a whole range  
of slightly lesser lyrics such as "Lufthansa",

"Laminex" and "Backyard". A lot of space is devoted to the long sequence "Sex Chemistry" which, for all its voyeurism, strikes me as formulaic: as if it were hastily written, relying implicitly on well-known attacks and defences. Then again, the voyeur is controlled by predictable formulae; perhaps the poem's problems are programmed by its questions. Better to think of Tranter at his most memorable, as in these lines from "South Coast After Rain, 1960":

Ah, the girl, how lovely she is;  
at sixteen, how grown up.  
He thinks of meeting her in twenty minutes,  
nothing else.

The radio glows in the dashboard,  
the rock 'n' roll sounds brand new.  
Things will be like this  
forever.

In its weaker moments Jennifer Maiden's *The Trust* moves well within the orbit of Tranter's early work; however, like *Under Berlin*, this new collection is more relaxed, more open to a broad range of experience, than before. The centrepiece is the long title poem, an exploration of intimacy in its various facets. Ambitious as this sequence is, several of the shorter lyrics have more force. Perhaps the best of the lot is "The Well":

The hands won't rest when they are able  
but skim insensate skin, and fall  
to mouths that fill and blur and shrivel  
as florid with reborn reaction  
as if they had so cried already—and  
again rubbed their tears down an arm,  
so swelled the veins with a marble friction  
on the frigid reverse of the palm.

That moves very well indeed; yet when Maiden adopts a more formal structure, as in "The Traitor", the rhythm becomes at once strident and awkward.

Bruce Beaver's admiration for poets as different as O'Hara and Rilke is familiar to readers of his *Selected Poems*. Here, in a verse biography of Rilke, he writes of that great poet's longing to write about anything "so long as it was not the poet's self". The result, as we know, was that astonishing collection, *New Poems*, what Beaver calls "a kind of open gallery of poems". "R.M.R.", as the biography is titled, has less power than Beaver's earlier verse portraits in *Odes and Days*, and, sad as it is to say, *Charmed Lives* is the work of a diminished talent. One or two of the lyrics recall the best of Beaver's "Days" series: "Nocturne" is a case in point, as is "One Long Summer Afternoon":

The lilac  
lulled me away from dusty heat  
to scenes as distant as another  
life. The tussocks in the fields

seemed sheep reclining;  
the sheep, like tussocks moving.  
We spent the day's end gardening  
surrounded by a spell of lilacs.

One revealing point in *Charmed Lives* is the sequence "Nine" which Beaver tells us is "in the style of Paul Celan". The poems look like Celan's on the page, but they have nothing of that poet's density, difficulty, inventiveness or anguish. Beaver's lyrics are lucid and fluent while Celan's actively resist any easy recuperation, as Jacques Derrida demonstrates time and again in his closely argued reading of Celan's poem, *Schibboleth*.

With Derrida we have come to a critic of vastly different style and taste from Bloom. Whereas Bloom affirms the poetics of influence, Derrida addresses what we could call a poetics of resistance: the ways in which a text "hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game". The one is concerned with questions of strength, the other with questions of difference. It's interesting that more writers are happy to read Derrida than Bloom, though perhaps not surprising. For deconstruction can show that your poem is more difficult, more allusive, more playful, than you ever suspected; while Bloom tells a darker story, that only a very few writers are truly creative, and that only the strong survive. That is not a view which will endear him to any poet, Australian or otherwise, but that has never been his intention.

Kevin Hart's most recent book of poetry was *Your Shadow*. He teaches at Deakin University. His *Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction Otherwise* is shortly to be published in England by Cambridge University Press.

- Beaver, Bruce. *Charmed Lives* (University of Queensland Press, \$9.95).  
Bloom, Harold. *Poetics of Influence: New and Selected Criticism*. Edited with an introduction by John Hollander (Henry R. Schwab, \$25.00).  
Derrida, Jacques. *Schibboleth: Pour Paul Celan* (Galilée, 62FF).  
Edgar, Stephen. *Ancient Music* (Angus and Robertson, \$12.95).  
Edmond, Lauris. *Summer Near the Arctic Circle* (Oxford University Press, \$16.95).  
Gebhardt, Peter. *Killing the Old Fool* (Pascoe, \$7.95).  
Gray, Robert. *Piano* (Angus and Robertson, \$12.95).  
Harwood, Gwen. *Bone Scan* (Angus and Robertson, \$12.95).  
Kefala, Antigone. *European Notebook* (Hale and Iremonger, \$10.95).  
Lansdown, Andrew. *Waking and Always* (Angus and Robertson, \$10.95).  
Maiden, Jennifer. *The Trust* (Black Lightning Press, \$15.95).  
Newsom, Vera. *Midnight Snow* (Hale and Iremonger, \$10.95).  
O'Connor, Mark. *Poetry of the Mountains*. With Photographs by Ian Brown (Second Back Row Press, \$14.95).  
Page, Geoff. *Footwork* (Angus and Robertson, \$12.95).  
Rodriguez, Judith. *The House By Water: New and Selected Poems* (University of Queensland Press, \$16.95).  
Scott, Margaret. *The Black Swans* (Angus and Robertson, \$12.95).  
Tranter, John. *Under Berlin* (University of Queensland Press, \$8.95).

# on the line

*If you live in the twentieth century you do not find it hard to see yourself in those, more desperate than yourself, who seek to shape it to their will. Salman Rushdie *The Satanic Verses*.*

Ayatollah Khomeini said on Teheran radio on 15 February that "the author of *The Satanic Verses*, and all those who were aware of its content are sentenced to death." No response this century to one book has had such enormous world-wide effects both on symbolic and on practical levels. We have been deluged by news of these effects and by stories about the demonstrations and protests for and against the statement. Many people have died particularly in Pakistan and India, and especially in Bombay, Rushdie's birthplace. In Pakistan a British Council library was bombed and a security guard killed. Thousands of editorials have been written. Three months later is there anything left to be said? I think there is. Moreover, the challenge Khomeini has made to each person's view of the world requires re-learning, re-focusing of our cultural assumptions, a process which will continue to occupy us for a long time to come.

What, so far, has been the practical effect in Australia? Some have said that our response at government, organizational and individual levels has been too little and too late. The government, according to this view, constrained by trade and general diplomatic priorities, acted only after the British government's fierce response, and then in too subdued a manner. Yet the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Evans, called in the Iranian Ambassador on 24 February. He told the Ambassador that Khomeini's call for assassinations was "at odds with the basic right of freedom of expression which is enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations." Perhaps a more immediate and more public statement by the Prime Minister would have given better voice to our outrage. At the level of symbol and imagination Hawke, the "great conciliator", failed once again. This is important but hardly at any practical level.

Writers, in groups and through their organizations, including those associated with this magazine, made public protests and paid for their advertisement.

Publishers, booksellers and many other bodies made vehement representations. Our Associate Editor, John McLaren, on behalf of Melbourne PEN, took up the case with the Prime Ministers of Australia and Iran, with Senator Evans and the Iranian Ambassador. John McLaren says that, to date, only Mr Hawke, through his secretary, has replied. "So far, stern words and no action. Live sheep apparently matter more to our leaders than a possibly dead author."

At this practical level we note with dismay, shaded by an understanding some might deplore, that some Australian booksellers, including Angus and Robertson, Grahames and Dymocks, have decided not to stock *The Satanic Verses*. For Angus and Robertson, with more than one hundred shops, the decision affects only half the chain, those directly owned (by a Murdoch company). A & R franchises are free to decide for themselves. Merchandising manager, Paul Carew, said the decision was made so as to protect staff. The need to protect freedom of expression was jettisoned.

The role of the media, especially newspapers, in this affair has yet to be documented and analysed. There are disturbing features. Why did the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mirror*, both Murdoch papers, refuse to accept a bookseller's advertisement for *The Satanic Verses*? And another thing: the search by so much of the media to find in Australia a Muslim who supported the Ayatollah's violence was the most disgusting and dangerous of 'beat-ups'. Anything for a headline, a shock-horror radio or television grab. Too bad: they did not find one Muslim authority but had to make do with the pathetic Javed Chaudry who spoke for no one but himself and who, in any case, quickly withdrew his spur of the moment remark (spurred of course by the media) when he appeared in a Sydney court in April. No thanks to those few media jackals that the damage to relations between Australian Muslims and the rest of us appears, so far, to be contained. Wendy Bacon examines the state of our press elsewhere in this issue.

Symbolically, the death sentence pronounced by the head of a theocratic state against citizens of other countries raises huge questions about the guarantees of individual rights in today's world. Such rights, where

they exist, hard-won over centuries, are part of national traditions only, traditions which, like notions of nationality, look increasingly fragile. In defending our freedom of speech we turn anew to all the great creators of that freedom and rediscover the limitations of 'our' traditions. Milton's great defence of the liberty of the press *Areopagitica* (1644), his call for tolerance "even of intolerable error", has been evoked over and over again. Galileo, Voltaire, Luther, a thousand others of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, have informed a million protests. But what do these mean to the Islamic world, a world which stretches to our near neighbours? What do we know of those in the Muslim world who have fought for tolerance and freedom of the press? What of *that* tradition? How little we know of the protests within Islam and of the culture producing such protests. The ruling theocracy in Iran is only one of the many voices of Islam. Even within Iran it may not speak for the majority. Recent changes there are many and turbulent. Ayatollah Montazeri, previously designated Khomeini's successor, refused to endorse the death sentences and was purged, as were many within Iran's Foreign Ministry.

Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian novelist and last year's Nobel prizewinner, spoke for millions when he called Khomeini's pronouncement "intellectual terrorism". Hesham El Essawy, a leader of the more than one million British Muslims, repudiated the death sentences while pointing out how little we know of Islam. That most Muslims are not protected by the bulwarks of our 'western' traditions may modify our moral indignation, an indignation which, in any case, sits uneasily beside the murder and torture of so many writers and intellectuals (in the Americas and in Asia) prompted and, in some cases, directed by 'western' democracy.

Rushdie's novel is about, among other things, "intellectual terrorism". It mocks and savages the tyranny in this world which arises from absolute belief in another. Rushdie challenges not only beliefs which prevail in his native 'East' but totally different beliefs, opposite and interchanging, which prevail in his adopted 'West'. *The Satanic Verses* is as luxuriant in its imagery, as incisive in its craft, as exotic and, to me, as ultimately unknowable, as the many-figured erotic carvings of some Hindu temples. It draws from ways of story telling beyond my grasp. No Muslim reader, no matter how 'enlightened' (in our terms) can avoid the question of blasphemy. *The Satanic Verses* gives us a new currency of that word. It may be we now have to think again about its relevance for us, a relevance always there just under the surfaces of contemporary life. Rushdie knew exactly what he was doing. From the reception in some countries of *Midnight's Children* (1981) he knew the raging powers of unreason he was to evoke. We can argue that that is a function of the creative artist. But we can also

wonder whether Rushdie's cure is not part of the disease.

Ten years ago few of us had any idea that the destruction of the Amazon forests was our direct concern. We changed our geography. Our perception of the world wide forest of symbols must change as quickly. Moral indignation is not enough, was never enough. Of course, in practical terms, we must continue our protest, especially within Australia whenever publishers and booksellers keep books away from us. That path is simple. What is far from simple is our response to the symbolic nature of Khomeini's judgement. Our traditions of freedom of the press, of individual rights under a common law limiting the power of the state, must be defended in contexts greater than national or 'western' traditions. On February 15 things changed, changed utterly.

*From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable.* Salman Rushdie *The Satanic Verses*.

With this issue the cost of a copy of *Overland* rises from \$5 to \$6, of an annual subscription from \$20 to \$24. Our last rise was in September, 1986. I remember that long ago I suggested introducing a life-subscription for \$100; it seemed "a good idea at the time". Our Treasurer has given a little lecture on the facts of life. That subscription, at \$240, is still a good buy. Like all little magazines *Overland* is squeezed between the clamps of production costs (about \$3.05 per copy) and rising postage (Victoria \$1.05 per copy, elsewhere \$1.10). We get \$3.60 net for each copy sold by bookshops. We have no office nor staff and we draw on the free gift of time not only of editors but of many others: above all Shirley McLaren who handles the subscriptions and much else, Gwen and Ian McDowell, Shelton Lea, Michael Dugan and Michael Sharkey who all help with proof-reading. Michael Dugan is also our honorary Treasurer and Gwen McDowell has for years helped me with correspondence. This lightens the picture as does the support of the Australia Council and the Victorian Ministry for the Arts and especially the remarkable financial help given by so many of our readers everywhere. The *Overland* Society (Chair: Nita Murray-Smith) has taken over responsibility for the magazine from the estate of Stephen Murray-Smith. It has established a Capital Trust Fund. We hope that the sale of the magnificent set of limited edition etchings donated by leading artists (see the brochure in this issue) will provide a realistic beginning for this Fund.

Barrett Reid

D. J. O'HEARN

## Plotting (2): A Quarterly Account of Recent Fiction

### PLODDING

It was Helen Daniel who, in her original and imaginative way, decided on the generic title "Plotting". I'm not so sure my pieces ought not be called "ploddings" as I bring up the rear of that dazzling line of books and writers which constituted the creative cavalry charge of 1988.

To say this is not to decry those books I will shortly move my pen among: far from it, but it is to give testimony to an astonishing year in which any of the novels short-listed for our national fiction prizes would, in any other year, have taken out awards on their own merits.

I cannot, however, understand why Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* failed to impress our learned judges or at least a majority of them. I have written about this elsewhere but it bears repeating. Carey's novel is a monumental masterpiece, a true bildungsroman where stone upon crafted stone is set carefully in place to create an edifice of towering proportions. His attention to detail, to context, while celebrating vision and risk, is the work of a major artist. Who can forget the Reverend Theophilus Hopkins, his deep fundamentalist faith as harsh as Devon, or the re-created life of our colonial past: its rural narrowness, its urban insecurity? Or those two visionary gamblers, Oscar and Lucinda, who never hold the right cards but dream their dreams and tackle the odds against all logic, and the petty mindedness of those who understand only material goals? Is it the very expansiveness, the largeness of the imaginative gamble, that failed to impress the judges? Have we, for example, become somewhat chary of the traditional novelists' role—the omniscient narrator's voice, untroubled by self-doubt, immune to self-irony, allowing only the story itself to create the ironies? I wonder.

Certainly what was noticeable in many of the novels about which Helen Daniel wrote so well and fervently was their awareness of and openness to post-modernist theory and practice. Mark Henshaw, Janette Turner Hospital, Marion Campbell, Brian Matthews and Paul Carter all show not only a comprehension of contemporary literary movements but mastery of the forms. They, in their turn, seem to have provoked

the anger and dismissiveness of some critics who refuse to accept that post-modernism is anything more than a passing fad and a self-promoting fad at that. Could it be that there has grown up, unannounced and mainly unremarked, yet another divisive hedge between various readers, with different groups striving yet again to pronounce a dominant canon?

I remember once at University receiving back a third-year essay I had written on Pope—an essay adjudged to be fairly good for its time and place. What burnt its way into my consciousness however, was the sagacious remark of the lecturer who corrected it. "In praising Pope so highly," he asked, "do you have to be so contemptuous of Dryden? Can't you recognise quality in difference?"

It was a telling and timely caution and helped remove all sorts of blinkers I had previously donned, almost unknowingly. I began to perceive the mind-manacles of pervasive literary fashions, the security of canons of taste, the arrogance and self-promotion of those for whom dismissiveness was a necessary means of fortifying ideology and perpetuating mental sloth. More importantly, I realised that openness and receptivity are essential critical obligations and that without these fundamental attitudes, judgement, however harsh it may finally have to be, is tainted. The critic is there to serve author, text and reader, not to appropriate them to the weary cause of self, yet in reading the mixed reviews of *Oscar and Lucinda* or of Marion Campbell's *Not Being Miriam*, I wonder whether some critics have even read the books they are discussing. On the one hand some commentators on Carey seem piqued that he has written a novel in the old style: discursive, unselfconscious, with rounded characters and narrative. Some commentators on Campbell's book, on the other hand, seem equally piqued that she has not written a novel in the old style: they object to her rapid wit, her self-conscious mix of voice, her display of technique with all the intellectual exigence her writing demands of the reader. She, like Henshaw, has been criticised for 'showing off' as though play itself, and display, those essential features of post-modernist writing, were mortal sins of creativity.

I make these remarks because we are in danger

of erecting barriers in the literary world along the tired old lines of the fifties. There are those for whom 'simple' has once again become a term of abuse and 'complex' the holy grail of the sophisticated. Some take pleasure only in fiction which plays endless mind-games: others cast such books aside as mere nonsense and take refuge in the safe and secure bosom of the trusted divine narrator. Displays of intellectuality arouse the dormant anti-intellectualism which is never in a deep sleep in this country. Yet, too often, the arrogance which does, rather than the self-irony which ought, to accompany such display quite rightly causes antagonism and drives readers to reject all contemporary writers who experiment with the new theories as equally worthless buttock gazers.

For those readers who find themselves confused by what is going on I would suggest a read of Brian Matthews' first collection of short stories neatly called *Quickening and Other Stories*. Matthews is, as writer and teacher, acutely aware of the labyrinth of modern literary theory. His opening gesture is called "Scenario" and whisks us and himself through the labyrinth with verve, and, as is necessary, much good humour. His stories are a good mix of the self-consciously modern and the cheekily traditional yarn, and he is an experimenter with language, feeling and perspective. But above all he is a fine writer: whether deadpan, playing with us, or passionately involved in his story, his language commands our respect. Not all of his stories are of equal value—I find him at his best when catching the invisible intimacies between people or when loosing his fond ironic humour on our quirks and eccentricities, but he is a writer who, with ease and grace, bridges the gap between the traditional and post-modern. As one reads the stories one notes how sensitive Matthews is to sound, and how expertly he captures in language the importance of the auditory sense in our modern lives.

If the meeting with Matthews still leaves some confusion about what is happening in contemporary writing then we can stand at the cross-roads and move in quite different directions. Down one path lies the bush camp of Barney Roberts whose collection *Tales I Carry With Me* is ideal for reading or listening to, by the camp fire, and to say this is to praise not belittle them. Roberts is a straightforward yarner, a man speaking of his experiences as an itinerant Australian, catching the taciturn, the funny, the tragic, in the lives of his mostly rural and working class people. They are lived tales, generous and warm, avoiding the stereotypical because each character is as alive as a friend.

By that campfire you might also find John Morrison the *Best Stories* of whom are to be found in a new selection by Penguin. Morrison is as much at home in the bush as he is in a seedy boarding house in a run down urban area, or on the waterfront. He speaks of men and women for whom life has never been

easy though neither has it been fragile. He is also aware that moral dilemmas recognise no class barriers and his acute observation of people and *mores* make his stories timeless.

If we follow this path past the camp and over the ridges we may light on Newcastle of the thirties where William Olson sets his loosely connected stories in *Down the Breakie*. Olson had almost completed his manuscript before his death in 1975 and the finished work has been drawn together by his son, W. G. Olson, from his late father's notes. It is a sharply evocative book, recreating the growing years of a young man in the industrial, coastal town during the depression. We observe young Sanders encountering the suppressed hostility of a miner on the dole: watch him as he tries his body in the local boxing gym; live in his shoes as Clappo, the awesome male teacher, makes men out of boys, by sarcasm, beatings and tormenting of the weakest. Class distinctions are crucial in this rudimentary society. Any boy, for example, who inadvertently admits to Clappo that his sport is tennis, is immediately branded as a spoiled middle class sissy, and subjected to special brutalities in and out of school. It is a tough all-male society constructed on macho rules, with little room for subtlety or private sensibility. It is where many of us come from and some prefer to remain.

If, at the cross-roads, we choose an alternative path, we might find ourselves in more difficult terrain unmarked by recognisable signposts. Here we would encounter Barry Hill erecting in our way his cerebrally labyrinthine novel *The Best Picture*. In this work, the wisdom of the East, the Upanishads, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, sanskrit mantras and a living guru mingle with Wittgenstein, Russell, Ayers and Orwell in timeless conflict. The setting is a commune, high in the Australian tablelands and the people a mix of long-term dwellers and sadly optimistic visitors. The narrator? Well let him speak for himself:

Every utterance is a severance, each sentence a pairing off: words don't tie anything down. I'm now going to try—"I" being no more than a voice loitering in sets of descriptions, conjectures, partial attachments to people, incidents, trajectories mentioned so far here (let this be ventured, then: all narrative as a sea of self-less manoeuvrings: telling as sleight of hand, self-effacement, routines for dismantling Ego, for lightly dismembering self—time out for nothing less than Dharmadancing!)—to describe the meeting between Will and Anne.

An enormous effort of writing, critical thinking and creativity has gone into this work but, sadly, to little avail. It is not that the book is not my cup of tea, it is too cerebral or mystical, or makes too many demands. I found it confused rather than confusing,

prosaic when passion was demanded, dull where it should have been exciting. None of the people in the novel could extricate themselves from their own miasma of the mind and even Michael, the attentive student of Wittgenstein's works, worries himself no further than the revelation (or is it threat?) of metaphor.

Despite these negative comments—and it is up to you readers to decide their worth—in some ways the very fact of such a book is pleasing. It admits of an author willing to experiment, prepared to offer intellectual struggle as central to his novel. It also challenges rather than lulls the reader, offers confrontation rather than allurements. Where I feel it fails is in its imaginative world and in its inability to mount theory as play. The enigmatic "I" in the piece quoted above, is of course, more than "a voice loitering in sets of descriptions, conjectures, etc.". It is also a choosing, deciding and selective "I" and that is why the narrator must not take himself too seriously. The self-effacing narrator is the opposite of much post-modernist writing where it is precisely the self-consciousness of the narrator which takes centre stage.

Janet Frame in her novel *The Carpathians* is very much aware of this problem. Her struggle is founded in the roots of post-modernist philosophy—in concerns with time, space and language.

It's another story of the town of the memory Flower, of the Gravity Star, the prospect of the sudden annihilation of the visual perception of distance and closeness, the container of knowledge, the trickling away of the perception of time and space . . . Near and far, then and now, here and there, the homely words of the language of time and space appear useless, heaps of rubble.

Frame works out these concerns in imaginative terms among the lives of people in whom we are interested because she allows us entry into their thoughts and feelings, their eccentricities and quotidian lives. When the startling, the inconceivable, occurs, it is both dramatic and beyond explanation. It is the Apocalypse of language, killing all the people in one street in a midnight shower of words, punctuation marks, letters, witnessed by a woman from New York who has lived among them for some months. It is a curious, reverberating tale, loosing upon us metaphysical fears and philosophical imaginings, as though ancient legends and modern physics have lain together and whelped a monstrous image for our time.

Returning to the crossroads from these jungles of the mind we might set out on yet another path which will lead us to confront the land itself. It is remarkable how many of our novelists still turn to the land and its brooding mystery as a means of exploration and discovery. After 200 years of European settlement the land still discomfords us, makes us uneasy, remains alien. Its vastness refuses to be filled—it is a space

which forces us to horizontal vision, dwarfs our aspirations, invites the endless trek. Geography and mapping, once the preserve of physical explorers, have now become central to many of our novelists, explorers of the mind. Gerald Murnane, Peter Mathers, Murray Bail, Peter Carey, are obvious examples. Rodney Hall's dramatic masterpiece, *Captivity Captive*, reminds us that the land is primaevial and indomitable, host to mysteries we will never comprehend. Frank Moorhouse in *Forty Seventeen* has his wholly urban and urbane protagonist return to the bush, seeking to recapture the unity and solace he had experienced as a child—and failing. Janette Turner Hospital in her dazzlingly modern *Charades*, which explores the contemporary problem of physics—parallel universes—cannot allow her ultra sophisticated heroine to escape memories of the Glass Mountain and her childhood experiences of the land. Dorothy Johnston in her new novel *Maralinga My Love* approaches the land as a lover; her character, Graham Falconer, coming to need the harsh beauty of the outback as an antidote to the dirty politics and drab humdrum of his scientific work in the city. Johnston's novel gives us a clear sense of the betrayal worked upon the people and the land by the British and our own well-meaning collaborators: the ignorance, the negligence, the lack of foresight which allowed this country once again to demonstrate its persistent colonialism.

Peter Skrzynecki, well known for his poetry, presents us with his first novel *The Beloved Mountain*. It is not entirely successful, though the central theme, the almost mystical attraction of Mount Warning to a young rural school teacher, is handled with lyrical grace and attention. We have so few mountains in this country, it is not surprising to find them exerting an undue influence on the imagination. Is their elevation—Lilliputian by comparison with those of other countries—a necessary escape from the blank horizontality of our landscape? Or has it something to do with vision and perception, a means of our conquering the perpetual flatness, by gazing down upon it? Certainly many of our tall slabs of elevated rock, such as Uluru, Hanging Rock, the Glass Mountains, command surprise and attention, their ancient starkness, their improbable permanence, reminding us of our transient hold on this land, our wilful littorality.

But let me plod on without too much speculation. Because we are an island, any road from any cross roads will eventually lead us to the coast and our careful link of cities sprawled there as though we have just landed or are permanently ready to evacuate. As I plod towards the coast there whizzes by me a bicyclist, remnant of that once very popular sport: popular because it was clearly within the reach of the average working man. Liam Davison's first novel *The Velodrome* is a very fine work. Deceptively simple,

it tells the story of a young boy, Leon, whose father, a champion cyclist, is killed in an accident at the Velodrome. His father's friend, Sam, befriends the boy and helps him weather the re-marriage of his mother to Eric, another cyclist crippled in the accident that killed his father. As the novel develops we realise that Davison is constructing a debate between opposing perceptions of reality: between Eric who believes absolutely in the accumulation of facts and Sam who thinks in terms of patterns and the circularity of events. The Velodrome, with its cyclists mounting to the rim before hurtling down to the inner circle, becomes a symbol of changing perspective and the journey north to the Barrier Reef, which Eric insists on undertaking, shows Leon the difference between knowledge as fact, and knowledge as possibility.

Together the maps made up layer upon layer of what we knew as the country and each one provided a deeper level of understanding, or a different way of looking at it. I wondered, underneath it all—when you finally got to the deepest layer—what the landscape was really like and what it would be like driving through it.

Once again, maps, landscape, perception; Davison is something of a Murnane on wheels.

In 1982 the Vogel Prize winner was Nigel Krauth and Davison was shortlisted for the 1987 award. Krauth has now produced his second novel *The Bathing Machine Called the Twentieth Century* and as we plod towards the coast of northern NSW we come upon the colonial outpost of Booloominbah, perched between river and swampland, minor port for the inland logging industry. The time is late nineteenth century and Krauth's town is described with the loving care of Dylan Thomas' Llaragub: it is also filled with similar eccentrics. Krauth's satire is gentle but pervasive, rich with humor and wonderfully po-faced.

The coast, of course, is where, until recently, all immigrant people first arrived, and most remained. Jim Sakkas, in *Ilias*, presents a vivid picture of that scene at Station Pier, Port Melbourne, the landing point where so much misery and false hope encountered Australian xenophobia and ignorant racism. Young Ilias makes good, after a fashion, but cannot finally overcome the intangible mysteries of language and the deliberate sleight of hand we Australians practise to conceal our passions and personal feelings.

Sakkas is yet another Vogel prize winner, and rightly so. The value of that award, which also gave Kate Grenville her start, is demonstrated by the quality of the novels produced by the last three authors mentioned.

It is odd, given the highly emotional tone of debate on multiculturalism and immigration, that more prominence has not been given to the ever-increasing crop of authors who are finally finding their voice

in their new land. Lolo Houbein came here from Holland in 1958 with no knowledge of English. Her second novel, *Walk a Barefoot Road*, is elegant testimony to her command of the learned language. The major part of the novel detailing the childhood and adolescence of a young girl, Riena, in Nazi-occupied Holland, is brilliant and memorable. The novel flattens out somewhat, when, after a series of disasters and personal mishaps, Riena finds herself alone and penniless in a small rented house in suburban Adelaide; her only salvation, a job as a saleswoman in a small clothes shop. Houbein depicts with numbing clarity the alienation and solitude of the migrant—unfortunately, in the latter stages of the novel, where Riena finds joy and love in a hill-top commune, the author's objectivity tends to falter and the prose loses much of its previous sharpness and bite.

Both Sakkas and Houbein have their characters move from the depressing anonymity and social antagonism of the city to the spaciousness of the country, where, if the people are on the whole just as hostile and tribal, the land itself provides some restorative solace. We are, however, a desperately urbanised nation and to find ourselves at the coast is normally to find ourselves in the city. Peter Shrubbs' *Family Matters* is set entirely in Sydney and traces the growing years of a young middle class woman as she seeks to find independence from her close-knit, educated, comfortable family. She is studying at the University, moves out of home, falls in love, but discovers that family is no easy net to avoid. It is a novel of innocence and goodness—no easy feat, and is not without some charm. Finally, I found the major character too naive to be true, her sharpness of perception, and swiftness of mind, too blinkered from reality to be valid.

Bronwen Lichtenstein, in her first collection of short stories, *Touching Sweet*, is almost the opposite. Her pen is sharp and pointed, her wit incisive, her prose a weapon:

The high-rise shop front has a shoe store—and him. Only once, but her eye holds him there forever. He is looking for shoes, finds a woman. Perhaps he is looking for a woman, and finds shoes. He is not from her city. His clothes shout forest and moose, his boots are built for snow.

Later on she decides to take him home and feed him because he looks safe. After the

steamed sultana pudding a la New Zealand she so generously feeds him, he makes a pass. She envisages being charmed, then raped in her single and solitary bed. She returns him to his bed-sit forthwith.

Lichtenstein has fire and passion, a quick sense of

humour and a ready eye for the quirky. Her stories are a delight.

Firmly set in the city, whether New York, Sydney or Melbourne, are the new mental tergiversations of Morris Lurie. *My Life as a Movie* rushes by, frame after flashing frame, entertaining, poignant, funny, reflective, in that brief off-hand way Lurie has of revealing just enough and no more. He is probably our very best pointillist of urban life.

John Tittensor, for several years ensconced in Provence, recalls the Melbourne of his youth in a surreal romp, *Carmody Comes Home*, which takes the mickey out of all he can find—the Catholic Church, the C.I.A., multi-nationals, and the crazies of the sixties who seized on anything that was new, because it was new, and discarded it some days later when the novelty was exhausted. It is an exorcising fun-run of a novel.

Another new voice, well worth attending to, is that of Stephanie Johnson. Like Bronwen Lichtenstein she too was born and educated in New Zealand and has fetched up here. Her first book of stories, *The Glass Whittler*, shows a writer ready to experiment with voice and image, a sharp intelligence and a mordant wit. She is particularly moving when writing through the persona of the naive, recording emotion as fact.

Gail Morgan's *Walk to Kulentufu* seems to me a strange mix. Some passages are lively, needle-sharp and telling: at other times the author strains to be impressive, throwing in metaphors that stand out for their graphic indifference to sense or meaning. She has need of a very tough-nosed editor and a more sure sense of her own quite obvious talent.

I have myself throughout this piece strained the metaphor of plodding—not in my prose where it sits securely—but in images of roads and coasts and cities. Let me give it one more fillip as I come to two novels which demand a wide audience.

The first of these is Kate Llewellyn's *Dear You*, a remarkably brave and disturbing book. It is a series of letters from a middle-aged woman to her absent (or is it lost?) lover who is addressed merely as "You". The form is less epistolary than diary, and allows Llewellyn to probe, waver, scream with pain, and reflect with passionate insight. As we accompany her from mood to mood, sense her anger, wonder at her self-knowledge, admire her loving patience, we learn more and more of our selves. Simple acts, such as gardening or cooking, take on the significance of survival as the author examines herself, her friends, her solitude with microscopic but generous care. It is a powerful moving document, sparing nothing and no-one, yet imbued with wisdom and intelligence that can only be the pure side of love. Its prose is intensely lyrical and direct, claiming its own beauty with easy grace. A memorable, passionate work.

Victor Kelleher's novel *Em's Story* transports us to the savage world of South Africa. A young woman returns from Johannesburg to the family farm at the

bidding of her grandmother, who demands she write the story of her family. That story is of Em, the grandmother, who first befriended a beaten up black worker, and then made love to him, only to witness his death by hanging at the hands of her father.

Em leaves the family farm and makes a solitary trek across the Kalahari to the North in an obsessive pilgrimage to the lands of the Herero, her lover's people. She finds them lying in groups of rotten corpses, exterminated entirely by the German soldiers brought out to protect the interests of settlers such as her father. In turn, Eva, the granddaughter, finds her own life imitating the pattern of her grandmother's as she too cares for and comes to love a black man beaten up by her brother and brother-in-law.

What is impressive about Kelleher's work is his structural creation of the unbreakable circle of history, credible because the genocidal callousness of the nineteenth century has not changed—it has merely adopted the mask of civilised arrogance. As Eva notes on first meeting her brother-in-law—"something smug and brutish about him that unnerves me."

Later, when tending to the broken and beaten body of the black and noting his stubborn resistance to her help, she reflects:

Whiteness, in this country, not simply a skin colour. More of an emblem. Something that can't be forgotten, ignored in the name of goodness or blind faith. Something that's always there.

Kelleher's description of the land, its native people and customs is masterly, replete with loving detail and a sense of its awesome grandeur.

His novel leads me back to a final reflection on the literature Helen Daniel and I have been roving among.

If, as I have remarked, the theme of the land, its majesty, brooding grandeur and indomitable size, remain still very much a source of inspiration to many of our writers of fiction, it is only to be expected that the people who are at one with the land are also becoming a focus for attention. This is not to say that so-called guilt is forcing writers to reflect on the Aboriginal people and our treatment of them, no more than it is to say that clearly one major effect of the feminist movement has been to alter the perspective and consciousness of male writers when dealing with colonial society. I suspect it is rather the case that our continued inability to feel at ease with the land tends to direct us towards those people who are clearly at ease with it, and to explore, as best we can, that unity of relationship. As well as this, disappointment with, if not absolute scepticism towards, the linear progressive model of social materialism may also be a factor leading to our authors' explorations of other, more ritualistic, modes of accommodating ourselves

to reality, and of lessening the alienation modern urban society creates.

Whatever the cause, several of our writers are re-introducing the Aboriginal into the landscape of their works. Rodney Hall has them as shadowy backdrops to the sacrificial family of pioneers, who carve away at the land, and at themselves, sensing the terror of the wilderness which only the Aboriginals know how to appease and use for their own purposes. Nigel Krauth re-creates a scene of colonial brutality where Darky is strung up to hang in a public bar, but enveloping the horror and brutishness of the scene is Krauth's sense of the patient wisdom of Darky's elders and family, their superior morality and ability to survive, even at the hands of their primitive white oppressors.

Bruce Pascoe, in *Fox*, traces the elusive movements of the half-caste, exploring himself and his world in the hope of discovering those origins which might bring him peace and heal the division in his soul. Eric Willmot, in *Pemulwuy: The Rainbow Warrior*, re-creates the life and tragedy of that fabled warrior, his need to defend and protect his world and the world of his forebears. These are not novels merely of protest, or attempts to arouse and sustain guilt. Like Victor Kelleher's *Em's Story* they are novels which seek to explore the unique relationship of the indigenous people with the land, to understand and appreciate the values of such people, and in so doing, to chip away at the ignorance and arrogance which underlay and still underlies their treatment by whites. Here is no venture into romantic mysticism, a return to the Rousseauist vision: rather what we have is an attempt to comprehend a value system, which in both its practical and psychic applications, is worth the exploration. I suspect (and hope) that in the years to come we will see more of such attempts, not lacking in some self-consciousness as they must be. For, after all, writers may be plotters, but they are also dreamers, creating for us in language their own dream-time.

I have now plodded far and wide, into speculation, across the land and into pockets of refreshment.

Thumbsore and numbed by the images and people of book after book, I am richer for the odyssey. I leave it to Helen Daniel to conduct the next tour, and worthy guide she is. I will plod on directionless but seeking the new paths I know are being laid by the only explorers left in our society—our writers and image-makers.

*D. J. O'Hearn is Executive Officer of The Australian Centre, University of Melbourne.*

Campbell, Marion: *Not Being Miriam*, Fremantle Arts Press, 1988, \$14.99.

Carey, Peter: *Oscar and Lucinda*, U.Q.P., 1988, \$14.95.

Davison, Liam: *The Velodrome*, Allen & Unwin, \$19.95.

Frame, Janet: *The Carpathians*, Allen & Unwin, \$32.95.

Hall, Rodney: *Captivity Captive*, McPhee Gribble, 1988, \$29.99.

Hill, Barry: *The Best Picture*, McPhee Gribble, 1988, \$34.99.

Hospital, Janette Turner: *Charades*, U.Q.P., 1988, \$26.95.

Houbein, Lolo: *Walk a Barefoot Road*, Angus & Robertson, \$16.95.

Johnson, Stephanie: *The Glass Whittler*, Penguin, 1989, \$9.99.

Johnston, Dorothy: *Maralinga My Love*, McPhee Gribble, 1988, \$12.99.

Kelleher, Victor: *Em's Story*, U.Q.P., \$11.95.

Krauth, Nigel: *The Bathing Machine Called the Twentieth Century*, Allen & Unwin, \$21.95.

Lichtenstein, Bronwen: *Touching Sweet*, Greenhouse Publications, \$12.95.

Llewellyn, Kate: *Dear You*, Hudson, \$19.95.

Lurie, Morris: *My Life as a Movie*, McPhee Gribble, 1988, \$11.99.

Matthews, Brian: *Quickening and Other Stories*, McPhee Gribble, 1989, \$11.99.

Morgan, Gail: *Walk to Kulentufu*, Dent, \$24.95.

Moorhouse, Frank: *Forty-Seventeen*, Viking, 1988, \$29.95.

Morrison, John: *Best Stories*, Penguin, 1988, \$11.99.

Olson, William: *Down the Breakie*, Allen & Unwin, \$19.95.

Pascoe, Bruce: *Fox*, McPhee Gribble, 1988, \$11.99.

Roberts, Barney: *Tales I Carry With Me*, McPhee Gribble, \$10.99.

Sakkas, Jim: *Ilias*, Allen & Unwin, \$24.95.

Shrubb, Peter: *Family Matters*, Hale & Iremonger, \$14.95.

Skrzynecki, Peter: *The Beloved Mountain*, Hale & Iremonger, \$12.95.

Tittensor, John: *Carmody Comes Home*, William Heinemann, \$14.95.

Willmot, Eric: *Pemulwuy: The Rainbow Warrior*, Weldons, 1987, \$24.95.

## Of Books and Covers: Peter Cowan

BRUCE BENNETT

Some well dressed people have always argued that clothes make the man (or woman); that the cover makes the book. Through our years of editing *Westerly* together since 1975, Peter Cowan and I have held regular disputations around this theme—neither of us however quite accepting, with Dorothy Hewett, the obligation of an author to “walk naked through the world”. Covers and clothes, we have agreed, are necessary: they present a certain face, an appearance to the world. We have differed though, on questions of emphasis. Often, I have been a proponent of the gaudy and tasteless, Peter of restraint, understatement and simple design. I have argued that a magazine should now and again grab the attention of readers, even shout at them, while Peter has insisted that literary innovation and the quality of material between the covers is paramount. We have usually conciliated our differences, often on the grounds of straitened economies. But a review of back issues of *Westerly* yields evidence of certain victories and defeats. For instance, Peter had success with a series of outback images: stark mineshafts against the skyline, or gibber and dune seen through the remnants of a building; on the other hand, I could point to a couple in bed in the Playhouse presentation of Barry Oakley’s play *Bedfellows*, or to the scarlet and black silhouette image of a woman on a harvester on the cover of the Contemporary China issue. Most recently, the addition of Dennis Haskell as a third editor and Susan Ellvey as designer has contributed to a more complex dialectic, improving no doubt the directness, colour and style of *Westerly*’s appearance to its readers.

A review of the sign systems implanted in Peter Cowan’s book covers since the early 1940s yields some interesting results. His first collection of stories, *Drift* (Reed and Harris, Melbourne and Adelaide, 1944) is heralded by the dark-brown grotesques of two of Albert Tucker’s unemployed figures of the 1930s: one of them, in great-coat and boots is stepping out drunkenly, theatrically, swinishly, bottle in hand; the other, darkly whiskered, slumps, staring out of hollowed eye sockets. These are two ways of responding to the tough years of the Depression and

its aftermath. Further back, a small faceless figure cowers beside the wall, a child perhaps, reminiscent of Edouard Munch’s figures of alienation and despair. A dark sky glowers above the walls and the boarded windows of the street. Appropriately, the book opens with a story called “Isolation” and ends with one called “Night”. There are lighter stories, but what strikes me about this collection, published during the war, is an emergent style and preoccupation with individuals who find themselves, or place themselves, outside of the mainstream of society. In this respect, the recent stories of Tim Winton and Archie Weller have a direct line back to Cowan’s stories of dispossessed drifters of the 1930s and 40s.

A continuity and development is suggested by the cover of Peter Cowan’s third collection of stories, *The Empty Street* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965). The painting by Robert Dickerson, which is reproduced on the cover is called “Boy in a Street”. The figure of a boy/man in nightshirt set against the sterile, windowless walls of the street suggests an even starker loss of community and communication than is signalled in *Drift*. An informed and enthusiastic supporter of contemporary figurative art, Peter Cowan insisted with his publishers that the Dickerson painting was right for this book. Ironically, for a writer who insists on the unpopularity of his art, this volume quickly sold out, but Peter Cowan’s alibi, his ‘cover’, was Dickerson’s painting. It was the painting, not the stories, he insists, which sold the book.

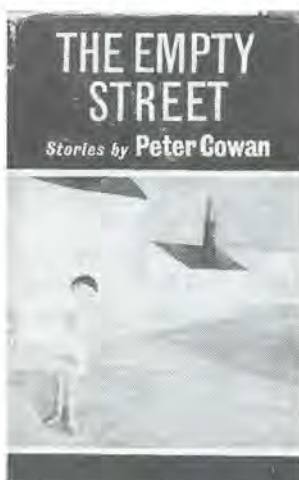
In these early books, especially *Drift*, a rapport seems to have existed between author, publisher and text which was not evident again in Peter Cowan’s career until his later liaison with Fremantle Arts Centre Press, commencing with the publication of *Mobiles* in 1979. I don’t want to harp on the negative examples. But the patchwork of colour on the cover of *The Tins* (U.Q.P., St Lucia, 1975) or the ‘art deco’ cover on the selected stories, *A Window in Mrs Xs Place* (Penguin, Ringwood, 1986)—which I introduced but did not choose the cover for—we see a relative lack of ‘fit’ between cover and contents compared with what was achieved in the relationship with John Reed

and Max Harris in Melbourne in the early 1940s and with editor Ray Coffey and designers Susan Ellvey and John Margio a generation later in the late 1970s and 1980s at Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

The covers of Peter Cowan's last three books of fiction with Fremantle Arts Centre Press are revealing; but, in keeping with the author's outlook, they are not too revealing. They imply rather than state their meanings. The selection of new stories titled *Mobiles* (1979), for instance, is introduced by a cover which is dominated by a huge, obdurate and wonderfully textured red rock caught, it seems, in the late afternoon sun. Hard against it is a piece of spinifex and gnarled grey wood. This photo, like some of the black and

"Red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky in the morning, sailor's warning." The cover designer's image of sky, and Cowan's in the book, is more complex and ambiguous, tantalising the imagination. But I'm still inclined to see it as a morning warning. I will return to this image later.

If covers themselves tell a story, then we might look for a sequence from *Mobiles* to *The Color of the Sky* and the latest volume of stories, *Voices* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988). The first impression, which Peter Cowan himself somewhat mordantly observed to me is that they are "getting darker". In one respect that is so, and may reflect something of a darkening vision as Cowan lives through the seventh decade of



white photos of aspects of the Western Australian landscape in the book's interior, makes an ironic comment: in this case, the red rock (which is one of a number which Peter Cowan knows and has photographed out the back of Meekatharra) is an image of stability and even sanctuary; (I'm reminded of the lines in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "(Come in under the shadow of this red rock)".) Beside this image, and other images of landscape in *Mobiles*, is set the idea which recurs in the stories of the mobility, rootlessness and transience of modern Australians. The individual narratives thus contribute to an overarching idea which is reinforced, through ironic contrast, on the cover. The obduracy of the West Australian landscape is not sentimentalised; for, as Cowan has said, that landscape is both "utterly attractive" and "pitiless". To find a hard beauty where other white Australians see only emptiness or ugliness is one of this writer's enduring legacies.

From the element of earth in *Mobiles* we turn to air in the novel *The Color of the Sky* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1986). Susan Eve Ellvey's cover design from Peter Cowan's photograph wonderfully captures the ambiguity of the sky, which some of us might foolishly try to encapsulate in the simple folk rhyme:

his life. But I'm reminded of a comment (by Craig McGregor, I think) that Cowan writes like a young man, open to new concerns and the development of experimental forms. I agree with this. He is one of the few Australian writers of short fiction who has varied and developed his art in response to changing conditions and possibilities: from the censorship constraints of the 1940s and 50s, for instance, to the freer environment of the 1970s and 80s. So I read the cover, and the contents of the new book *Voices*, with less pessimism than Peter Cowan's observation about a series of books slipping into the dark. For one thing, darkness and light are relative qualities. As any photographer knows—and Peter Cowan works regularly in a photographer's dark room—the quality of light achieved depends upon, is correlative with, the shades of darkness. John Margio's photo of a corner of a building lit by a spotlight which pierces the surrounding dark enhances the impression in the stories of the interrelatedness of light and dark.

Without the trappings of normal narrative conventions, such as authorial commentary or explanation, or even quotation marks to denote direct speech, Cowan's voices do speak unclothed, as if out of the darkness. They seem bare of eccentric clothing,



mannerisms, the colorful paraphernalia of conventional notions of 'character'. The effect is to light up a corner of the self or its society, to show something of the play of light and shade that comprise the experience of living.

For darkness is of course a metaphoric quality, as Sigmund Freud recognised when he referred to the unconscious as the night-time side of the self: the dark, usually concealed, unkempt aspect of our personality which the light of rationality tries to sweep aside: awkward emotions, fears, desires, nightmares.

Peter Cowan's fiction, and especially *Voices*, presents glimpses of this darkness of unreason which we all share; and which, paradoxically, in a world dominated by economic rationalism and its offshoots may be the best guarantee of our humanity.

In their formal arrangement and treatment of their subjects, Peter Cowan's short fictions resist the controlling hand of superficial reason. In their representations of what their author has called "the pointlessness, frustration and bitterness of much of today's living" they reject the conventions of a realism deriving from historical narrative or journalism. Yet the world which they reveal in ways other than those of the historian or journalist is that which our newspapers regularly inform us about, or moralise upon: the drug culture, prostitution, sexual abuse,

commercial corruption. Settings, which are often used symbolically, range from representations of the dry interior of Western Australia to sections of its coastline, from school classrooms and their surroundings to glassed-in apartments in Perth or a hotel in one of the nearby Asian capitals. In presenting us with headline catching situations, Cowan might seem to be a sensationalist. His approach is in fact opposite to this: he reveals situations only gradually and indirectly, without ceremonial fanfare, hinting at possibilities and alternatives, engaging the reader in a process of understanding and a questioning of conventional assumptions and values. The second story in *Voices*, "The Call", is characteristic in its method. It opens like this:

She opened the door of the unit. From the narrow walk of the third floor the light was behind him.

Then she said: You.

Please, he said. Don't close the door.

He did not move. She said: You. Here.

I wanted to speak to you.

I must be mad.

It would not take long.

I could shout. Even here someone would know.

I understand that.

I don't believe this.  
 Could I talk to you?  
 You want me to let you in here?  
 Please.  
 She saw the grey concrete of the  
 walkway, the brown painted bars of  
 the railing, a line of thin shadows.  
 You stand there. You say that. After  
 what you did.  
 Because of that.  
 There were voices along the end of  
 the walk, someone calling. He moved  
 and she could see his face.

These voices, as if overheard, must be pieced together to extract a meaning. A kind of auditory imagination takes over as we are presented with these voices which speak to us from a frame of changing light and shade. From the start a tautness, a tension, is evident in the voices, a rough music of discord. One voice, it becomes evident as we read on, is that of a man, the other that of a woman who has been sexually assaulted by him in the past. There have been two trials, one in court and one in the man's conscience while he is in gaol. On parole he has returned, he says, to try to apologise and understand. The voices rise and fall: accusations, wounding comments, puzzlement and self-hate are revealed. No moralising comments are made by this author, nor does the story close conclusively. While disappointing as a piece of journalism, the story is remarkable for its capacity to build a situation in the reader's mind by hints and clues, by innuendo, by the slightest variation of vocabulary or word order.

Few writers have used human voices more skilfully to explore the tensions between male and female set against the changing expectations of society. Peter Cowan's fascination with this subject runs right through his work and is nowhere more alive than in its contemporary manifestations. In "The Gully", for instance, which seems to be set somewhere on the mid-northern coast of Western Australia, tensions grow between a man and woman over the man's increasing involvement in an operation to smuggle drugs. There is nothing sensational in the treatment of this situation. Nor is there a sentimentalisation of the woman's motives in urging her partner to opt out before it is too late. Her outlook is summed up in her attitude to the garden she has grown in the sandy, unpromising dunes, her commitment to the place where they have settled:

She opened the door, the light sharp across the verandah boards. A few high thin clouds. Moving inland. He saw her walk down the path, turn at its angle to stand by the trees, green along the edge of the yard.

She was standing by the wired space of the gardens. The beds sheltered, held, by the house and

the line of trees. The clear hard colours of the zinnias, petunias. They grow here, she said. Ordinary things, but they grow. In the shade by the trees among the rocks, carried in, piled carefully, ferns and creepers trailing the ground. In the sun, near the path, plants, wide leaved, small yellow flowers, he could not remember the names. He said: This is all you care about here. She said: It's the only beautiful thing here . . .

(p. 18)

Against the woman's belief in nurturing and maintaining a garden, the man cannot remember the names of the flowers. Cowan says no more. He does not need to. The clues are planted, the attentive reader will allow them to grow.

If there is a hint of idealisation of the woman in "The Gully", reminiscent perhaps of the early story "The Tractor" (woman as nurturer and natural conservationist) other stories show the perversions and anxieties which result from the power of certain individuals over others, whether they are women or men. If sex is important in Peter Cowan's stories, power is central; and the urge to escape to some freer, more open domain is often impelled by a fear of order or authority imposed. In the story "Apartment", for instance, Karen, ex-addict and prostitute enjoys the relative luxury of an apartment where she has been asked to live with a man on weekends and evenings, perhaps as a payoff for some drugs deal. The segments of this fine story do not *tell* the reader what is going on: rather, the reader must piece it together like a puzzle, like the actual puzzle of finding oneself in a strange situation and making sense of it. Glass is a powerful signifier here (as it is in the story "Glass Orchid", set in a hotel in Singapore). In certain lights, glass of course may be the perfect transparency; in others, it may just reflect one's image back again. The voices of the minder and hired woman in "Apartment" demonstrate both these possibilities: enclosure and the possibility of an open, freer vision upon the outside world. Also present in this story is the metaphor of acting: different roles, disguises may limit the personality, or give it scope for expansion. Prisons of tyranny—of unwarranted control by one person over another—may be temporarily transmuted by the imagination, by assuming different roles—by having 'covers'—but these may themselves become fixed masks, fetishes. Such fixedness is in itself a death.

The qualities which I have outlined indicate something of the complexity which Peter Cowan builds into these short fictions, which take them far beyond the limited ambitions of the journalistic story or the formula romance. The only thing that is 'simple' about them is their vocabulary. Like his early mentor Hemingway, Cowan has developed a stripped-down style. And like Beckett's voices, Peter Cowan's are rendered in a terse, compact style with something of

Beckett's allegorical edge (though without his clowns or his virtuoso *tour de force* quality). As the epigraph to *Voices* from Max Harris's poem "Passing Mouths", suggests, the most meaningful literature for our times will show the attempted communications of people lost, which nevertheless express their need: the "need/of the gentle breast, the greed/and hollow of love, the cheek/to kiss, the lips."

Peter Cowan achieves this vision of Australia's post-second-war 'lost generation' by techniques in prose fiction which relate as much to painting and music as they do to other literary texts. His fiction has links with those marvellous artistic breakthroughs spawned during or soon after the second world war by Nolan, Tucker, Dickerson, Boyd and others. These painters re-imagined landscape and people in the shadow of despair, creating images not out of cliché but by a reversion to essential images seen as if in dream or nightmare. Landscape too could be perceived afresh if one did not rely on the tired forms of surface realism. The major Australian post-war painters seem to have inspired some of Cowan's experiments in symbolic form and in the notion that works on certain themes could be repeated, with variations, in a series. The stories in *Mobiles*, for instance, and again in *Voices* have this sense of a loose connectedness, of variations on certain themes.

The concluding story in *Voices*, "The Sky", contains an interior monologue about the problems of form in art which carries over, in part from his recent novel. The problem is encapsulated in the question of the sky and how to render it in art. The French symbolists also posed this problem and it sent some of them to the wall, where they were reduced to wordlessness, gazing upon blankness. For Cowan's 'cover' in this story, his allegorical narrator, the problem is posed by his apparently contradictory responses to music and to the other arts. How can one be "deeply moved by what is often called the music of the late baroque"

yet also accept that "the hard, empty sky [is] its own necessity"? The easy way is to opt out of this and other ironies and puzzles of living; to accept what he refers to as "a god of our time", namely "successful truism". The lures of "successful truism" abound. But Peter Cowan, a writer's writer who has created a position at the leading edge of his craft (and *there's* a successful truism!) cannot remain content with this. In an odd way, which is entirely Cowan's, he combines a bareness of style with the complications and reverberations of baroque music, of Pachelbel's Canon, for instance, or some of Bach's suites. Cowan attempts to keep his stories in a single key, but the voices counterpoint and overlap, as in the musical canon. In patterning words like this, the writer of short fiction, as of music, is testing the limits of his art.

It may be the case that, just as James Joyce took his particular form of fictional elaboration to its utmost extent in *Finnegans Wake*, Peter Cowan has taken the minimalist exercise in short fiction to its most extreme point in *Voices*. This may be a suggestion of the cover of *Voices* which seems almost overtaken by the encroaching dark. But the dark, as I have suggested, may also reveal. The descending thirds of Pachelbel's Canon, or a face of blankness and misery in a Tucker painting may, like Cowan's voices, provide a shaft of insight into complex lives. This is the assertion of art against the general dark.

Acknowledgement to the *Fremantle Arts Review* where this article first appeared.

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*Peter Cowan's most recent book is the novel, The Hills of Apollo Bay, published in March this year by Fremantle Arts Centre Press, \$14.99.*

## TWO POEMS BY KEITH HARRISON

### OPAL MINERS

Dumb bastards, living down here—just for bits of fire.

Weasels in a hole. Last week a truck  
Went past, we heard it shake the ground.  
*Truck, I said. Herb, it's a truck.*  
I don't think Herb understands most words  
Any more. We never speak, just dig. Hardly ever.  
But he heard the shaking too  
So we both up into the horrible daylight.  
Blinding white, musta been 40. And there was  
This truck, stopped, still tickin over  
And a big fella with one of them army helmets  
And a great handkerchief droopin down his back.  
Lookin straight at us, through binoculars  
Like we was animals or somethin.  
Just lookin, maybe five minutes.  
None of us moved. Herb, me, nor him.  
Then he put the glasses down, and you know  
What he did? Give us the finger.  
Then he dropped down and they drove off.  
Not a wave, not a bottla steam. Only the finger.  
Just as well he didn't speak, I s'pose.  
Herb's no good with strangers.

And I'm better off down here lookin for  
Whatever I'm lookin for. It's slow,  
But it beats Sydney any day. And when you find  
A good one even Herb starts jabberin.  
And I think to myself, *that's what we came here  
for:*  
*Little lost fires.*

Look, if I carry them  
Up into the light and hold them you can hear  
The big fire, and the little ones, here  
On my open hand, all talking to each other.  
Maybe  
That's why Herb don't trust ordinary words any  
more.

We'll probably stay here till we croak.  
By then we'll have almost no use for them.

Only a handful, one or two every year.

### PIRRA IN DEEP WINTER

Mist at the end of pencils,  
mist in pillows, fuming in our hair.  
Not being mist  
we thrust it back, seeking  
clear lines, the cello's  
gutsy vibrato—  
not being mist, not being mist at all.

Even the sheep have lost their edges.  
Saffron rainlight squeezes the house all day.  
Everything here  
hunkers down, rides toward the centre:  
an inch, a thousand years.  
Soon, in a time beyond trees  
they'll dig us up  
and marvel at our bones  
the quaint design of wrenches, architraves,  
dead rifles.

Noon: a river of cooking smells,  
brown voices drifting, birdless air.  
Our voices, and our fathers'—who cannot  
shake themselves  
back into their bodies,  
but wander everywhere about the house  
like vaneless windmills  
raging with desire.

Humming the themes of *Was* and  
*Will Be Soon*:  
gong-beat of summer; a clarity  
of wolves in early snow.

Fog at the window: Herr Haydn  
brooding at the black piano,  
rose light hesitating  
in ancient glass.

A ginger tomcat dozes by the fire.  
His mother, heavy with others,  
scratches him with her eyes.

## SHAVING

Leaning forward  
with a towel around your waist  
both arms bent upwards  
I glimpsed you through the door

saw a path of flesh  
cut among the snow  
your hand drew down your cheek  
the other drew the razor up

do you have any idea  
how strange and beautiful  
this is

as if an antelope  
stepped to a lake  
gently doffed its antlers  
on the bank  
and swam away

KATE LLEWELLYN

## BATH

I remember I told my cousin that my bottom was  
inflated

and if I squeezed tightly it was really smaller.

My hair spreading out like a sea string under the  
water,

a deep breath to rinse shampoo.

When dad had a bath, even if I had gone to bed, I  
got up

and watched television.

I hated him clearing his throat, splashing himself,

I hoped every night he would have an early  
shower.

Underneath the bath water my legs looked

thinner, on the surface

they are wide as bridges.

I always flood my breasts and watch them sink as  
the water rises,

my stomach creating a shelf dropping and curving  
to the ocean.

KERI GLASTONBURY

## THE SISTERS

Twin lambswool berets  
crowded pat upon  
paled apricot hair;  
they weren't twins  
reading sunshine law.

Dawdle, dawdle, stop:  
they went gradual  
at morning assembly  
as a hit woodman  
threading a needle.

No boy dared lift  
their dusky gym frocks'  
long match lining  
to check bloomers  
clean and paid for.

They lunched alone  
from one red case,  
a snobby duet  
whose faces detached  
like lost marshmallows.

Major and minor  
nodes bidding a stem,  
they loved each other  
in sockettes white  
as hospital gauze.

Evergreen cloud  
ordered their house  
bane to everyone  
save Christ and them.  
They were not allowed,

Monkey puzzle trees  
goaded me by;  
colour to colour  
stick insects crawled  
within fernish pine.

Willed by whispers,  
I found at home  
a mason bee's nest  
laid with stung spiders  
flame couldn't wake.

LEWIS PACKER

## TUMBRIL MORNING

The man on the morning bus has a toupé—  
on his lap a kangaroo in plastic with a bow  
and one small bullet hole behind the ear—  
ventriloquist incontinent with blood:  
the tumbril trundles on.

“Persons or parts projected from a vehicle  
will be prosecuted and the bus withdrawn”;  
That leaves a lot of elbows writhing in the air,  
truncated armpits pump arterial ooze:  
the tumbril trundles on.

Asian students rise on bandy legs for old Greek  
women.  
Aloe eyes slide round for refuge in the sniper’s  
hide,  
consigned there by a mushroom  
and the sneers of fifty years:  
the tumbril trundles on.

The roo now wears the toupé with a grin.  
His puppet sneezes globs of blood.  
The elbows clap and writhe.  
The Asian eyes squirm in the jar of olives.  
Into the mushroom haze the tumbril trundles on.

A. S. HODGE

## LIZARD RACES

Yarlo: where they rear the racing lizard  
On summer flats sere as goanna hide.  
Serious dollars rest on this runner  
Burnished with enamel.

He pops from the squeeze box,  
Sprinting past the odd goanna—  
Vetted so he won’t cannibalise  
His close kin. These are money-earners  
Or plain dud lizardry; bearded dragon,  
Thorny devil and the bicycle lizard:  
Give him a chain and he’ll take an acre.

It’s said they have a mutual fondness,  
Scourers of ant hills, older than Hannibal.

To me they are not ugly or old; beauty’s  
Kin deep. I dream of similarities  
In my sleep.

J. K. MURPHY

## ADDIO, MUSE!

Today is rinsed as unripe grapefruit  
after last night’s rain—but where  
is creative angst? Loss sought for  
yet it leaves a little grief—  
source perhaps of a final few  
voluptuous ejaculations of ink.

So farewell, endlessly variable days  
and boiling sea, the roar of time;  
loved flowers of the earth, reminders  
of the transit of bright forms  
and alchemy of the elements—  
out of the final mud your radiant birth;

and you, inhabitant of my heart,  
not less real for being invented,  
from whom as from a marriage  
I have learnt; and farewell,  
rhetoric of farewell, operatic  
lies about my place in the universe!

ALISON CLARK

The concrete poem is much more than a novel literary toy. It is uniquely capable of carrying complex meanings and the stamp of individual creativity, and deserves greater critical appreciation.

This is especially true when we consider the number of outstanding practitioners in Australia, and the quality, vigor and diversity of their work.

Concrete poetry is difficult to pigeon-hole as it falls between the strict formal boundaries of 'literature' on the one hand, and the 'visual arts' on the other.

However, the problem of classification is solved if we consider all writing, including the 'hybrid' forms I am about to discuss, as falling under the more inclusive term of 'inscription'.

This not only makes the connection between writing and sculpture, writing and painting, very plain; it also evokes the ancient tradition to which concrete poetry belongs—one that literally goes back to the pyramids, and beyond them to mankind's earliest and magical recognition that icon and logos could be one.

To quote Dom Sylvester Houédard, an influential European concrete poet of the fifties, "Designing large texts and pictures as in Shalmeneser's Eighth Century obelisk and the mortuary temple of Ramses III, in which text and picture interpenetrate perfectly—the manipulation of texts into massive columns, into amulets and other visual wholes—gives the carver/scratcher/writer mastery over words as matter, as concrete things."

In the more recent Western tradition, of course, we have the example of illuminated manuscripts.

Those who may object that a modern book need have no connection with visual images and sculptural form forget that it already has—inescapably.

Although you may not be able to judge a book by its cover, the nature of perception ensures that you look at the cover each time you take it up, and text and cover image become associated.

Also—to follow the argument into a slightly different area—there is a great deal of difference between reading the same text presented in different formats, or in different media. One's eyes and attention will be articulated in different ways, as each establishes a different rhythm of perception. Typeface, typesize,

column measure and page design will determine how easily and how quickly you are able to read, and this to some extent *modifies* the text. (For example, there is a flickering pause each time a page is turned.) It is only because we have become habituated to a standard format for books that we forget that many others are possible. We also fail to recognise the book's affinity with Shalmeneser's obelisk. It too is a cultural and—dare I say it?—sculptural, artefact defined by the dominant print technology.

Concrete poetry, uniquely, is sensitive to these issues and plays on the physical properties of the print medium, to create an inter-play between word and image, between literal and visual meaning and lexical and semiotic references.

Generally, however, when concrete poetry appears in literary magazines, it is used in the same way as illustrative material—to break up pages of grey type and lend them visual interest. While this seems reasonable editorial practice, it may deflect us from considering individual examples on their own formal and aesthetic terms.

In Australia, concrete poets have received little critical attention, and there have been few anthologies of concrete poetry. A notable exception to this is *Missing Forms*, published in Melbourne by Collective Effort in 1981. It is especially valuable for including work by outstanding precursors in the field, such as Alan Riddell and Sweeney Reed, and deserves to be re-published in an updated, revised and better printed edition.

In the sixties Reed refined simple typographic forms into immediate and resonant lyrical statements. A much-published poem, consisting of the word HORIZON cut in half horizontally, is an example of his gift for elegant minimalism and poetic evocation. Reed also pioneered the poster poem and sometimes worked in areas closely related to painting and sculpture.

Work originally exhibited in galleries in the sixties and seventies by Tony Figallo, Garrie Hutchinson, Alex Danko and Rudi Krausmann is also reproduced in *Missing Forms*.

More recently, a deal of outstanding work has been

produced by II. O, Jas H. Duke, Peter Murphy, Richard Tipping, Pete Spence, Peter Lyssiotis, Ted Hopkins and Alex Selenitsch. Six of these are also poets in the usual sense; Spence, Lyssiotis and Hopkins have widely experimented with collage, photo-narrative and visual texts, whereas Selenitsch has confined himself almost exclusively to concrete poetry.

Selenitsch is regarded by many of his peers in Australia as one of the doyens of concrete poetry, and outlining the development of his work may be useful in revealing how certain international trends have been absorbed in this country.

In the early sixties, while studying architecture, Selenitsch was introduced to the collages and visual poems of the Berlin Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, and he was particularly impressed by the simplicity and immediacy of Schwitter's single letter poems (dating from 1924). Later, in 1966, he read an essay in the first issue of *Form*, a magazine published in the UK, in which Roland Barthes cogently examined neo-constructivist and rationalist approaches to art.

The article persuaded Selenitsch that everyday materials were ideally suited to produce art, and that all narrative elements should be excluded from it, in order to mark a radical break with the 19th Century.

His architectural training also encouraged Selenitsch's appreciation and eye for visual structures and patterns.

Central to his early work was a preoccupation with time. It seemed to him that the immediately apprehended image/poem might be able to remove time from art. If that were possible, the object or poem

could exist, shorn of temporality, in an instant or continuous present.

These inherently metaphysical speculations underly much of his work. If all history is contained in the here and now, then the present is an unchanging field and history an illusion fostered by the individual selection of its simultaneous and infinitely diverse contents.

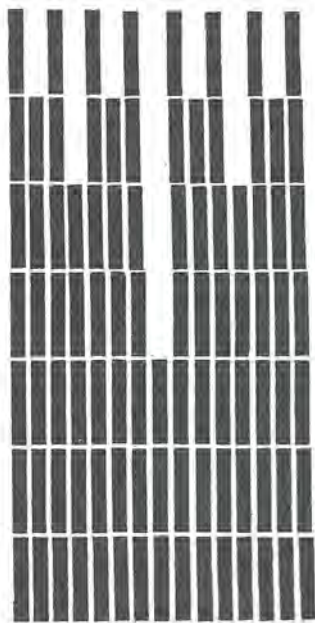
These were heady, exciting and thoroughly radical ideas, and they led Selenitsch to elaborate a series of large-scale projects, many of which—20 years later—still continue.

Selenitsch's first concrete poem was completed in 1967, while he was still an architecture student. He was designing a staircase, using Letraset to label a drawing, when he had a sense of "sudden crystallisation". The abbreviations 'up/dn', he saw, could be strung vertically into a ladder, and 'up' was the reverse of 'dn'. This suggested not only the visual representation of a ladder, but of scales of notes, snakes and ladders, and so on. Like his best work, its discovery was uncalculated and fortuitous. Instead, there was the excitement of instantaneous recognition, as seemingly disparate elements suddenly cohered.

"Up/dn" was first published in *Broadsheet* in 1968, but has been republished many times. It remains an elegant example of Selenitsch's multi-valent, typographic style.

However, Selenitsch became dissatisfied with concrete poems which use print to suggest the shapes of objects, and wanted to depart from 'secondary picture making'. At the same time, he was studying

"2 trees" from Societree a-z  
by Alex Selenitsch



the paintings of Yves Klein, the French artist and member of the influential 'Zero Group', who was active in Dusseldorf in the 1960s. Klien's incorporation of ordinary objects into his work was inspirational.

But more influential was the work of Marcel Duchamp, which Selenitsch found impenetrable, enigmatic and intriguing. In it, meaning seemed secondary, as it welcomed multiple interpretations. Duchamp also seemed to have by-passed the restrictions of 'taste', by using games, routines and chance manipulations to construct his art.

At this time Selenitsch embarked on one of his major projects, the "Monotones" series. He selected a deliberately 'blank' word, monotones, and has since subjected it to 38 separate permutations and transformations, using a wide range of printed, painted and sculptural media. He was, and remains, less interested in the banal meanings the word might suggest, and more in the actual process of investigation—in subjecting the word to a huge range of material and aesthetic contexts and quasi-mathematical operations.

Selenitsch does not see concrete poetry as having any clear linear or historical development. (The usual one makes links between Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Schwitters, the Dadaists and Futurists, and so on.) Rather, he points to intersections and correspondences between work of the early 20th Century and that which appeared in Europe and the UK during the fifties and sixties.

Selenitsch became interested in the Vienna Group, in the work of Konrad Bayer and the visual poems of Gerhardt Ruhm, but more so in those of the Scot, Ian Hamilton Finlay, who remains perhaps the world's most outstanding concrete poet.

Finlay worked in a variety of media (so there were also links with Duchamp). He incorporated bits of the environment into his work, collage-style. He extended the field tremendously by making concrete poems into toys, embroideries, sculpture, furniture and domestic items such as kettles and teacups—perhaps following on from the ideas of Ruskin.

Finlay's concrete poems/sculptures have also been widely displayed in gardens and public places, by riverbanks and the sea, and many were designed to incorporate or reflect the natural light and colors of outdoor environments.

Finlay remains a considerable influence on Richard Tipping, who also works in a variety of media. Tipping's work is characterised by a sophisticated use of materials, and is often very likeable. But Tipping's meanings are a little too immediately transparent when—as is sometimes the case—he flirts somewhat with facile puns. Also, he is to some degree derivative of Finlay, without advancing beyond him.

In 1974, while holidaying in Europe, Selenitsch took the opportunity to meet many of the major British concrete poets, including Finlay, Bob Cobbing and John Furnival.

But in Australia, during the sixties, Selenitsch had few precursors, although Sweeney Reed and Alan Riddell had completed their early work. Dennis Douglas also introduced him to some of Christopher Brennan's typographic experiments, written while the latter was influenced by Mallarmé.

Selenitsch published some of his first concrete poems in *Broadsheet* (which consisted of a single sheet of graphics and poems and was produced by the late Ian Turner, Barrett Reid and others) and later collaborated in a number of projects with Sweeney Reed and the painter Alun Leach-Jones.

At that time Selenitsch admits he had a very 'purist' attitude to the mixing of written words and visual images. He favored an approach in which they would be completely integrated, as he believed the visual potential of the word had not been adequately explored.

Selenitsch recalls the years 1969 to 1971 as watershed ones. In Melbourne, there was a great deal of dialogue about poetry, with an emphasis on experimentation, risk-taking and research. He took part in the general ferment of artistic activity, as there seemed to him the possibility of an emerging new culture and society, as people also experimented with social ideas and ideals.

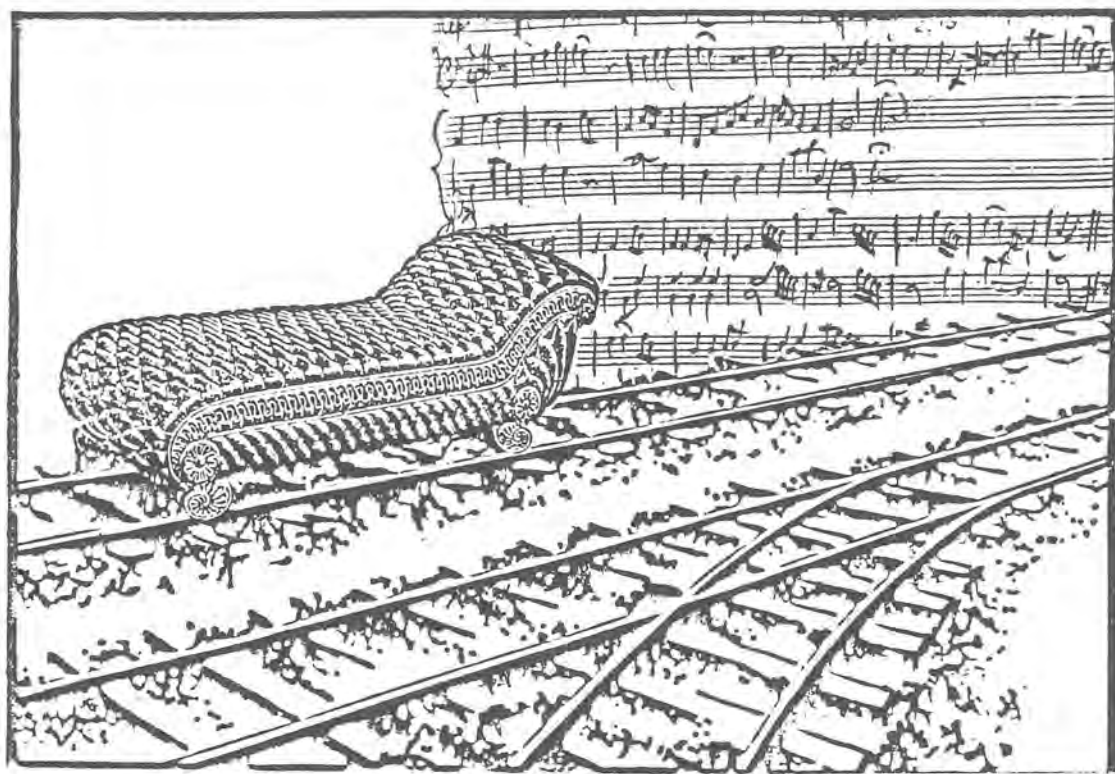
Out of a general social change, he reasoned, a new artistic language might be born and poetry taken to new and exciting places.

Selenitsch's pre-occupation with language, as with the new social values he imagined it might help to define, may have had a lot to do with his migrant background. Born in Germany of a Russian/Austrian/Ukrainian family, he has never really felt "Australian by habit" and, insulated from Melbourne within his Russian-speaking household, it was still possible for him to feel very much a European.

Selenitsch has no academic background in poetry or literature, is unread in the classics and his work is in no way referential to a literary historical context. His is essentially an art of ideas, grounded in a direct manipulation of materials and media. Even when his concerns appear metaphysical he tries to relate them to the common materials of daily life, to the physical properties of print, ink and paper.

Jas Duke and II.O are also self-taught concrete poets whose work lies outside any literary historical regime. Like Selenitsch they are not, however, naïfs—but apply a lively and completely individual approach to the solving of creative problems. Their work is also marked by great freshness and vigor, and they remain the two Australian concrete poets in whose work Selenitsch also finds the most vital source of stimulation.

Often in Duke's concrete poetry a phrase may, literally, be 'exploded'—through a very free use of typography—into an emotionally charged sign. Duke's work is visceral, bold and extremely vigorous, but its



*pete spence: from the series "Viennese Track"*

wider intellectual content becomes clear when put in context with his more discursive writing. Duke also uses Letraset in a unique way, without imitating typography. Contrasting with this 'obvious' use of a very ordinary commercial product found everywhere in print media, is the sense that Duke's Letraset poems exist purely as enigmatic objects, outside nomination as either poetry or typography. It is as though he has pre-empted and denied any attempt at critical pigeonholing in order to maximise and maintain his creative freedom. At the same time he is able to register the impact, literally 'upon' the medium, of a deep emotional intensity.

Similarly, the concrete poems of II.O are marked by great freshness and vigor, and are completely individual. Characteristically, they embrace the principle of risk-taking. II's failure rate seems higher than Duke's, but he makes up for this by the sheer energy and variety of his work, which is also distinguished by an open revelation of process. That is, II exhibits everything—each step of the poem's construction—in the finished product. Also, he has an amazing ability to recruit the most banal and ordinary, or the most refined, visual element to his own purposes. Crosswords, Chinese characters, a photograph of a bare branch, all become grist for his mill. He tackles his material in a spirit of fearless 'ad-hocism', and remains unintimidated by formal learning when he

steps into an area of specialisation—for example, when manipulating and 'distorting' Chinese calligraphy.

II.O, through a variety of publishing initiatives, has also done much to further concrete poetry in Australia.

Many concrete poets have also been influenced by painters. Selenitsch's work is in some respects a much cooler echo, in a different medium, of the painting of Mike Brown. Brown's restless and inclusive surfaces are organised like collages that seem about to embrace chaos. There are also similarities between Selenitsch's work and the Melbourne-based painter, Trevor Vickers, for whom the object and artefact are prime. In a Vickers' painting, there is an outwardly cool and tranquil design, but with an inner structural tension and restlessness that makes the painting very dynamic and full of internal movement.

Selenitsch's affinity with these painters underlines another continuing theme in his work: the contrasting of 'one' against 'many'.

The collage is an inclusive form, a unity that welcomes diversity, able to accept everything. Selenitsch regards it as pre-eminently democratic, and links it—perhaps in the heroic spirit of international modernism—with a diverse and self-regulating political system.

These ideas are consistent with the "Monotones" series, where a single word is elaborated into multiple contexts and meanings.

Sometimes the variations of monotonies also have a spatial character. For example, in one poem, the letters are superimposed, as if in a side-on (or elevation) view of the word. Sometimes the adjustments are tiny, and in one variation he simply alters the distance between the letters. Or, as in another, he includes only the area the letters enclose (the middles of the three o's and the semicircle within the upper half of the 'e').

In Selenitsch's recent work, the tendency towards complexity and elaborate systems continues with projects like his "Translating The Sator/Rotas Square". This work is a systematic—but completely imaginative—investigation of an ancient Roman 'magic square', the original of which can be found carved in rock and exhibited in the museum of Cirencester (UK).

The square is constructed in such a way that it is able to generate numerous poetic, palindromic, mathematical, metaphorical and spatial possibilities. It is a 'seed' form, a unity, able to paraphrase with almost infinite variety. Often, Selenitsch takes a diagrammatic approach in his investigation of the square. Collectively, these diagrams have a peculiar resonance, and elicit quasi-mystical associations. Unfortunately, the work is too complicated to give a full account of here.

Some of Selenitsch's work is enigmatic and very difficult, such as his "(Eks Tetraktys) 5 to 1". This work is based on a Pythagorean number pyramid, and contains a diagram meant to represent, in systematic and spatial terms, the way metaphorical systems undergo displacement and translation. Or, to put it conversely, it seeks to demonstrate how metaphor has an absolute mathematical basis in reality.

In single works which are not a part of a series, there is the same intent to cope with more complex formulations, for example, in a poem completed in 1979 titled "Constellation"—which consists of the letter 's' rotated through 360 degrees and distributed over the page in a regular diamond pattern. Out of the centre of this field, a crystalline shape has emerged. In this concrete poem, the 's' may stand for Selenitsch, for space, for white noise, for structure and for infinite possibility. The crystal may stand for the actual, the attainable, the possible and for musical structure. The poem is multivalent and richly metaphorical.

A recent series—for a variety of media—consists of 200 'versions' of the Southern Cross.\* By connecting the stars of this familiar constellation with straight lines (that are never allowed to cross) it is possible to discover many shapes other than a cross.

As well as having rich metaphorical associations, the series is a terse essay in epistemology and visual perception, demonstrating how we interpret and drastically narrow the world by overlaying it with socially habituated meanings.

There will eventually be 200 variations, to celebrate the bicentenary of white settlement in Australia. The alternative readings of the constellation suggest Aboriginal interpretations of the landscape that might have been displaced and hidden. This also gives the series an additional level of meaning, as polemic and wry irony.

Since 1984, the artistic exploration of visual languages has been dramatically re-vitalised with the appearance of *Ligne* magazine, edited by the Melbourne-based writers Bev Aisbett, Pete Spence and, in early issues, Dave Powell.

Steve Perkins, the editor of a similar American publication, describes *Ligne* as "a high-quality Xerox magazine of visual and concrete poetry, and text and



*thalia: "process: poet's card"*

image experimentations . . . (It makes) an eclectic, but not scattered, foray into the no-man's-land between language and image."

Spence, particularly, has brought great energy to his role as editor, to create a focus for much outstanding local and international work. He has also become a major Australian practitioner in the field.

His work is characterised by great freshness and energy, and by its focus on both concrete poetry and visual texts as protean forms of a new visual language, and on the ways visual and textual elements within a single composed image may interact.

In his work, he will often quote a small part or fragment of a visual image, which is able to recapitulate the whole, in much the same way a few words may refer to complex objects in the everyday world. Using the fragment and the partial image in this way amounts to a form of super collage, ensuring any narrative readings of the image remain open and diverse.

Spence's method bears similarities to P.O.'s, in that both approaches are marked by a spontaneous 'ad hocism'. Spence, particularly, is eager to move beyond an art context to shape and elaborate signs into a

new form of written language. His work acknowledges the 'play of signifiers' in the contemporary environment, a play that becomes intensified, compressed, and highly charged in his visual texts.

In the concrete poetry of, say, Sweeney Reed, there is a minimum of text, but maximum use is made of the elements comprising it. This 'classical' or 'purist' approach may be contrasted with Spence's, where letters and bits of letters are seen as visual signs building into larger and more complex texts.

As with Selenitsch, Spence's work is not pre-meditated; there is a strong sense of improvisation and discovery; a re-recognition of the purely formal shape of letters and signs; and an intuitive sense of aesthetic considerations, such as balance, composition and the use of white space.

There is also the sense that Spence is re-appropriating the print environment. For example, in one poem he has taken parts of a Southern Comfort advertisement, cropping letters to emphasise their Cyrillic appearance, then composing them in an abstract way to recapture their identity as 'pure form'. In this way he is able to re-gain control over his environment, discarding messages that might seek to manipulate him, and put its signs and formal elements to his own purposes.

However, there is no suggestion Spence is illustrating an idea or philosophical stance. Ideas are merely part of the work, which is attuned to discovery. They are also secondary to the artistic practices they generate. Nor is the work predicated on any ideology, which might narrow the possible narratives it contains or readings it makes possible.

The fragmentation of images which Spence explores is, of course, increasingly evident in the modern environment. Often, we see reductions, details and sections of images printed in books and magazines,

a huge amount of printed and visual material juxtaposed on billboards, street signs, window displays, and on television and in films.

One could speculate that this fragmentation amounts to a sort of shorthand which has already developed and been built into the system. Because, in the wider environment, signifiers interact largely by chance (having been placed there in an ad hoc and unsystematic way), they may also be generating new sub-texts that are, as yet, largely subliminal.

Spence's work, rather than "just adding to the noise", seeks to expose these sub-texts, and suggest new ones. So what lies "behind" may be read. Also, of course, they seek to surprise and work within their own formal and aesthetic terms.

On a purely personal level, Spence is also using his work to deal with the increasing complexity of language, to cope and come to terms with it, to deal with the "noise" creatively, to embrace the disparate and chance aspects of the environment in a way that is not alienating, and to discover new possibilities for language, and possibly recognise the emergence of an entirely new one.

\* See the cover of *Overland* no. 102.

*This article was written before the current exhibition Words on Walls; A Survey of Contemporary Visual Poetry opened at Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne. I was the curator of that exhibition and Alex Selenitsch was the designer. The catalogue with an extensive introduction and bibliography is available from the Gallery. The exhibition includes work by Karen Cherry, Ruth Cowen, and thalia as well as by many of the artists mentioned here. [Ed.]*

*John Jenkins' latest books include Twenty Two Contemporary Australian Composers and two books of poetry Airborne Dogs and Other Collaborations (with Ken Bolton) and Chromatic Cargoes.*



Ruth Cowen

## I.

Most of the Snowy River below Jindabyne runs deep in a gorge, excepting only an open valley running east across the Monaro through Dalgety, and the flats from Orbost to the sea. It is all hard to reach by road other than for the Orbost flats, the Dalgety bridge, a few kilometres along the Barry Way near the border of Victoria and New South Wales, and the crossing at McKillops Bridge. The river south from the Jacobs River to McKillops Bridge and then to Lucas Point, where the Buchan River runs into the Snowy, is popular with canoeists and rafting parties, and so comparatively well known. Between Dalgety and Jacobs River it is a different story, far too dangerous for easy canoeing, although it has been done. There is no good road access. The scenery is spectacular, but the topography is odd.

The Snowy runs in a great loop, east, then south; then it turns north-west near Burnt Hut Crossing for 85 kilometres to Minnigans Mountain, within 25 kilometres of Jindabyne, 150 kilometres away by river. From Biddi and the Jacobs River, the Snowy at last makes up its mind where it is going, and heads off for the Southern Ocean. That is one oddity. The second is that the Monaro is a broad, open grassland with almost imperceptible valleys and low ridges, but as each of its tributaries approaches the Snowy gorge, cut way below the gentle terrain of the plateau, the pace changes, slopes become precipitous and the landscape is wild, sometimes desolate, always powerful, exhilarating, overwhelming—and very hard to penetrate.

These natural oddities of the landscape have created a time-warp. Different eras of Australian history co-exist in this country, or nearly so—they are zoned by access or travel times. Deep within the Snowy loop, on the lip of the gorge at 'Spion Kop' and 'Popong', there are a few men and women living, by choice, the life of a hundred years ago, when cattle ran all through this country, even in the gorge, which offered the only unfailing water supply. Today, most of the land has been abandoned or absorbed into Kosciusko

and Tingaringy National Parks. It is called 'wilderness' now.

I found this the hardest section of the Snowy to get to know, usually through private property and endless farm gates, then down dizzy fire trails or other dubious four-wheel drive tracks. As well as my wish to learn the country in a general way, I had two specific quests. One was to find the 'Stone Bridge' and the Snowy Falls (or Jimenbuen Falls), not marked on the maps, but major natural features. At the 'Stone Bridge', the river has cut its bed below huge granite boulders, rushing beneath in an almost invisible but very audible torrent, and dropping five metres or more in its passage. I had first learnt of the Snowy Falls from a painting in the home of the founding settlers at Bonang. The falls took some finding, but I shall never forget them. The second quest was to make sense of the photographs in the archives of the National Library in Canberra, which were undated and not located other than the general catalogue entry, 'Snowy River Series'. I wanted to know exactly where each was taken, by whom, at what date, and if possible to identify the figures in them. My only hope of finding out was to check out the river myself, and to show the photographs to the people who lived by it and knew it.

In pursuing these two quests, both eventually successful, I discovered the time-warp. It is not new. We all know that some places and people are 'behind the times', and that we live by different perceptual clocks, but this Snowy country shows a beautiful zoning by travel times. At the periphery, it is easy to get out. The short stretch of gravel road soon gives way to bitumen, leading quickly to the highway, Cooma Airport, Canberra. Further in, the going is slow, the roads indifferent, and barred by farm gates. The Williams' boy from 'Worongah' opens and closes thirty farm gates every day as his mum drives him in the old Land-Rover to school at Dalgety. Deep within the loop, a car is useless and even a Range-Rover is vulnerable. This is horse country, and part of an earlier Australia.

## II

I met Bill Wroe when I made my first crossing at Burnt Hut coming up from the south-east through Delegate and Tombong. We slithered down the steep eroded slopes, forded the river on a firm gravel bottom, scrambled up the high sandbanks on the other side, and then up through grey trees to the high grasslands. On the north side of the river we stopped at the first farm house we encountered to ask our way, a farm now very isolated, at the 'end of the line', although it must once have seen frequent travellers. 'Worongah' is its name, owned by the friendly Mitchell family, whom I was to meet later. On this occasion there was no one home, so we travelled on to the next place, 'Spion Kop', a name brought back to Australia from the Boer War. The homestead consisted of an old wooden house, quite small, with a new one added at the side, also small, but enough for two. An old woman came very slowly down the high kitchen steps, grasping a rail, crippled with rheumatism or arthritis. The barking dogs soon brought her husband in from the paddocks, upright on his horse but shaky on his feet once he had regained them from a mounting platform. They were a fine old couple, Bill Wroe and his wife, dependent on one another and content with their life. They had little prospect of help if either of them ran into trouble, but they had no wish to retire to the town. So we listened to the magpies carol and smelt the dry grass and eucalyptus oils of the

country air while we were given directions by a man who knew the land better than he could describe it for strangers. He was also incredulous that we should *want* to go to the Snowy Falls. There could be no profit in that, and it was an incomprehensibly useless thing to do, from his point of view. If we really wanted detailed directions, we had better ask the Crisps over at 'Kalimna', he said, pointing west across the rolling paddocks, the name uttered with a respect that was at first lost on me, although the almost reverential tones of pride were not. Clearly the Crisps *mattered*.

We had to press on that day, but I was keen to spend more time talking to the Wroes, so I paid them a second visit. I was lucky to strike a wet day. Bill was up in the stables with his horse and his grandson, Tony Coyne, who lives in Berridale. Bill was making walking sticks. He likes to keep busy, so that is what he does when it is too wet to work outside, up in the fragrant stables with his horses and dog. We talked there for a while; when the rain set in hard, clearly for the rest of the day, we went down to the house and Mrs Wroe made tea.

There were some good stories. He had helped put rams across the Snowy in the flying fox at Burnt Hut for Edgar Wright on the Tombong side. He had helped Ted and Amos Woodhouse once with a hundred head of bullocks they were taking down to Bairnsdale (through Delegate and Deddick to McKellars Crossing and up the Turnback track to Suggan Buggan). They brought them to the river between Burnt Hut and

*Bill Wroe: Old eyes still full of mischief  
(Photograph courtesy of Wroe family, Spion Kop, Victoria)*



Warm Corner, but it was running a banker, so they trekked upstream for twenty-five miles to where the McLaughlin runs into the Snowy and got them over there. He had stories about Jack Langhorne, who first took up 'Worongah', and lent me a photograph of the first cattleman's hut on that land, put up by Langhorne. Langhorne had a bullock team that was to cross at Burnt Hut. Rootsey was the drover. There were four young bullocks who were still being broken in, and Rootsey should have put them in separately from the rest, but he put the lot in together, and they all drowned at Burnt Hut, swept off by the current.

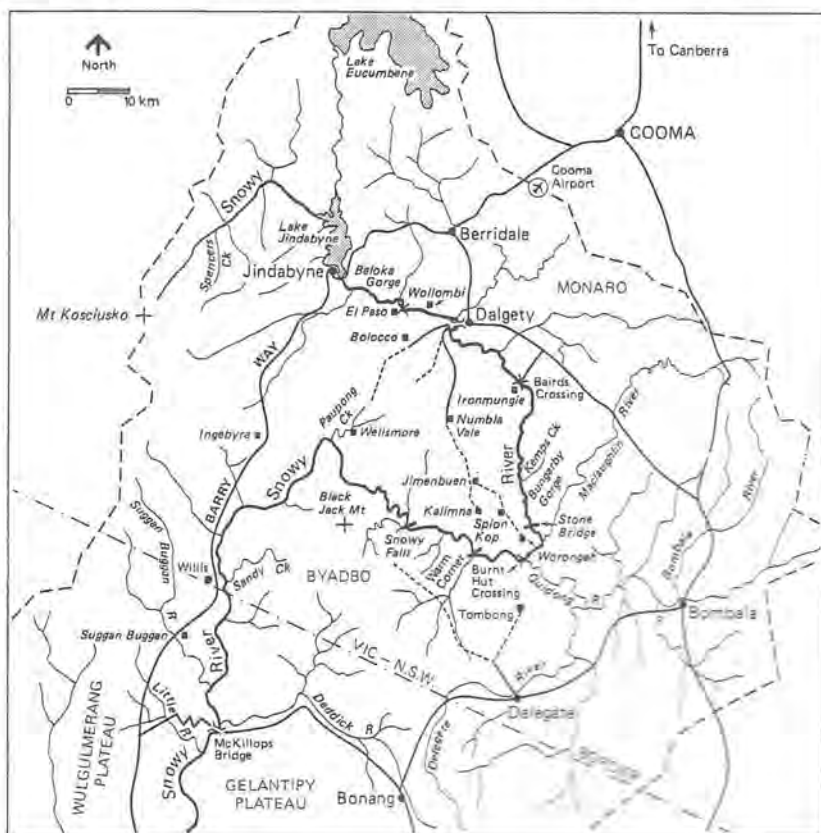
I showed Bill an old photograph I had of a bullock being shod. 'Eight shoes to a bullock, did you know that?' said Bill. I do now; and that the shoes were leather, and not iron; Ben Rose told me that later. I told him that I had scrambled on foot up to the Quidong from Burnt Hut, only to find half way that there was a tolerably trafficable fire-trail. "Keith Williams" (who took over 'Worongah' from Jack Langhorne) "put that in," said Bill, and then started hunting for another photograph of a lonely grave and its inscription, a few hundred metres up the Quidong from its junction with the Snowy. I copied the inscription, which reads:

This cross marks the spot where on the 16th June, 1892, William, Earl of Ancram, borne on the 29th

of March 1867, eldest son of the IX Marquess of Lothian, met his death by the accidental discharge of a gun.

Towering rocks of the gorge, grey trees, and the harsh cry of the currawang keep him company, the twenty-five year old Earl of Ancram. He could hardly be more remote from the gentle farm landscapes of Midlothian.

I also told Bill that I had been down again to the Stone Bridge on the Snowy, and he was a little impressed that I had been able to find it on my own. Brian Mitchell had guided us on the first visit, but it turned out to be Bill Wroe's land. I also had stumbled across a well-set-up log cabin in a gully near the river, backed by granite cliffs. It was a very secretive setting, but the cabin looked to be geared for the simple life of luxury. There was an empty champagne bottle, French, on the rough hewn table. Bill had sold a few acres of his land to a couple of fellas from Sydney, he said with a cackle. He talked about Brian Mitchell and his family with some pleasure, I thought; they were young, with young children, and they would stay on. Mrs Mitchell—Wollongong girl, Bill thought—was the first woman who had lived at 'Worongah'. Keith Williams was Brian Mitchell's grandfather. Keith was good with machinery and it was he who put in the big dam, and who had graded the track down to the



Snowy where the McLaughlin runs in, where the Mitchells have a small lucerne paddock on as much river flat as the Snowy provides here. Even the old landrover was Keith Williams'. He died in January 1988.

At about 5.30 in the afternoon it stopped raining and after my third mug of tea, I headed off north on the dirt road, through more farm gates, to the bitumen at Numbla Vale, and so to Dalgety and Canberra. In the back of the landcruiser there was one of Bill's walking sticks, which I later used around Jagungal in the Snowy Mountains; three old photographs which he had lent me for copying, and a full notebook.

At the end of another valley further west, I met Ossie Wellsmore, Oswald Sylvester Wellsmore to give him full title, reflected by the OSW on his wool bales. He was cutting up wood with a buzz-saw on Sunday morning as we came up out of the Snowy gorge on the Paupong Fire Trail. He is in his early eighties, hale and hearty, full of sly merriment, ready for a yarn and a laugh. ("I'm a bit younger than Ossie," 76-year-old Bill Wroe had said, when I talked with him a few days earlier.) His place is one of those at the end of the line, in this case the Paupong Valley, which merges imperceptibly with the Beloka Creek Valley towards the north, all gentle grasslands, but the valley walls are steepening fast by the time one gets to Ossie's place, with the familiar Snowy transition from sealed road, good gravel road and cattle grids, indifferent gravel roads and farm gates—and after that, steep grades on a fire trail through precipitous, broken country covered with sub-arid woodland.

The Wellsmores have lived around the Snowy for generations: Ossie is the third, with a fourth to follow him. Wellsmore Hill, east of Windmill Hill, is named for his family and he knows the origins of many of the place names, Wild Woman Ridge for instance, which we had followed for a while on our way north out of the Gorge, was named, a little disappointingly, after a heifer. But then cattle have played a much bigger part in this country than women. Ossie has worked with cattle all his life, and he shows the bow legs and reluctance to walk of a man who has lived on horseback.

When he was twelve years old he went on his first cattle droving journey to Delegate, across the Burnt Hut Crossing, through Tombong on the Corrowong track to town. On the way back he passed the Wrights at Tombong, and they asked him how he was going back. Young Ossie said that he thought that he would ride across the Snodgrass Plains, up the Kangaroo Ground to Black Jack, and cross there to the Paupong. "Take you a week," said old man Wright. "You spend the night with us, and go back the way you came," which he did. He remembered a later droving trip along the same route, through Delegate to Bombala. They picked up Bill Wroe at 'Spion Kop', crossed

Burnt Hut Crossing, and got to Delegate, where they rested their horses outside the Delegate Hotel, where Bill Wroe missed his round. "Never mind," he said, "I'll buy your dinner at Bombala," but that did not come off either. "Don't you worry, I'll buy you all a drink at Delegate on the way back," said Bill, but when they got back to Delegate, the hotel was closed. "He doesn't look as if he's got twopence, Bill Wroe," said Ossie, "but he's got a tidy bit put away, he's a wealthy man, young Bill."

Like all the other cattlemen of his age, he was full of stories about 'poddy-duffing'. The grown bullocks were all branded so the duffers rounded up cows with poddy calves. Ossie told me of a cliff in the Byadbo that he came across once that had below it the bones of many hundreds of cows. The duffers drove the cows over the cliff and kept the clean-skin poddies. He had disreputable stories about many of the old families around the Snowy, including the quasi-seigneurial Crisps. Ossie said that his father told him that Amos Crisp got his start by stealing some cattle at night from Hyde Park in Sydney, and then driving them south as fast as he could, beyond the 'limits of settlement'—which, as Lhotsky (1834) makes clear, was also beyond the reach of the law.

Ossie also had stories about Jack Riley, "the Man from Snowy River" who had learnt hard riding taking cattle through the Snowy Gorge country from Ingebyra and Paupong to Suggan Buggan, and not "up by Kosciusko's side". He spent time in jail for horse-stealing. Ossie discounts a romantic version of this story, that Riley was droving the horses from Black Mountain north with his brother-in-law, who, sensing trouble, asked him to take the horses on to Dalgety alone. "Not knowing that the horses were stolen, John agreed, and when the police picked him up, he—because of a strict sense of loyalty to his sister—remained silent when questioned. His refusal to implicate his sister's husband cost him a seven-year gaol sentence, of which he served five" (Stephenson, 1980, p. 94). Ossie thought that story worth a particularly ribald cackle. Banjo Paterson heard the main tale at Tom Groggin, Riley's hut on the Upper Murray, whither he had ridden from Corryong. Ossie remembers as a boy, an old stockman dropping in with the casual remark that he had just taken "some poet fella" up to Tom Groggin. Ossie had driven cattle through much of Riley's country, down the Snowy to Willis, then up again out of the Gorge to Suggan Buggan, Black Mountain, and then down the ridges to Bairnsdale. He had spent many a night in the old schoolhouse at Suggan Buggan.

I asked him about changes in the river and the land around it. Like almost every one else I asked the question, he mentioned the fish first—it was beautiful fishing. Trout. But now it is too shallow and the water's too warm. Still plenty of eels, though, if you like eels. He remembered some of the floods. The 1927 flood



*The Suggan Buggan schoolhouse, 1984*

was a beauty. He had marked a tree at the mouth of Popong Creek to give the height. The tree is at the break in slope on the north side of the gorge, but between the tree and river, when I was there in late March 1985, there is a broad and bleak boulder bed. During floods the river fills the whole of the valley, 200 metres or more wide, and fast, and deep. The boulder beds used to be covered with silty alluvium carrying sweet grass, and near the break in slope, spreading yellow box. Beautiful camping, it used to be, said Ossie; but now it is nothing but bloody rocks.

I always asked about changes in the river. The Mugridge family are on Beehive Creek, also at the end of the line. From their place, you can pick up the Numbla Fire Trail, which gives access to Windmill Hill and the Snowy Falls (or Jimenbuen Falls, as Mugridge called them, which gave me the key to a photograph in the archives of the National Library). His place would be about 10 kilometres from the falls as the crow flies, but sometimes you "couldn't work your dog for the noise from Jimenbuen Falls," he said. He spoke of the river with sad compassion, which I found to be a widespread feeling. It was as if the river were a lion in a cage, the King of the Beasts with its spirit broken. "I don't believe in irrigation myself," he said. "You should use the water on the

country it falls on; then a man learns how to manage his land properly."

### III

Bill Wroe and Ossie Wellsmore belong to a vanishing world, one that has survived so long only because of the protection afforded by the geography of their near-inaccessible valleys. The biologist might describe them as a remnant population. Some parts of the Snowy are linked to the contemporary world by easy access. Dr P. B. Hutchinson and his wife live at 'Waterford', an old property on the river below Merretts Pool, where the Snowy comes out of Barney's Range and begins its broad and open course through the tablelands past Dalgety and Bairds Crossing before it plunges into the Bungarby Gorge. 'Waterford' used to be called 'El Paso', or 'The Pass', and it has one of the very few easy fords across the Snowy. Dr Hutchinson is an agricultural consultant who does work for the Australian Development Assistance Bureau in Bangladesh and South-east Asia. He can drive from 'Waterford' across the ford, on a fairly good gravel road to Berridale, and be at Cooma airport within half an hour.

I first met him when I came in from the Beloka

road in a four-wheel drive, looking for access to the Gorge through Barney's Range. We talked a bit, he gave me his card, and offered to get me through the paddocks to Merretts Pool if I rang ahead, which I did a few weeks later. We then set out for the range, where I was able to establish the site of some early photographs. The Hutchinsons are highly educated and hospitable people. They are New Zealanders—Betty is the daughter of a Professor of Physics from the University of Auckland. They gave me a good lunch, and we talked about their 800 acres (320 hectares) and their plans for it. They irrigate 40 hectares now for lucerne on the river flats by spray irrigation and hope to increase this to 52 hectares. They hold a licence for a four-inch pipe from the Snowy, from the Water Resources Commission of New South Wales. The licence costs them \$800 a year, but their major irrigation cost lies in an annual electricity bill of around \$6,000 to run the pump. They fertilise heavily, and take off about 1,800 bales of lucerne a year, of which they sell two-thirds and keep the rest for their own herd of 250 Herefords, which includes several bulls and 125 breeders. Like so much of the country around the Snowy, this was degraded land, and it is impressive to see what can be done with good management. The old erosion scars have gone, filled in and graded by earth-moving equipment. Good fencing, pasture rotation and the use of supplementary feeding with lucerne have re-established a sward that inhibits erosion. A computer program prints out management needs—for instance, what injections or other treatment are appropriate for each of the animals when they are herded. This is a far remove from the bushmanship and almost instinctive skills of Ossie Wellsmore and his peers.

This 800 acres at 'Waterford' is now nearly an economically viable enterprise, and the Hutchinsons expect it to be wholly so in the near future. They are the very first to put the waters of the Snowy to agricultural use as it comes out of its mountain tract, and they do so to good effect. There are still problems, introduced pests being the greatest, as they are in so much of agricultural and pastoral Australia. The worst is a fairly recent introduction, serrated tussock grass, which came in from Argentina in the 1960s. It is very invasive, soon becoming the dominant ground cover if left unchecked, and it has no nutritive value whatsoever for sheep or cattle. Rabbits are still very much in evidence, although not in the plague proportion of pre-myxomatosis days. The only indigenous pests of any significance are the wood-duck, which are more properly geese than duck. Like the Cape Barren Goose they have a very rapid digestive system, which requires a much more substantial food intake than true ducks, and of course, a corresponding output. On 'Waterford', they eat and foul the lucerne. The Hutchinsons are conservationists, but they are also trying to make a living, and the two aims are in conflict.

#### IV

If Bill Wroe and Ossie Wellsmore represent one world and Dr Hutchinson and his computer-management another, they are at least all three making a living from land along the river, and they are linked by families like the Mitchells, who are young, ready to use heavy machinery where it is needed, good managers and concerned to educate their children well for an intelligent future on the land. They are linked also by the well established properties away from the river—'Jimembuen', 'Kalimna', 'Bibbenluke', 'Delegate Station', and many more—where there is a tradition of good management and of education. The families of the Monaro are usually conservative, but most of them are quick to take from the technology and ideas of today whatever is useful to them.

There are others who use the land differently. Across the river from the Hutchinsons, on the Dalgety side, there is an old station called 'Wollombi'. Along the river frontage it has been subdivided into rather small blocks; permission for subdivision was given by the Shire Council largely because serrated tussock was out of hand on 'Wollombi', beyond the resources of the owner's control, and hence a hazard to the whole region, whereas the new small landholders can be required to eradicate it. Some of the blocks have 'chalets' built on them, intended to attract skiers, as it is an easy run to Jindabyne, but they have not been a great success. Another enterprise has been given the grand name of 'Snowy Station', and is used as a holiday-cum-educational centre for school children and others, offering a supposedly authentic experience of traditional Monaro wide-ranging station life on a hundred hectares.

Further down the river, at Kemps Creek on the Bungarby road—but still linked in comfortably to the main road system and Canberra—there is another subdivision near the river, now flowing in the deepening Bungarby Gorge north of the McLaughlin, Quidong and Burnt Hut, where the river loops back to the north-west, cutting steeply below the tablelands. Here the farmers are selling off "the pretty country", as one man put it, not of great value agriculturally, but scenic. One weekender I talked to is Tony Criddle on 110 acres (44 hectares), for which he paid \$24,000 a few years ago. He runs 120 sheep to keep the grass down. The Criddles are from Plymouth in the West Country of England, as their voices show. Tony is a Navy Pilot, based in Canberra, but he is also a landscape painter and hopes that he may be able to spend much of his time at Kemps Creek within a few years, making a living jointly from the land, painting, and a few investments. The Criddles say that the locals were suspicious of the weekenders when they first moved in but that now they are accepted. There are half a dozen of them, they all help each other, and "bring back a bit of life to the area". To



*"That's my Dad": Reuben Rose II, his horse and rabbit dog by the Snowy near Dalgety about 1905 (Ferguson Collection)*

the purist, their cottages and small subdivisions are out of scale with the vast, seemingly primal landscape, but they may be major land users in the future, in those parts of the gorge that can be reached in less than half a day's drive from Canberra.

Once we came upon a fairly new log cabin right down in the gorge, but still within fairly easy reach of the main road. We had been searching for a way, and asked at a homestead about a track shown on our not always reliable map. The track down was quite good, they thought. It led to the 'log cabin', said the daughter, exchanging a glance with her mother that was not explained then. We worked our way through the paddocks and farm gates and left them for a steep descent. The river, when we at length reached it, was shrunken and sad, although the log cabin at the road's end near the river was interesting in its own way. People can choose the privacy of country life for all sorts of reasons. A broken down van between cabin and river bore painted slogans, one of which read "Flying high on hash". There was a great pile of empty port flacons by the back door. An old tank nearby was riddled with shot-holes. A red-eyed woman peered from the doorway, blinking. We didn't linger.

## V

One more family must come into the story, because through them, many pieces fell suddenly into place; they are the Roses of 'Bolocco'. My first meeting was not good. We were looking for access to Barneys Range, on the way to 'Waterford' and the Hutchinsons. The road ran through 'Bolocco', so we called at the house to ask permission, at about eleven on Sunday morning. No one home; so we set off through the bare paddocks of a droughty summer. Just as we were slowing up to open the third or fourth gate, a farm vehicle shot up from nowhere, frightening the hell out of us, and stopped behind us. We explained ourselves, and all was well, but, "We worry about fire". They had been hand feeding stock this Sunday morning, on 'Bolocco', one of the old, established prime properties of the Monaro.

Some weeks later, I rang another Mrs Rose at Kybeyan. I had been told that she had a good collection of old photographs. I was looking for photographs. I was also trying to identify some good old photographs that had come from the National Library collection in Canberra, but without information—no dates, no precise location, no photographers' names—just that

they were of the Snowy River. I had worked hard locating the photographs and had by now placed most of them exactly, through arduous field-checking, but I still had no dates or other information, although I showed them to all the 'old-timers'. "Try my brother-in-law at 'Bolocco'," (near Dalgety) said Mrs Rose of Kybeyan, so I did. I had been working from Canberra, but my time there was at an end. There was no time that was really convenient to either of us. However, Mr Rose kindly agreed to see me on Sunday morning before they left for Sydney. It wasn't convenient for me either, but I thought that I had better go.

I arrived at 11 am, as promised, and opened my album. "That's my dad," said Ben Rose at once. "That's his horse and his rabbit dog," (which was a greyhound). Reuben Rose, born in 1881, seven years before the Dalgety Bridge was opened, son of Reuben Rose, who had arrived at 'Bolocco' in 1872 (and his father Thomas arrived in Sydney in 1792 and took up land at Campbelltown. So said Ben Rose, who turned out also to be a Reuben. So is his son, who is a Professor of Surgery at the University of Sydney, and his grandson: "When the boy is down here, he is the fifth Reuben Rose on 'Bolocco'," said his grandfather. "He loves it down here," he added hopefully.

The photographs were taken by George Bell, who took wet plates all around the Monaro, down the Snowy, and up to Kosciusko and the High Country. He was a professional landscape photographer, working for about twenty years from the late 1890s. He needed a pack of horses to carry his gear, and Reuben Rose (secondus) often rode with him. Reuben Rose III had some of the photographs hanging on his walls, which I have since had copied. He suggested that I take them to 'Hollywood George' in Cooma for copying (at Hollywood Studios, hence the name). Ben thought that he might have some of the negatives. As it turned out, he didn't, but he urged me to check the archives of the Snowy Mountains Authority before I left Cooma. I had always meant to do this but had never got around to it, and when I finally did so that same day, I found a helpful archivist and an extraordinary collection, which included some of George Bell's original glass plates: his best work in the High Country is the equal of the landscape photographs of William Henry Jackson (1843-1942) who recorded the American West at about the same time. Colin Totterdell, Klaus Hueneke and Pieter Arriens all follow in George Bell's footsteps.

In the kitchen at 'Bolocco' we drank several mugs of tea, and talked, and went through my album. Ben Rose confirmed my localities, and identified the people. One series of photographs was of Paupong, and they included a rather elegant woman with full skirt and broad brimmed hat. Sometimes she was on horseback, sometimes dismounted—"Mrs Monckton," said Ben Rose. Her husband was a wool-buyer who

owned 'El Paso', now 'Waterford', Peter Hutchinsons's place. She was a Crisp; her father was Dave Crisp, who had 'Ironmungy'. Two generations back the Crisps owned most of the best land within the Snowy loop—'Matong', 'Jimembuen', 'Numbla Vale', 'Ironmungy'. Now only 'Junior' is left, Colin Crisp at 'Kalimna'. Ben Rose's father was horrified at the way the Crisps spent money in Sydney, living it up at The Wentworth and The Jockey Club. The Roses got on with looking after their land. Junior's mother (nobody calls him Colin Crisp) was Keith William's sister, I was told. All the pieces of my jigsaw began to fall into place.

I left the Roses with regret, and drove back to the little church I had passed just before their gate, and the nearby cemetery, all there is to Beloka. There is no township, not even a store or hall. The cemetery is lovely, spacious, tranquil, sitting clear in the rolling grasslands of these high tablelands, with Barneys Range in the background. There I finally ran all my cast to ground.

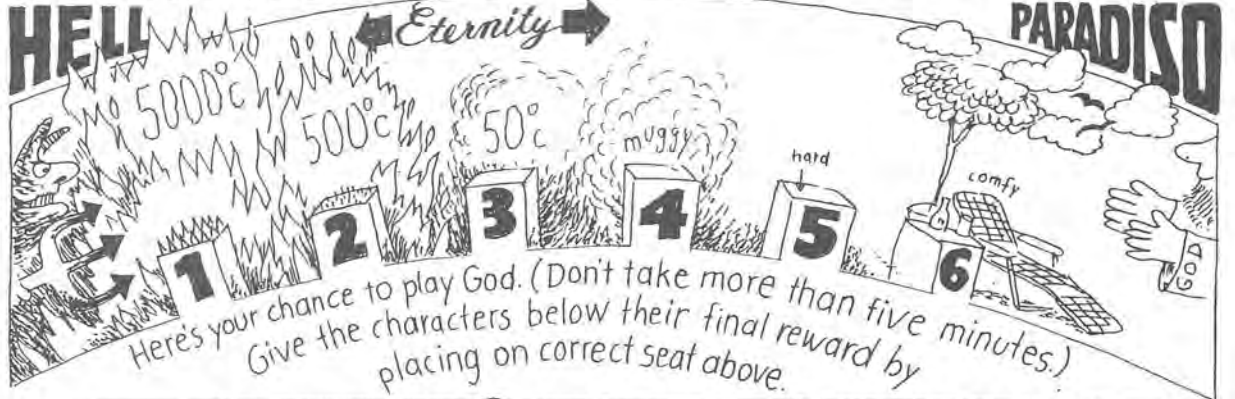
Amos Crisp was the first big land-holder in the 'loop' at 'Jimembuen'. He presided, although his funerary marble was not ornate for the time. None of them were. All the headstones were aligned by compass to face east, ready for the resurrection. Many of them recorded the names of young children. The Monaro sense of family cohesion and continuity was overwhelming. The family groups are all clearly set off, and they are all there: the Crisps, the Wellsmores, the Wroes, some of the Woodhouse clan, the Roses, even Merrett of Merretts Pool, nearby at the foot of Barneys Range. They lay there in the clear autumn air, together and apart, grouped first by family, and with greater separation, by faith or sect, which also reflected their origins in the British Isles—Irish Catholics, Scots Presbyterians, a few Methodists from Wales and the industrial Midlands, and a solid phalanx of Anglicans, their diverse cultural backgrounds territorially defined as a last testament to a way of life stilled into a way of death.

#### Notes

- Hancock, W. K. (1972) *Discovering Monaro: A study of man's impact on his environment* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Lhotsky, Dr John (1834) *A journey from Sydney to the Australian Alps* (ed Alan E. J. Andrews) Blubber Head Press, Hobart.
- Lingard, Joseph (ca 1834) *Narrative of a journey to and from New South Wales—including a seven years' residence in that country* J. Taylor, Chapel-en-le-Frith England.

*George Seddon was appointed as the first Director of the Centre for Environmental Studies at the University of Melbourne in 1974; he became Dean of the Faculty for Architecture and Planning in 1981. He resigned his Chair in 1988 to take up his current position as Professorial Associate in the Centre for the Study of Australian Literature at the University of Western Australia.*

# SAINTS 'n' SINNERS (A mini-quiz for literati) by Lofa



**A**

The saintly Man of God. Likes full jails and empty heads. Specialises in stoning pregnant women and chasing children into mine fields.

**B**

The Author. Makes a living by showing disrespect to A.

**C**

The multitude. Loving God and loving it...

**D**

Bookseller D. Refuses to stock B's book.

... safety of our staff...  
...blah... religious sensibilities  
of our community... blah...

**E**

Bookseller E. Sells B's book and profits from publicity.

... No giving in  
to black mail... blah blah...  
freedom of press...  
blah blah...

**F**

Mister Smug. He simply enjoys a good yarn...

Oh, and what about the cartoonist... and what about moi?

THE SOLUTION? YOU'LL HAVE TO WAIT FOR THE LAST JUDGEMENT...

# books

## So What's New

Harry Heseltine

Laurie Hergenhan (General Editor): *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (Penguin, \$19.99).

To begin with, a disclaimer. My query is not the testy scepticism of a survivor of Geoffrey Dutton's 1964 *The Literature of Australia*, now a quarter of a century old. It is a genuine response to the unavoidable emphasis in the title of Penguin's latest addition to our sum of cultural commentary, and to the brave assertion of its general editor on p.xii of his Introduction: "*The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* aims to be innovative to show that the actual writing of [literary history] needs to be reconceived . . ." The details of the promised program of intellectual refreshment are laid out elsewhere in the same Introduction. They include "the realisation that neither the text, nor the reading, is value-free, and hence culture-free" (p.xiv), the belief that "narrative history seems no longer viable or at best restrictive" (p.xv), the determination that literary history should not centre "around outstanding names", should avoid the judgemental, but "include evaluation" (p.xvi).

Given this palpable intention to produce a revisionary history, any interested reader, it seems to me, is entitled to ask "So what's new?" As a contributor to Dutton's earlier volume, I suppose I must confess to a special interest but not, I hope, to invincible prejudice. I shall certainly be prepared, on a number of matters, to use the 1964 compilation as a reference point.

My question, then, is not rhetorically put in the expectation that the answer will come back—"Nothing". On the contrary, I find much that is new, in the most literal sense, within the 620 pages of *The Penguin New Literary History*. Quite simply, it offers a great deal more information, over a wider range of related activities, than is to be found in the 1964 work. The reason for this can in large measure be

attributed to Penguin's choice of general editor for its up-dated account of our literary growth and development. During the past twenty-five years nobody has done more than Laurie Hergenhan, through his editorship of the journal *Australian Literary Studies* and his development of the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Queensland, to consolidate the factual base of our literary scholarship, to sharpen and direct the operations of our literary criticism. In a word, his contribution to the transformation of Australian literary studies from an uneasy semi-amateurism to full professionalism amply qualifies him for the task that Penguin has entrusted to him.

The distance between 1964 and 1989 can be crudely but vividly measured by comparing the list of Dutton's contributors with Hergenhan's. Dutton rallied twenty-three writers around his editorial platform—some of them major poets, some of them academics with established reputations in English literary scholarship, others (like myself) with no reputation at all, none, I think, with reputations founded exclusively on the close interpretation of Australian texts and culture. Laurie Hergenhan, by way of contrast, has called upon forty collaborators, virtually all of whom are employed full-time in tertiary institutions as specialists in Australian (not necessarily literary) studies. In its very personnel, that is to say, *The New Literary History* bears eloquent testimony to the thorough professionalisation that has now overtaken the treatment of its subject matter.

The new information contained in *The New Literary History* is, in essence, of three kinds. In the first place, Hergenhan's history enjoys the enormous advantage over Dutton's of having been published in 1988 rather than in 1964. In the period between those two dates, the growth in the quantity (and, arguably the mean average quality) of Australian writing was exponential. Hergenhan's team simply had far more discussable writers and writing to deal with than did Dutton's. Names like Glenda Adams and Peter Carey, Barry Oakley and David Williamson, Ron Blair and Frank Moorhouse, do not appear in Dutton's index because

they could not; from Hergenhan's there was no way they could be omitted.

Yet *The New Literary History* can claim other virtues than merely the recognition of contemporary writers whom to ignore would have been unthinkable. It makes another major contribution to our knowledge of our literature through a treatment of its earlier manifestations far deeper and broader than Dutton's contributors might have imagined possible. In this regard, I return to my previous point—that Australian literary studies have travelled fast and far since 1964, and that movement has been fuelled as much by the painstaking re-discovery of the past as by the creative output of the present. The index to *The New Literary History* (again a rough but useful guide) points us to scores of names which had dropped out of sight until the archeological activities of the past two decades: W. H. Fitchett and William Foster, Adrian Lawlor and Louise Mack, K. Langloh Parker and Susan Nugent Bond—these are but a few randomly chosen instances of the figures from our past now properly brought back into an understanding of the complex achievement which has been, and is our literary culture.

The most impressive extension of our factual acquaintance with Australian writing, however, springs from the decision taken by Hergenhan (and, I presume, his committee) to incorporate into their grand design chapters on certain kinds of material for which Dutton's volume could find no place at all. I have in mind, for instance, sections like those on Australian English and Aboriginal Literature, on Women Writers and Children's Literature—rectifications of such glaring omissions from the 1964 set of essays as to need no further commendation. I would also, nevertheless, wish to single out and commend those chapters which deal with the technological and economic, indeed all the material means by which a writer's intellectual property is carried into the public domain, as well as with the hindrances to his general reception. The densely informed contributions of Ken Stewart, Richard Nile and David Walker, Judith Brett more than adequately transmit the sense of the creation and consumption of literature as a lively, complicated, contingent activity, a vibrant, essential strand in the network of Australian society.

I have used the term "network" here with some deliberation—it occurs on several occasions in the text of *The Penguin New Literary History*, and, as an implicit image, underpins virtually the whole historiographic enterprise. Bruce Clunies Ross strikes the keynote with the very first sentence of Chapter I: "European culture arrived in Australia with a gun and a whistle" (p.3). What is noteworthy here is less the tacit acceptance of the European base of our national experience (though in this regard *The New Literary History* is generally quite conservative) than the assumption that

the history of Australian literature is the history of Australian culture. Only a page or two later, Clunies Ross effects another linkage characteristic of the work's totality: "distance . . . was to become a major determinant of Australian history and culture" (p.6). In this book, "history", "literature", and "culture" become if not interchangeable terms, at the very least concepts of equal weight and authority; literary texts are seen to be of interest in direct proportion to their ability to assist in the task of cultural diagnosis. The collapsing of literature and culture into virtually a single entity is validated by another of the leading ideas expressed by Laurie Hergenhan in his General Introduction: "boundaries between high and low culture are dissolving" (p.xv). That precept is consistently translated into practice in the background chapters which head every part of *The New Literary History*; their authors, Bruce Clunies Ross, Alan Frost, Shirley Walker, Brian Kiernan, and Bruce Bennett—demonstrate that, as a precept, it has the force and cogency to generate quite impressive intellectual exposition.

So pervasive is the equation of literature and culture throughout the *History*, so endemic the appeal to a certain idea of culture, that I am moved to see the single most important influence behind all its various essays as that of the late Raymond Williams. Perhaps in the future we may come to read *The New Literary History* as the tribute of Australia's literary intelligentsia to the author of *Culture and Society* as much as another candle on our bicentennial birthday cake. Not that Hergenhan and his collaborators give us undiluted Williams—Williams, rather, with trimmings. Indeed, it is precisely in those trimmings that they might see the best justification of the adjective "new" in their *New Literary History*. The book, as I read it, aims not only to present us with the full dossier of new fact, information, and scholarship assembled around Australian literary studies, but also to apply the apparatus of contemporary critical theory to as much of that dossier as possible. Some of the elements of that apparatus I identified in the opening paragraph of this review—the rejection of narrative history, the avoidance of hierarchical judgement, the acceptance that no kind of cultural analysis is value-free. To these might be added the strong sense that literary culture is the product of complex transactions between reader, writer, and a host of interventions between them; the awareness that a "text" is a very unstable thing indeed, and that "discourse" must comprehend a much wider range of linguistic and para-linguistic behaviour than was admitted into Dutton's 1964 volume. To support such views, terms like "constructing", "situating", "locating", "problematical" find their way into the discourse of Hergenhan's contributors—neither ostentatiously nor aggressively, but visibly enough. While they do not overburden the text, they are certainly accorded the

kind of privilege which implies assent.

If contemporary literary theory is unmistakably "there" in *The New Literary History*, what it actually delivers by way of fresh understanding of its material is another matter entirely. It is, in fact, in this regard that I find the whole book's aspiration to bold innovation most disappointingly unfulfilled. In the end, *The New Literary History* is not the sort of full-bloodedly revisionist document that one could either reject with violence or greet with hosannahs—the Dockers, McQueens, Taylors, who might have made it that are absent from its table of contents. To my mind, the effort towards historiographical novelty is decidedly tepid, producing only a somewhat uncertain re-shuffling of established opinions and ideas.

Some of the conspectus chapters, thus, notably fail to sidestep the very pitfall against which their general editor had admonished them—"to avoid the flatness of a survey" (p.xvi). Other writers, constrained by the prevailingly generic pattern of the *History's* structure are forced into some remarkable shifts to fit the material assigned them to the limits within which they are required to operate. Peter Fitzpatrick, for example, in obeying the stringencies of his chapter title, "Myth-making in Modern Drama", is denied the possibility of a wider sweep of his astute critical imagination over the whole territory of contemporary theatre. Or Ivor Indyk has to tie his definitions and arguments into some quite unusual knots to accommodate all the interesting things he has to say about some of our modern verse under the rubric of "The Pastoral Poets".

To me, however, (and here I will be seen to reveal my own hand), the greatest disappointment flowing from the principles to which Laurie Hergenhan and his collaborators are committed is the fragmentation of major figures into little bits of commentary spread through three, four, or more widely disparate chapters. Brennan, for instance, is scattered through some four or five different essays, including those on "Melodrama and the Melodramatic Imagination", "The Pastoral Poets", and "Dreams, Visions, and Utopias". Nowhere is he granted the full and engaged commentary that would demonstrate that he is worth thinking about at all. In the same way, the index of *The New Literary History* lists only two pages out of twenty-four entries which provided anything like a sustained discussion of the poetry of A. D. Hope; his achievement receives most space in Brian Matthews' characteristically pungent piece on "Literature and Conflict", where he appears in the role of the blood-letting but finally repentant literary reviewer. I search in vain for any discussion of Patrick White more than two or three pages long; I jump between a dozen different places in the text trying to piece together the outlines of a writer named Henry Lawson. The organization of the *History* leads to the virtual elision of whole careers—those of Brian Penton, Douglas

Stewart, Kenneth Mackenzie, Grace Perry, spring to mind.

If the generic organization of *The New Literary History* so thoroughly shatters the coherence of some of our most significant literary personalities, it results in the total disappearance of many lesser, but still very important writers. The index of *The New Literary History* has no place for poets like Craig Powell or Noel Macainsh, for novelists such as J. J. Hardie and Gwen Kelly, for valiant supporters of our intellectual culture like Brian Fitzpatrick, Bruce Muirden, and Walter Stone. The end result of what I take to be some of the more curious inclusions, exclusions and emphases of *The New Literary History* is a difficulty for the reader (no matter how sympathetic) in seeing the trees for the woods.

I have ascribed this effect to the principled commitment of the general editor and his collaborators to an analysis of literary culture too exclusively dependent on the idea of genres of discourse. I shall hazard the further guess that it may also be the outcome of a committee approach to the writing of literary history—an approach I understand to have been very different from that pursued by Geoffrey Dutton in 1964, which was in effect that of an autocrat assigning tasks to subordinates and then letting them get on with the job. In theory, the collaborative, integrative approach should win hands down, cementing a mosaic where the other stitches together a patchwork. Yet I cannot honestly believe in this instance that the committee has the better of things. Indeed, it is only when Hergenhan's contributors take the bit between their teeth and behave like somewhat unruly individuals that they produce really vibrant criticism and history. I have in mind the chapters written by, say, James Tulip, Julian Croft, and Chris Wallace-Crabbe. Elsewhere the contributors seem just a little overawed by the collective magnitude of their undertaking; the result is a wholly admirable utility but little to excite the imagination or, in truth, much by way of startlingly new perceptions into the character and progress of our literature. In this regard, the chapter on "Australian Humour" by Dorothy Jones and Barry Andrews is representative. It certainly leads us through some pointed and unfamiliar exemplary material, but only to this thoroughly orthodox conclusion: "For all its deflationary, irreverent quality, Australian humour is usually an acknowledgement of the status quo" (p.74).

In answer, then, to the question which heads this review—"So what's new?"—I find myself unable to give a single, unqualified response. Against the great deal that commands our admiration stand certain real disappointments. The valuable additions to our archival store are balanced by what to my mind are some strange distortions of the lives and aspirations which have created, and continue to create our literature; commentaries which bring sympathetic flair

to their enterprise must be weighed against passages of rather pedestrian utility; a proper recognition of the tight nexus between literature and culture is weakened by a somewhat compromised application of current literary theory. In sum, I salute Laurie Hergenhan and his collaborators for the proper ambition and scope of their aspirations, applaud the solid conviction of their scholarship, but cannot withhold a doubt about the cogency and comprehensiveness of those experiential patterns they ask me to accept as the genuine shape of Australian literary culture. I once heard an eminent American historian give a paper on "The Nature of History"; his unwavering conviction, first, last, and in between, was that "history is telling stories".

*The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* does not, by its own example, make the case against a literary history which finds a place for narrative, for story telling. Peter Pierce has a lively and challenging contribution on "Forms of Australian Literary History". For all the professionalism, knowledgeability and varying success of his fellow writers, it is Pierce's final sentence which continues to ring in my mind:

The literary histories of Australia that invent different issues of debate, that abandon residual insecurities concerning the value of local materials (insecurities implied by the dichotomising habit and the melodramatic temper of debate) remain to be written. (p. 88).

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## Landscape without Landscape

Alex Selenitsch

Paul Foss (ed.): *Island in the Stream: Myths of Place in Australian Culture* (Pluto Press Australia Limited, PO Box 199, Leichardt, NSW 2040, \$19.95).

"But what would the contrary look like, a *landscape without landscape*?" writes Paul Foss in his Prefatory Remarks to this collection of essays and artworks. The subtitle of this book "Myths of Place in Australian Culture" clearly states the problem. Put either of the words *myth* or *place* close to the word *Australia*, and like mice out of dust, *landscape* spontaneously appears.

Foss's question is directed towards official obsessions like the myths we have concerning The Land. For Foss, his essayists and artists—with one notable exception, Peter Myers—the question also represents their struggle with this official minotaur and its enclosing labyrinth.

At first glance, the book is cheerfully polyglot. Photographs, abstract paintings, essays of one sort or another on unlikely subjects (*Cinéphiles* in a place/myth context?) means that the reader has to undergo drastic shifts to stay with the data. Like a grouping of friends from different parts of one's public and private life, one could speculate on how the book is a representation of the editor's body corporate. One could also speculate on how the book is a representation of the polyglot nature of OZ. The essayists and artists don't debate this among themselves, but individually pit themselves against an unstated yet implied set of beliefs. I assume these include such things as the pastoral dream, egalitarian gold, the transformation of convict stain into holy shroud, sun worship, cultural cringe, and the best beer in the world. These kind of myths can be set into an overall vision, and it is what makes something like A. B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life* read exactly as a fortunate life—and also as a complete fiction, too good and too mythical to be true. So at a time when more of the country's history is being written into its ideology, a book such as *Island in the Stream* promises a great deal.

Like anything directed towards change, some aspects of this book will irritate. Two aspects in particular kept me squirming in my seat.

Many of the contributors to this book have deliberately written from a marginal point of view or have written about marginal subjects. In Ross Gibson's essay, the convict painter Thomas Watling is treated as a writer, Paul Carter examines the role or rather non-role of the photograph in exploration. Eric Rolls writes of the Chinese as "new guests" and describes how OZ is a minor outreach of the world's central civilization. The Aborigines get the usual separatist 'spiritual' treatment; Juan Davila's brazen homosexual vision takes the mickey out of even more Aussie icons and Peter Lyssiotis and Sneja Gunew take up themes related to recent European migration to this country. One of the artists in the book, Imants Tillers, has even made a career out of the observation that OZ is a marginal, i.e. provincial, culture and is based on second-hand mediated imagery and ideas.

By its presentation, more than anything else, the book implies that all marginal stances (maybe all *approved* ones) are of equal value, even if their concerns and concept of a centre are quite different. Marginality is a profoundly negative myth. Except for Sneja Gunew, whose densely packed essay treats the migrant experience as a serious, not 'ethnic' issue, the authors in this book treat marginality with academic calm. The overall effect is one of resignation. Such is the power of the minotaur's labyrinth.

There are some nice ironies to this marginalism, too. Australia is a margin of the British Empire, a land of outcasts, exiles, provincials, and above all, *colonials*. These are centralist, official views. The view-

point that OZ is central, on the other hand is marginal. Myths that say we are our own centre are not only actively discouraged, but technically treasonable, as the recent RSL objections to the formation of a Republican Party illustrate.

The second of my irritants concerns the French. Having thrown off our government issue clothes with Leavis & Co. stamped all over them, we seem to have made a dash for the boutiques. This new francophilia allows for a glittering prose style, but ignores local conditions (francophiles will argue that the local condition *n'est existe pas*). In this book, the French are an undercurrent like the boiling waters under Murarora. They are there in 'the Gaze' (i.e. the eroticization of anything you desire, the reduction of desire to sex), 'the Other' (i.e. Newton's third law of motion applied to relationships where no motion takes place) and that appalling invention of ivory towerism 'the Simulcra' (i.e. the substitution of the sign for reality, without a clear definition of either). Such undercurrents ensure that writers re-write and that painters re-paint. With such streams it's only possible to land on the same island, in the same place, over and over again.

Yet despite these irritations, or maybe because of them, the reader can identify in this book aspects of our culture that have so far escaped general critical attention. To do this, the reader has to invent a point of view, or a number of them to absorb the whole book. No consistent editorial bias extends through the book, and hence the Prefatory Remarks, not Introduction, by the editor.

My own bias—hardly original—concerns the influence of film. It is a medium that runs through our present-day culture at many levels, and since the advent of television at a daily if not constant rate. Further, through film, one can see a new field of discursive techniques. Montage or *mise-en-scene* (both French words, I note) and the separate but simultaneous narrative styles of light, sound, music and voice-over offer a rich model for representing and hence understanding polyglot experience.

From this point of view, the contributors exhibit various degrees of courage and success. Adrian Martin's essay on the cinéophile (film buff or fan in the old language) is an elegant response. It is subtitled 'a history of cultural populism 1960 to 1988' and involves a discussion of critical styles, enthusiasms and fashions. No doubt factually precise as far as the cinema is concerned, it reads as an allegory of general cultural trends and their attached myths—our love/hate relationship with America, the influence of the French, problems of local production, the ideal attributes of the reader, the qualities demanded of a critic etc. The essay most obviously about film, Stuart Cunningham's examination of two films by Charles Chauvel, is also the most straightforward. It is a literary reading (disaggregating, the author calls it, in a

typically 'Other' way) of the film product. Meaghan Morris takes this sort of study a stage further. In her interesting essay, Morris meditates on the multi-place/no-place format of the 4-hour TV launch of the bicentennial *Australia Live: Celebration of a Nation*, and parallels it with the travel writings of Ernestine Hill. She takes the literary essay to one kind of limit, and at the same time gives the TV program a literary pedigree.

It's surprising that the essayists aren't more inventive. Elsewhere this intellectual milieu has attempted new critical methods and new narrative techniques. While I was writing this review, SBS broadcast Ross Gibson's film *Camera Natura*. It included, to my delight, some animated sections on Watling. Colin Symes, one of the joint authors of the most traditionalist essay in this book, is the author of a brilliant critique entitled *Je Suis La Neice De Monsieur Stravinsky* which can be found in the anthology *The Best of the Ear*. Some of the authors and artists have appeared in *Art & Text*, and also in *Australian Mythological Sights. Sites. Cities.*, a polyglot book coordinated by Kurt Brereton in 1986.

The artists in the book don't seem to have been so awed by the seriousness of the venture. Or is it that the book inadvertently displays another myth: that official writing has to be conservative (and dualistic in its theme and structure) while official visual art must be innovative? The artists are clearly at ease with film. Peter Lyssiotis's suite of photomontages, *The Journey Home*, leads frame by frame to a memorable final image of a standing archaic figure amid a pile of rubble. Next to its head, in the sky beyond, is a new moon—a new beginning, or the old one remembered. Robyn Stacey's set of cibachromes uses the progressive close-up as a narrative device; this is also suggested in the staggered perspective of Imants Tillers' painting.

I mentioned Peter Myers' contribution before as an exception in this anthology. His essay affirms the inquisitive tone of the book by documenting the confrontation of Australian Whites and Australian Blacks in Wilcannia, NSW. But it is different in an important way. Most of the other essays and artworks are commentaries on works of art or pieces of entertainment. Myers' essay is an architect's report on the housing needs for a particular Aboriginal community. It is an examination of a piece of 'reality' and even offers a plan of action. It is a pragmatic piece, but not naive and shows how myths are embedded in ordinary life and not just carefully articulated in works of art.

So what would a landscape without landscape look like? One answer is easy. It looks like Clifton Hill, or Maroubra or North Adelaide or . . . (insert where you live). It's likely to be a suburb: a place and a mythology which is hardly approached by this book.

The answer that Foss is asking for concerns the intangible. It is the web of ideas—the tissue of lies—by which we live.

It's at this level that *Island in the Stream* hits home. Rather than being concerned with real places or even specific myths, the book ricochets among those rules that lead to the making of myths and places. This is why many of the essays feel so placeless at first reading and is probably why they can be difficult to read. It's probably why they are so rewarding, too, when as with my example of the filmic influence, an appropriate tool for understanding them becomes apparent.

Although this particular volume was prompted by the bicentenary, it would be a pity if it proved to be an isolated event. Many of the essays and artworks use material from the past, but in the context of the present. The whole book has the feeling of a 'seminar without walls', dedicated to the presentation of ideas close to their formulation. Under such circumstances, errors in argument, loss of nerve, speculative judgments and so on are welcome, as they lead to further attempts at clarity and cohesion. Provided, of course, there is another seminar, another book. It would benefit all of us to have more books like this one, both provocative and provisional, occupying a place somewhere between a special issue periodical and the classic reference.

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## Press Ganged

Wendy Bacon

David Bowman: *The Captive Press* (Penguin, \$14.99).

It is unusual for a lack of reviews of a book to be evidence of its importance. But such is the case with David Bowman's *The Captive Press*.

So far, only two of the nine capital city dailies and scores of other papers owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd have reviewed the book. Both reviews were dismissive.

A central thesis of the book is that Murdoch's hold over 60% of the Australian newspaper market fundamentally threatens the watchdog role which the press should play in a democracy. That danger exists as much through silence as through what is actually published.

The Murdoch papers' treatment of *The Captive Press* only fuels Bowman's claim that those who like to pretend News Ltd papers are run independently of

their owner's opinions are "place-seekers, apologists and sycophants".

This book has several strengths. It begins with a racey run down of the "long and continuing frenzy" in which media interests have been "bought, sold, taken over, shut down and hawked in the global marketplace" since the end of 1986. The current result is that Murdoch reigns supreme in newspapers, and three property developers dominate the television industry.

But Bowman does more than inform. The book also contains a powerful polemic, a warning note. Its passionate and irreverent tone is a refreshing change from the smug comment which often passes for political analysis in the daily press.

Bowman examines a number of statements made by Murdoch and shows how "if he were in the business of prophecy, he would have gone broke long ago." Support for this statement was not hard to find. For example, when Murdoch bought control of TV station Channel 10 Sydney in 1979, he was questioned before the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal about whether he intended to take over Channel 10 in Melbourne. "There is no substance to that rumour," he said, "and I do not see why I should give up a profitable station in Adelaide for a loser in Melbourne." Before 1980 was out, he had sold Adelaide and obtained half of Channel 10, and before long he would buy the rest.

This is all quite straightforward stuff. But where was this sort of down-to-earth analysis in the thousands of words churned out as Murdoch plotted to gobble up the *Herald and Weekly Times*. As Bowman himself puts it: "They (the journalists) gave it their gee-whiz treatment, playing up the excitement of the auction, agog at the vast sums of money." The Australian told us that Murdoch had jam on his toast the morning of the bid "but did not discuss the pros and cons of an American tycoon swallowing most of the Australian press."

But Murdoch is not the only one of the businessmen who control our press to be tongue-lashed by Bowman. Of the men who sat on the *Herald and Weekly Times* board when it recommended the Murdoch take-over, he has this to say: "Presumably the board would have sold out to *Pravda* or the South Africans given the opportunity and the cash. These were men for whom the responsibility of the *Herald* had become a burden."

But he reserves his most scathing comments for the Labor politicians whom he accuses of feathering the nests of their media mates—in particular Murdoch and Packer—in order to guarantee their support. If the metropolitan newspapers which have traditionally supported the conservative forces in Australian politics now tend to support Labor, it is not because the press has changed but because the ALP has become a "party of managers and minders, led by men of elastic . . . for whom survival without principles was to be preferred any day to martyrdom in a social cause."

Left-wing views continue as always to be filtered out of the mainstream press.

Bowman argues that although the moment when Murdoch chose to swear the United States oath of allegiance was dictated by commercial considerations, he is emotionally as well as technically an American citizen. What this means, according to Bowman, is that any stated concern Murdoch might have for Australian sovereignty is subsumed in his belief that Australian interests coincide with the interests of the United States, which he has described as the "richest, freest and happiest nation on earth." Bowman mocks Prime Minister Bob Hawke who quoted as proof of Murdoch's Australianess, his support for Australia in the America's Cup.

For Bowman the question of foreign ownership is not merely one of preference for homegrown control. He goes so far as to argue that by failing to use their powers to block foreign investment in the *Herald and Weekly Times* takeover, Hawke and Treasurer Paul Keating have laid us open to covert political interference by the United States.

While some will readily agree with Bowman's concern that Murdoch's right-wing views are systematically reflected in the products of his multinational publishing empire, this book would be more persuasive for a reader not already convinced if he provided more examples of how control is actually exercised in the Murdoch press.

Such an analysis would include a study of News Ltd's political columnists, including their views and political links. It might also include a detailed examination of particular issues and personalities, for example the treatment of that powerful business friend of our Prime Minister, Sir Peter Abeles. Abeles' transport conglomerate TNT half owns Ansett with News Ltd.

While I was at the *National Times*, I was involved in publishing a series of articles alleging corruption in the NSW branch of the Transport Workers' Union. In our articles, we included details of a union official's family company which owned several properties. A TNT manager owned 98% of the shares in this company. Later, in the *Times on Sunday* we interviewed a man who said he was paid by TNT to do renovations on another TWU official's home. Details of an invoice covering one particular job were provided. TNT have never disputed these matters. Yet the TWU corruption story was ignored by the Murdoch press. Can you imagine what sort of coverage the same material would have received if the union official had been Norm Gallagher!

The TWU story was broken not by the *National Times* but by Kerry Packer's *Bulletin*. It is worth noting here that, although the *Bulletin* journalist had a copy of company documents showing details of the TWU official's family company, the TNT angle on the story was also ignored by Packer's *Bulletin*. Packer and

Abeles executives also control a joint company. This may be relevant to the selective treatment the story received in the *Bulletin*.

Murdoch journalists who wish to keep working are not going to talk publicly about the way their work is distorted and controlled. Trusted sources would be needed if one were to examine this issue frankly. I suspect a lack of sources was Bowman's problem with the Murdoch material.

As an ex-Editor-in-Chief of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Bowman has no shortage of sources when he deals with the only other surviving major newspaper empire, John Fairfax and Sons. The glimpses he provides into that company under the leadership of the late Sir Warwick Fairfax and his son James Fairfax would on their own make this book a valuable one.

Some of these deal with the pressure to bring the *National Times* back into line when it started publishing critical articles about powerful business mates of those 'elastic' Labor leaders.

One incident he reports is how PR agent Martin Dougherty rang the then *National Times* editor Jeff Pemberthy when he was about to publish a long article about his client Abeles. Dougherty who was also a personal friend of Sir Warwick Fairfax reminded Pemberthy the Fairfax board were unhappy about his failure to tame the Fairfax board and would be even more unhappy if the Abeles article appeared.

Bowman's book was not the place for the full story of the final years of the *National Times*, and its successor, the *Times on Sunday*. Given the lack of job opportunities for journalists who offend media companies, a complete account may never be written.

One of the things I learned while working for the *National Times* was how powerful businessmen, even apparent competitors in the media game, receive favourable treatment in the press. A poster promoting a long story by Marion Wilkinson about Kerry Packer was printed but never distributed, although not even the most cautious lawyer would have suggested it was defamatory. The same article took weeks to write but even longer to publish as week after week it was read by the then John Fairfax and Sons' managing editor, adjusted to his tastes and then rewritten, again reread and so on. If it had not been for editor Brian Toohey's determination, it would never have been published.

Shortly afterwards, Jeff Pemberthy was appointed as Editor-in-Chief of the *National Times*. His unspoken task, which to his great credit he failed to carry out, was to control Toohey. Just as Pemberthy had settled in to his role as editor, he was transferred suddenly to the editorship of *Time Australia*.

Bowman knows too much about the Fairfax press to fall into the trap of painting it as the saviour and Murdoch as the demon as some journalists are inclined to do. Indeed he chastises journalist Evan Whitton for reporting after the death of Sir Warwick Fairfax, "reporters in no other newspaper organisation are

given, as I believe, so much leeway to seek out and report the truth, wherever it may lie. The faults of omission or commission of the *Herald* and other Fairfax newspapers, and they no doubt are many, are thus those of its journalists and not those of Sir Warwick and his family." Bowman wondered how Whitton could have made such a comment when he himself as a staff writer had 'fallen foul' of Sir Warwick when he wrote a story about Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Fairfax journalists and editors are even more vulnerable in the wake of young Warwick Fairfax's privatisation bid which has shaken the company's financial foundations. *Sydney Morning Herald* journalists were jubilant when a short strike achieved the removal of the new managing editor, none other than the PR agent Martin Dougherty, and a seat for ex-editor Chris Anderson on the Board. By lionising Anderson, who as Bowman points out had played a role in driving Brian Toohey out of the Fairfax press, the journalists lost a chance to establish a charter of editorial independence as *Age* journalists had managed to do during their brilliant campaign to prevent their paper being bought by a foreigner.

Bowman divides his book into proprietors, editors and journalists. His is the first comprehensive account of how editorial sovereignty is a myth in Australia. Drawing on his own and others' experience, he provides many examples of how owners exert their will over editors. When it comes to the relationship of editors to journalists, his account becomes more impressionistic.

In his introduction, Bowman makes this statement: "By the account of newspapers, we live in a good society, but another account would make the need for change palpable—economically, politically, socially. Truly, society becomes what the news media care to make of it, how they care to tell it, but they don't care to tell it as a great many fellow Australians know it. We have no mainstream newspapers prepared to do that. Would such papers survive? Who knows?"

If this is true, and I believe it is, the explanation will involve much more than an account of how owners control editors. An equally important question is how editors control journalists and jouranlists each other. In his brief rundown on the nature of journalism, Bowman mentions self-censorship. But the processes by which journalists learn what is a 'story' and the hidden agenda of values which determine their selection of 'facts' is much more subtle than that.

The book ends with a brief chapter on solutions. While Bowman makes it clear that he favours legislative prescriptions not only to control ownership of newspapers but also to protect the independence of editors and journalists, he is uncertain about what form they should take or even whether they will work. So he puts his faith in a public inquiry which will find a way to close the gap between the state of the

industry and what the newspaper industry should be if "it is to serve the reasonable needs of a democracy."

Given the history of Royal Commissions, Bowman's faith in an inquiry would seem naive. An inquiry could well be useful in discovering facts so far hidden for commercial reasons. It could play a role in educating the public about the media crisis dealt with in this book. But it is unlikely that either of our two main political parties would implement its proposals if they challenged commercial interests and required a public funding commitment.

The book ends on this disappointingly lame note. After 40 years as a journalist, Bowman has decided there is a fundamental conflict between a newspaper industry run for profit and a democratic press. The difficulty becomes even more obvious in a small capitalist market like our own. But having faced this, Bowman probably also believes the solutions require a change, more fundamental, than anything one can envisage in the near future in Australia. Is he really so uncertain as he seems—or did he simply not want to end on such a pessimistic note?

*Wendy Bacon is a lawyer and freelance investigative journalist. She has worked at Channel 9, SBS and the National Times. She is currently writing a book on the media for the Left Book Club.*

## Preserving Childhood: Great Tune, June

Graham Seal

*June Factor: Captain Cook Chased A Chook: Children's Folklore in Australia* (Penguin, \$16.99).

One of the few lasting benefits of the Bicentenary will be its publishing program. June Factor's pioneering study of Australian children's folklore is one of the results of that program, and one that will be read, studied and enjoyed for many years. Coming hard on the heels of the long-awaited report of the Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia, *Folklife: Our Living Heritage*, this book confirms the previous neglect of Australian folklore and consolidates its new position on the agenda of educators and scholars.

Widely known for her collections of children's folklore (*All Right, Vegemite!; Far Out, Brussel Sprout!; Unreal, Banana Peel!*), June Factor has produced a comprehensive survey of the role, function and significance of children's folklore in Australia. Beginning with a consideration of the nature of childhood and the role of folklore within that phase of the individual's life, the book moves on to consider the history of children's folklore studies in this country;

surveys the lore of Aboriginal and colonial children; discusses the influence of class, religion, gender and ethnicity on childlore; then shows the humour, vulgarity, linguistic play and imaginative characteristics of children's folklore.

After this extensive evidence of the continuing ability of children to preserve and extend their traditions in all circumstances, Factor concludes with a thorough trouncing of the views of Postman and other neo-Leavisites on the supposed death of childhood in the modern age of mass communication. This chapter provides a well-documented challenge for the anti-TV lobby and should be widely read by educators of all persuasions.

The notes and references indicate the author's extensive reading in the fields of folklore, educational psychology, anthropology and literature, all of which are convincingly synthesised in the very readable body text. The cover (art by Kikitsa Michalantos; design by Cathy van Ee) is excellent, apart from the fact that it has already begun to separate from the binding of my copy. The only other slight disappointment is that the index is adequate rather than comprehensive.

In demonstrating the simultaneously universal and localised nature of the folklore process and its role in both social cohesion and social marginalisation, *Captain Cook Chased a Chook* provides what I hope will become a central text in educational institutions. This important work will also be read with delighted hoots of recognition in homes throughout the country.

*Graham Seal is the author of The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society, just published by Oxford University Press.*

## A Salute to Geoff Serle

Barry Jones

Geoffrey Serle (general editor): *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Vol. 11 1891-1939 Nes-Smi (Melbourne University Press, \$48).

The eleventh volume of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* is a timely bicentennial testimony to the work of its general editor, Geoff Serle.

In volumes 7 to 10, he shared responsibility with Bede Nairn, and volume 12—the last in the series, taking the work up to World War II—will be edited by John Ritchie.

Volume 11 is Geoff Serle's monument. As author of the prizewinning *John Monash* (1982), he is recognised as one of our finest biographers, while *The Golden Age* (1963), *The Rush to be Rich* (1971) and *From Deserts the Prophets Come* (1973) combine

analysis, advocacy and an intense, hard-driven style, which carries readers along with the sweep of his argument. With Manning Clark, he sometimes wears the prophet's mantle.

He has been an exemplary editor, coaxing, goading, encouraging and correcting. He contributed so much to the entry on W.A. Osborne in the present volume, that I asked that it be published over his name and mine. Only my name appears. My experience must have been shared by hundreds of other contributors.

He contributed six entries in his own name to Volume 11: the writer Edward (a.k.a. Vance) Palmer, lexicographer Eric Partridge, Labor premier George Prendergast, Victorian judge William Schutt, accountant and scholar Percival Serle, and a failed Liberal Premier William Shiels.

His father, Percival Serle (1871-1951) was a largely self-educated bookkeeper with a passion for literature and painting who worked on Melbourne University's administrative staff. He published some fine editions of poetry, made "the first worthwhile attempt at scientific Australian bibliography", became an art advisor and part-time curator at Melbourne's National Gallery and ran a second-hand book shop. His 'outstanding achievement', writes his son, was his two volume *Dictionary of Australian Biography* (1949), which "lasted usefully as a reference work for some forty years". I have vivid recollections of Mr Serle, in old age, scuttling up the long ladders in the reading room at the Public Library, as it was then called.

The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* will be one of Geoffrey Serle's outstanding achievements too.

The present volume contains 691 entries by 488 authors. The longest entries are for N.S.W. Premier and Prime Minister Sir George Reid (13 columns), the financier W. S. Robinson (9.7) Queensland Labor Premier William Forgan Smith (9.6), long-serving Senator and Minister from the West Sir George Pearce (9.4), Country Party leader and surgeon Sir Earle Page (9.4), another Queensland Labor leader T. J. Ryan (8.8), Prime Minister J. H. Scullin (7.8), painter Tom Roberts (6), engineer C. Y. O'Connor (6) and novelist Ethel (a.k.a. Henry Handel) Richardson (5.8). It is curious that only four of the ten subjects with the longest entries make the grade in the 'Bicentennial 200' in *The People Who Made Australia Great*—O'Connor, Richardson, Roberts and Robinson—despite the collaboration between both projects. Others among the 'Bicentennial 200' in Volume 11 of the ADB are the poet Banjo Paterson, artist Margaret Preston, physician Vera Scantlebury Brown, feminist Rose Scott, CSIRO scientists A. E. V. Richardson and David Rivett, chocolate king Mac Robertson and aviators Keith and Ross Smith.

I have picked up very few slips. J. L. Rentoul could not have received an OBE in 1912 as the Order of the British Empire was not established until 1917. Earle Page was made a GCMG in 1938, not a KCMG.

Members of the Privy Council are more correctly described as 'Privy Counsellors', not councillors as in local government.

From the beginning of the series, subjects have been listed under the names on their birth certificates rather than their familiar names—for example Edward Vivian Palmer and Janet Gertrude Palmer rather than Vance and Nettie Palmer. This won't confuse old hands much, but it could confuse the young. It is hard to see any advantage in maintaining the practice. Vance Palmer appears before Henry, Janet, Joseph and Thomas Palmer—and there is no cross-reference (Palmer, Vance; see Palmer, Edward).

Both articles listed, however, are of outstanding interest.

Sir Robert Archdale Parkhill, a now forgotten rival of R. G. Menzies, was always known as Archdale, not Robert. The entry does not make this clear, although it could be inferred from references of his service as 'Alderman Archie Parkhill' and that he was nicknamed 'Archduke'. Why not list him as Parkhill, Sir (Robert) Archdale? Incidentally, this same confusion occurs in the Commonwealth *Parliamentary Handbook*.

Sir George Reid's biography by W. G. McMinn is sympathetic, admirably finding its way through the thorny thicket of New South Wales politics as the Parkes era was ending, and the threats and opportunities of federation were coming up, in which Reid's role was notably equivocal. However, while Reid's honours are detailed, the highest one—appointment to the Privy Council in 1897—was overlooked.

Brian Beddie's entry on Sir George Pearce, for whom a new House of Representatives seat has been named, points to his 37 years as a Senator and 25 years (actually 24 years 8 months and 25 days) as a Minister, but fails to point out that this is an unbeaten term in office, followed by Menzies, with just under 23 years as a Minister, and Billy McMahon with more than 21 years. Pearce moved steadily to the right, and retained a great reputation for integrity and wisdom, but despite the clarity of Dr Beddie's exposition I have no clear idea what he was all about. Perhaps that is the author's point.

The Rivett family is represented by three articles covering the Rev. Albert (1855-1934), clergyman and pacifist, and seven of his children, including Sir David (1885-1961), the courageous leader of CSIRO (later CSIRO), Edward, pioneer of spinal manipulation, Christine, gynaecologist, Eleanor, missionary, Elsie, welfare worker, Doris, psychologist, and Olive, missionary.

As usual, some of the most fascinating entries are comparatively short, for example Marie Noblet (1889-1930), a French Catholic mystic and stigmatic, who suffered possessions, paroxysms and intermittent ecstasies as a missionary in New Guinea, Arnold von Skerst (1888-1948) Nazi propagandist and language

teacher, and William John Rendell Scott (1888-1956) an Old Guard leader on whom Lawrence based the character Jack Colcott in *Kangaroo*.

Women are well represented, with about one-third of the entries, and I am ashamed to find so many names new to me.

Stephen Murray-Smith's entry on Sir Raymond Priestley is the last of his many contributions to the ADB.

A comparatively short review can only point to the excellence of so many entries—Peter Richardson on W. S. Robinson, Ross Johnson and the late Denis Murphy on T. J. Ryan, Diane Langmore on Ethel Osborne, Frank Crowley on Sir Gerard Smith, Chris Wallace-Crabbe on Bernard O'Dowd: to do the volume justice would require a review of equivalent length.

*Barry Jones is Minister for Science, Customs and Small Business in the Australian Government.*

## The Necessity of Vision

John McLaren

Dennis Altman: *A Politics of Poetry—reconstructing social democracy*, with a rejoinder by Bob McMullan (Pluto Press, in association with the Australian Fabian Society and Socialist Forum, \$6.95).

Dennis Altman is not one of the radicals who criticise the federal government's supposed betrayal of Labor ideals without taking into account the global economy and the political culture that constrain it. He would no doubt agree with Hugh Stretton's remark, quoted by Bob McMullen in his rejoinder, that "Intellectuals who don't run for elective office should not wax too righteous about the mucky necessities of those who do." But while recognising necessity he also seeks a vision, and suspects that "the current leadership of the Labor Party is leading the ALP in a fundamentally new direction, and away from a clear commitment to goals of equity and social justice." This pamphlet is an attempt to redefine those goals in terms of a humanistic vision which sees people as more than consumers and society as an agency of collective as well as individual fulfilment.

Altman accepts that the New Right offers a better analysis of social reality than does either old or new left, whose thinking still tends to concentrate on issues of the workplace and the economy. The individualist rhetoric of the right appeals to popular distrust of government and the desire of people to get on with their own lives. If it is to regain the initiative in debate and set the political agenda, the left, he argues, must recognise this cultural reality and respond not only

with sound economic management but also with an appeal to those wider interests which have successfully enlisted popular energies in the feminist and conservationist movements.

This does not mean that the Labor Party should become merely a coalition of interests, akin to the Democrats. Rather, Altman argues that it should adopt a program of both red and green, combining traditional policies of social and economic justice with concern for the environment, cultural diversity and individual empowerment. These diverse matters must be addressed by a single politics which recognises that the sense of powerlessness, and of alienation from both the state and institutions, arises from the nature of contemporary capitalism and can be overcome only by collective action to redistribute power.

The achievement of these goals need not mean that the state itself must become bigger, or even that power should be distributed to local communities, who may be equally tyrannous over dissidents and neglectful of the public interest. Altman, recognising the inadequacy of eighteenth century liberalism, returns to a position rather equivalent to seventeenth century radicalism and the demand that the state curb the strong and give power directly to the weak. To achieve social justice the state must support those presently weakened, disadvantaged or impoverished by lack of economic or social resources. To preserve the environment the state must assert public over private interest, and develop an economy in harmony with our ecology. The state must use its power in pursuit of these goals, and their achievement will itself redistribute social and economic power.

This summary does not do justice to Altman's argument, which offers a clear alternative to the politics of despair of those on both right and left who believe Labor cannot retain power except in alliance with finance. In calling for a politics of poetry he is asking for a recognition of the wholeness of human experience and of the hunger of people for a fullness of life. He calls for a tough-minded socialism which will still remember to laugh and to sing. His message is as important to ideologues as to the puritans and grim preachers of economic realism.

*John McLaren's latest book Australian Literature—An Historical Introduction is shortly to be published by Longman Cheshire.*

## The Individual and the Party

Len Fox

John Senty: *Ralph Gibson, An Extraordinary Communist* (Ralph Gibson Biography Committee; Distributed by International Bookshop, \$12.95).

When I heard some time ago that John Senty was

writing a biography of Ralph Gibson my thoughts went back to a clear summer morning fifty-odd years ago when I returned to Melbourne after a year in Europe. Till then I had lived a fairly conservative life, but in Europe I had been confronted by a fascist upsurge that clearly threatened the world.

I had changed, but Melbourne remained the same smug city—smugger than ever perhaps under its sesquicentenary paint and banners. The leaders of the UAP were telling the people that fascism had made the trains run on time, and the ALP politicians were preaching the blessings of isolation. A new body called the Movement Against War and Fascism had opened an office in Russell Street, with four dedicated 'functionaries', but they seemed to be spending most of their time collecting money to enable themselves to keep body and soul together on a few meat pies and other cheap meals per day. It was a bleak prospect.

Four or five years later, when I left Melbourne for Sydney, the picture had changed. The grim side was that a terrible world war had now become certain; the bright side was that a broad progressive movement had been formed that had the strength to overcome the problems that lay ahead and serve as a basis for the broad people's alliances that are today struggling on many fronts to save the forests, to save the cities, to save freedom, to save peace, to save the world.

Ralph Gibson played an important role in building that movement. Of course he wasn't alone. A Czechoslovak called Egon Kisch and a New Zealander named Gerald Griffin were major actors. So was a Bulgarian named Georgi Dimitrov who called on communists everywhere to end the tragic narrowness that had been condemning all their efforts to sterility. And in Melbourne there were many people, both men and women, both communists and non-communists, who helped create the new unity. One thinks of Labor Party men and women like Maurice Blackburn and Cath Clarey, of writers like Nettie Palmer, of Christians like Palmer Phillips and Helen Baillie, of communists like Dorothy Gibson—but these names are only a few.

I sensed the importance of what these people had accomplished when, in 1940, I moved to Sydney and discovered how much less of a broad peace movement there was in that city. The difference was partly due to Melbourne's long tradition of radical-democratic movements with strong middle class and cultural participation. But it was partly due to the influence of Ralph Gibson. He was in a key position to influence others, and his natural style was broad, human, tolerant and non-domineering.

He didn't have a towering physique or a dominant personality; he gave the impression of being a retiring person, almost shy. But his intellectual grasp of the world situation and his incisive, analytic style of speaking, while less colourful than that of orators like Lloyd Ross, Jack Blake or Ernie Thornton, made a

deep impression on both working class and middle class audiences. Those who heard him felt he wasn't pushing himself forward, he was letting the facts speak.

John Senty makes a good job of capturing this somewhat elusive personality. But the book is not only an interesting personal sketch; it is also a thoughtful and critical picture of the Communist Party of Australia. And not only in the broad 'United Front' days of the later 1930s; Gibson joined in 1932 in the narrow 'social-fascist' period and is still a member today. And the use of the word "extraordinary" in the title does not mean that Gibson has been different from other communists, that he has been a maverick, but rather the opposite, that he has been the quintessential communist, dedicated, loyal and hard-working like the others, but more so. The depiction of his strengths and weaknesses, and where they led him, is also the story of the strengths and weaknesses of the Party, and where they led it.

The author does not pull punches in describing the weaknesses—the arrogant leftism of the pre-Dimitrov period, the revived narrowness of the post-war years, and the growing grip of Stalinism, culminating in the complete failure of the leadership to face up to Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956; its refusal to separate Stalinism and socialism.

These are depicted not merely in abstract terms, but as they affected flesh-and-blood communists like Ralph Gibson and John Senty himself.

Because of this, the book is perhaps the best short history of the Communist Party yet written, even though it was not intended as such. Perhaps some enterprising publisher may commission Senty to write a full history. This would enable him to develop more fully his analysis of Stalinism and its stultifying effect on true socialism, and also to develop two interesting themes which he raises briefly. One of these is the position of the intellectual in the Party. Within certain limits there was respect and freedom for the intellectual, but there was an underlying contempt and fear which came to a peak in the 1956-57 period when every intellectual was a potential 'revisionist' and every 'revisionist' a potential enemy. Alongside this, and encouraging it, was an attitude of romantic idealisation of the working class on the part of some intellectuals, Ralph Gibson included.

The other theme that could be developed is the way in which the leading communist 'cadres' (as distinct from the rank and file) found themselves living more and more in a narrow, unreal world which tended to produce narrow dogmatic 'organisation-man' personalities perfectly suited to routine tasks but totally unable to face up to harsh realities like the 1956 Twentieth Congress revelations.

A book giving further treatment of these themes would be of great value to those members of the broad left now seeking new ways forward. In the meantime, Senty's biography of Ralph Gibson is worth reading

not only because it gives a vivid portrait of an important Australian, but also because, within its limits, it is in many ways the best history yet of the Australian Left over the past sixty years.

*Len Fox's new book of poems was published recently. A contemporary of Ralph Gibson, his books include Eureka and its Flag and Broad Left, Narrow Left. Victorian State Secretary of Movement Against War and Fascism 1935 to 1939 and Communist Party member 1935 to 1970.*

## The Great Singer, Icon and Enigma

Michael Sharkey

W. H. Wilde: *Courage a Grace; a Biography of Dame Mary Gilmore* (Melbourne University Press, \$45.95).

In her tribute to Mary Gilmore in 1965, Dymphna Cusack observed 'integrity is a lodestone even for those who do not possess it'. The comment was aimed at those who deprecated Gilmore's work in her life or after her death. No one belittled the work like Gilmore herself, though, and while self-deprecation requires self-knowledge, she could be sure she occupied a high place among Australian writers.

Gilmore knew her own propensities to fantasise, but we can ask how well she read her own jealousy of women who impinged on her status—Henry Lawson's Bertha, or her son Billy's Dorothy. Questions proliferate about her self-promotion, her constructions of literary and folkloric tradition; her admiration for turncoats like Lane or Hughes; her contradictory socialism and acceptance of an Imperial honour; her secrecy and canniness in dealing with the record for posterity. And these doubts remain at the end of Bill Wilde's instructive enterprise.

Gilmore was convinced of the importance of what she had to say. Her poetry and prose give her the right to our respect. Direct, humane, at their best honed and spare, her lyrics have not been in vogue for some time. The reasons are not far to seek. The detached, public utterance favoured by Hope and a later generation was at odds with her engaged and personal manner. Products of later views of what poetry is and what it should do, we can fail to observe those elements which made her work loved and remembered. She drew on literary as well as folk forms and sources—song, ballad, lullaby—imbuing her own localised experiences with universalist values. The nationalist iconography or even avowed purpose of much of her work has made it possible to interpret her role as that of literary conscience of her country, a sort of poetical H. V. Evatt. She subordinated much of her writing to interpretation of the political struggle she saw as characterising history, and portrayed herself

as representative figure in the struggle. That said, the mordant lyric "Nationality" defies any effort to gainsay her comment or skill.

Her campaign began with the struggle to be productive beyond nurturing good white English-speaking communalist children in the working-man's Paraguayan utopia, Cosme. Productive she was. Some of her writing is great. Some is plain bad, where the predominant concern is with what is said rather than the best way of saying it. Gilmore contended with working journalism for much of her career. The *Worker* was her reluctant host for twenty-three years, and like her contemporaries H. E. Boote, R. J. Cassidy, Lola Gornall, Zora Cross and David McKee Wright on that paper, Gilmore often published verse which seems hurried, unresolved, at best striking or merely competent. It is time someone looked at it all closely: there are surprises.

Where poetry still has readers, it stands in danger of being marginal to their lives, of occupying the same space as Stockhausen—or Galuppi—on the cultural shelf. There is much to be said for Gilmore's candid speech and her persistence in the old craft ways. Straightforwardness and passionate concern do not long remain out of vogue, as the overdue swing to appreciation of the Victorians attests. Roll on, I say, the rediscovery of the Edwardians and Georgians.

Gilmore courted hazard in common with all who strive to make public occasions live in art. She sought to keep high poetic company—Burns and the anonymous Scots bards—and her work could miss the verve of the originals. Gilmore's 'arrows' fell wide at times in regard to her objects of worship in other fields. George Robertson and C. E. W. Bean were among the "inspiring and attractive men" she knew. So was Billy Hughes, and Gilmore suffered for her allegiance. Wilde does not tease out any adequate reason for Gilmore's loyalty to the man: one's sympathies remain with Boote and Cassidy.

Wilde doesn't offer us a celebration of the woman, for all that the book trades as 'the official authorised biography' and a bicentennial knell is sounded in the Preface. The Australasian Book Society published *Mary Gilmore: A Tribute* in 1965, and the sponsors of that project snaffled the Dobell portrait for their dustjacket: Melbourne University Press's cover portrait is frankly disappointing by comparison. Wilde provides a generous range of Gilmore's poetry, and some tentative judgement upon it. Commentary by others is made to do most of the work, so one is forced back on one's own judgement after all. I don't mind this approach, but Wilde is too nice all round. His own interpretations are illuminating: yes, we should reread her.

I can appreciate the difficulties faced by Wilde. Gilmore's secrecy about her private life leave gaps in the tapestry. Readers will want to know more. Did her men seek to escape her as keenly as she sought

to escape them? Gilmore was assiduous in obscuring all that came between her and her family. Wilde comes as close to psychological interpretation as he dares when he proposes a sense of guilt relating to her view of her father—a reasonable hypothesis based on the 'penance' in her later poems. So much is guesswork: the family unit, corner-stone of Cosme's society and contractual article in its wedding-service, was jettisoned by Gilmore, as her mother (and her mother's friend Louisa Lawson) had also escaped to greener literary pastures. Decent Victorian primness hides the reason for Gilmore's spending most of her forty-five years of marriage apart from her husband. Contract, according to her, was sacred, but her silence marks another sense of duty—to present only her public face to posterity. She destroyed nearly sixty years' letters concerning her family life.

Did guilt or shame attach to any broken contracts? Her departure from Cosme on health grounds was, on the face of it, more dignified than that of Lane, the founder. She liked "a manly man", and Wilde tentatively suggests surrogate father types: was Hughes then like her father in being at once strong-minded and a disappointment? Not quite. More speculation—or more weight on the puzzling aspects of character and career would be welcome in a work which will remain the standard reference for some time.

Gilmore's character is enigmatic: scandalised by suggestions of eroticism in her own work, she could appreciate Zora Cross's work and yet be shocked by Marie Pitt's relationship with Bernard O'Dowd. Gilmore appears a wowser: her own Will seems to have liked a beer, and her son, Bill, died an alcoholic; medicinal spirits were, in best Victorian fashion, a relief for Mary in times of stress or insomnia. The reasons for Bill's condition are not canvassed by Wilde. More annoyingly, Gilmore's attitudes to race are not clarified. Did she ever see Aboriginals as quite equal to whites? Old racial loyalties are posited as her first consideration, and her attachment to the Clan Cameron is understandable. She held out early for racial purity, applauding southern American segregation and regarding miscegenation—in *Coonardoo* or in 'real life'—as repulsive. Did she utterly repudiate this bigotry later? Were her Aboriginals ever more than picturesque anachronisms? Her friendship with Faith Musing (Faith Bandler) and her patronage of organisations could do with more comment.

For all the contradictions spun out by her or surrounding her, Gilmore's campaigns for progressive causes are part of Australian history. Her work encouraged the preservation of material which some contemporaries would sooner have forgotten. Wilde's canvassing of one hundred years of Australian history is facilitated by her sense of what was worth preserving. It would be pleasant to think that Wilde's hints relating to the uncollected and unpublished works

would be acted on in the interests of bibliography, and to restore some of Gilmore's finest works to a user-friendly format. This biography is a choice companion to the *Letters of Mary Gilmore*—another of Wilde's labours of love and enduring monuments.

*Michael Sharkey is writing a biography of David McKee Wright. His most recent book is The Illustrated Treasury of Australian Humour (O.U.P., \$39.95).*

## Warm Man, Cold War

Stuart Macintyre

Russel Ward: *A Radical Life: The Autobiography of Russel Ward* (Macmillan, \$35.00).

*A Radical Life* is not one but several autobiographies at once. The foreword announces a critical self-examination and refers with approval to Cromwell's injunction that his portrait be painted 'warts and all'. The Russel Ward who emerges from this exercise is an awkward, boisterous, shy, cross-grained, easy-going, self-critical lump of a lad who is slow to find his avocation. In this confessional mode he is ever vigilant for signs of outward or inward weakness. Like Edmund Gosse in the classic *Father and Son*, he wrestles with the need to "differ in some obvious way from my awesomely admired and loved parent". There is no respite from the control of this Methodist headmaster—both at home and at school he commands obedience—and it is only as Russel Ward establishes his autonomy in acts of rebellion against his father's puritanism that he begins to understand the temperamental affinities they share. In particular, he comes to appreciate how his father's rigid self-control masked a sensitivity to social slights.

But throughout the evangelical austerity of this spiritual confession, cheerfulness keeps breaking in. From the first page, with its vivid evocation of the colours and smells of early childhood in Charters Towers, to the white light and sky and water of South Perth, and the open parklands of Adelaide, *A Radical Life* celebrates the senses. The richness of childhood memory is a feature of Australian autobiography and this account bears traces of some of the best of them, notably those of Hal Porter and Bernard Smith. Sensuality refutes sin, it admits no guilt. As Russel Ward relates his awakening sexuality, there was no need for embarrassment. He tells how his mother came to bid him goodnight as he was shaking the bed in the rapture of his discovery of masturbation: "she simply said 'Good night, son' in such a way as to let me know that she was happy for me to have grown up and perfectly confident that I had, and would have, nothing to fear or be ashamed of".

Finally, there is the story of how Russel Ward came to write *The Australian Legend*, that seminal codification of the national past. Intellectually, this story leads from a literary education at his father's school; learning from Hancock, Portus and others at Adelaide University in the 1930s; joining the Communist Party in the flood-tide of its influence and potential during World War Two; to research at the Australian National University as the Cold War chilled the promise of post-war reconstruction. Temperamentally, Ward's interpretation of the national ethos is prefigured in his juxtaposition of childhood innocence and bounteous Australian nature against the tribulations of adult sociability.

He resolves the conflict in a transitional chapter, "Geelong and the Centre". Upon graduation at the end of 1936, he was recruited by J. R. Darling to teach at Geelong Grammar. There he worked round the clock, taking classes, supervising games, patrolling dormitories (and arranging, in concert with a sixth-former named Stephen Murray-Smith, for Ralph Gibson to address "the rather privileged section of the masses then resident at the school"). Such gestures scarcely alleviated his rejection of what the school stood for.

During school holidays he set off with friends from Adelaide on a trek to Alice Springs. This journey into the centre becomes a discovery of the real Australia and its rough hospitality. In a pub he meets an ancient white-bearded bushman who, in retrospect, he recognises as "the archetypal Australian man". He works as a labourer and experiences the primitive democracy of the masculine collectivity. He encounters wanton sexual invitation over which his Methodism scarcely prevails. He begins to learn the country from Aboriginal stockmen and witnesses the humiliation and brutality inflicted on Aborigines.

*The Australian Legend* distilled these experiences and explored their historical genesis, establishing Russel Ward as a leading member of what is now called the Old Left. His leftism was real and passionate, and the scars left by victimisation are apparent as he rehearses his experiences at the hands of the cold warriors of the University of New South Wales. The book concludes with his appointment to the University of New England; the radical life continues.

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## Instabilities: Memory and Language

David Matthews

Leon Trainor: *Livio* (Greenhouse, \$14.95).

Marion Campbell: *Not Being Miriam* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, \$14.99).

At one point in *Livio*, the eponymous narrator stands with his wife looking into a stream from a bar near the fountain of Vaucluse. Livio relates how he imagined himself tearing off his wedding ring and throwing it to the trout in the water below. "Such moments of sacrilege," he says, "come as easily as the sudden gush of poetry, and are worth as little. I have grown to prefer the reflection which prose affords, however dry it may be." There are many such moments of sacrilege in this impressive novel—often, as is the case here, in the form of personal revolt; at other times in the form of the narrator's reaction to constraints of a political kind, in the events of Europe and Australia in the sixties and early seventies. But, as with the wedding ring, most of the desires of these moments remain unacted.

The event belongs in a central passage laden with significances. The bar that Livio and his wife are sitting in is Chez Pètrarque, named after the master of the art that Livio says has failed him. The reflective prose he has come to favour exists, of course, in this book, which is his memoir of wanderings through France and Italy, his marriage, and eventual return to Australia. But memory, too, is unreliable, as the same passage reveals. Livio tells how he seems to remember becoming separated from his wife "and spent an anxious hour looking for her." But he no longer knows whether this really happened, or whether it is a phantom foreshadowing of their real, and final, separation.

Born of Italian parents in Australia, growing up with different languages, and then turning his back on his birthplace, Livio's identity is itself uncertain. His narrative, written in recollection, spans about fifteen years, and in part is an attempt to deal with these uncertainties and make sense of a life. There is little stability in Livio's life: when his marriage crumbles, he is left to bring up his daughter, who, it is gradually revealed, has Down's syndrome and is not expected to live beyond her teens. The unfolding of Livio's growing love for Julie, a skilfully handled parallel plot, is a fixed point in the narrative of Livio's life constantly threatened by the possibility of her death.

Partly, of course, Livio's memoir is about the ungraspable nature of a life, the fundamental inequivalence between an experience and the language used to describe it. The writer is full of fears about this, describing how an event in his life can remain submerged for a long time before surfacing in his writing. "Sometimes a whole succession of events will

rise up and blot out the present until I have written them all down. In such moments I fear my life will grow steadily devoid of new experience, until I am finally limited to writing about the act of writing." The tone of the novel is wistful, the characteristic outcome of events an undercutting of meaning and significance. Livio is a poet whose epiphanic moments continually collapse in on themselves.

This first novel by poet Leon Trainor is a remarkable book, if uneven in places. The book is so dominated by the presence of Livio as narrator, that much of the dialogue and minor characters are swamped by his saturnine presence. Much that is given as direct speech sounds as if it should be reported dialogue, so coloured is it by the patterns of Livio's own speech. From time to time, Livio lapses into a cynical sententiousness ("We quickly resumed that amused superficiality which passes for friendship") which sits uneasily with the subtleties of his character, and of most of the writing. But on the whole, this is a remarkably well sustained novel.

*Livio* deals with the instabilities of memory; Marion Campbell's new book, *Not Being Miriam*, plays with the instabilities of language itself. Campbell's splintered narrative and dense, quicksilver prose mock the claims of language to representation, celebrating the heights of metaphor, pun, allusion and illusion.

This is not to imply any failure to come to grips with narrative. Though the individually titled sections of the book are mostly self-contained, and some have been published separately as stories, the several strands gradually come together to reach a fictional crescendo. For much of the book, the supposed imperatives of the novel are ignored or flagrantly transgressed, so that the effect of the novel is achieved in spite of the tearing apart of the form.

The strands of the book concern Bess, a drama teacher who would rather have been an actress; Lydia, the wife of Bess's colleague Harry; and Elsie, Bess's next door neighbour. The early stories rapidly chart moments from Bess's childhood and adolescence, her marriage and life with her son. Readjustment is constantly forced on her as her aspirations are successively thwarted. Her growing closeness to Harry Grogan introduces Grogan's wife, Lydia. A digression sketches in Elsie's story, up to the point where she is married to Roger and becomes Bess's neighbour. The women are not close friends or associates, nor do they have much in common. But the complications of their own lives soon bring them together in a disastrous confluence of their separate stories.

Miriam is a ghostly presence, the dead first wife of Roger, Elsie's husband. While it is Elsie who is *not* Miriam, the negativity of the title functions in the case of each of the women. Bess has not become an actress, not lived up to the expectations of her family.

German-born Lydia is not English, like her husband Harry, and can never throw off this heritage. Roger keeps a blown-up poster of Miriam behind his trousers in the closet, but from this concealment she looms over each of the women.

The problem with this kind of plot sketch is that it pretends to recontain the narratives in a manageable and familiar frame, when in fact they are constantly spilling over. The narrative technique attacks rather than tells the story. The story is related, variously, from within the consciousnesses of all the characters, at times switching without warning from one to another in the one chapter or story. The kaleidoscopic perspective derived from this technique is paralleled by the approaching of one event in several different stories from different perspectives. In this way, the

event that most nearly approximates the climax is viewed from different angles, subjected to scrutiny rather than allowed the unexamined status of a literary convention.

Campbell's work has been dubbed 'experimental writing', possibly the blandest of critical labels; on the other hand, she has gained her detractors from the transparent realists' camp, as will happen to any writer so consistently artful and intelligent. Her new work is innovative and exciting and, with it, Campbell has reinforced the reputation she established with *Lines of Flight*.

*David Mathews is a postgraduate in the English Department at Melbourne University.*

## floating fund

BARRETT REID writes: Well we *did* get your New Year greetings! Not only a total of \$2810 to mid-February, but so many encouraging notes. And such a mix of places and people. A great beginning for The Overland Society, its Finance Committee and Treasurer. Specific thanks to: \$500, J.B.; \$250, M.B.; \$200, Anon; \$130, J.M.; \$100, R.A., R.S.; \$80, L.R., J.W.; \$50, M.C.L., M.McL.; \$40, B.W.; \$30, J.D., N. & S.H., J.E., T.M., M.M., J.F., N.B., M.R., A.M., N.B., H.A., G.H., S.D., E.D., A.H.; \$25, T.S., G.G., L.P., B.B.; \$20, T.H., M.W., C.T., R.B., R.S., D.B., M.M., J.B., B.N-S., D.G., V.G.I.; \$10, S.T., R.D., J.H., R.H., L.C., L.K., P.M., B.H., L.D., V.T., E.M., D.M., P.I., J.S., M.E., M.S., E.C., V.S., B.G., I.W., J.T., C.E.S., S.P., R.F., S.McK., L.B., G.S., K.P., B.B., B.W., M.L., R.J.S.; \$6, D.S., A.S.; \$5, S.S., M.N., A.C., R.A., J.H., T.S., J.G., J.H., K.E., M.J.T., C.C., N.C.N., E.J.C., J.B., E.C., K.R., D.O'S., R.C., F.W., M.R., R.G., J.S., E.G., R.H.; \$4, G.S., O.J.



NGUYEN CHI THIEN, VIETNAM

## Writers in Prison, (1)

The freedom to speak and to listen, to write and to read is not a luxury but a condition of human survival. Yet everywhere it is under threat. In its annual report for 1988, the Writers in Prison committee of International P.E.N. lists 305 writers known to be in prison around the world. Of these cases, 33 had become known since the previous report, while 49 of the prisoners then known had since been released. Since that report, the death threat to Salman Rushdie and the British censorship of reports on Northern Ireland have reminded us that the freedom to speak and write remains precarious around the world.

International P.E.N. is an organisation of writers dedicated to maintaining and extending this freedom. Its English president, Antonia Fraser, has publicly supported Salman Rushdie and his publishers. Australian branches have also written calling on our government to support him and on the Iranian government to withdraw the death threat. P.E.N. relies on publicity and moral persuasion to achieve its aims, and needs the support of people everywhere if it is to succeed in widening the frontiers of freedom even slightly. Despite continuing oppression, recent events suggest some hope for the immediate future as governments are recognising the need to free their peoples. Nevertheless, writers continue to languish in prison, unable to share their ideas with the world and in fear of their own lives. In support of P.E.N.'s efforts

and our own commitment to freedom of expression, *Overland* each issue will report on one writer in prison and ask our readers to give the prisoner their support.

Australian branches of P.E.N. have adopted imprisoned writers in China, Vietnam, South Korea and Turkey. In Vietnam, the Hanoi poet Nguyen Chi Thien is enduring his third term of imprisonment since 1958, when he tried to publish *Vi Dan—For the People*. Ten years ago he was arrested after he had deposited in the British embassy a new collection of his poems, since published in translation as *Flowers from Hell*, winner of the 1985 Rotterdam Poetry International Prize. Last year, there were rumours that he had died in prison, but these have not been confirmed. It is known that he is critically ill, but the Vietnamese government has not responded to enquiries about his welfare or whereabouts.

Vietnam remains devastated by war, desperately poor, and ostracised by the nations who caused its misery. It cannot afford to persecute its own people. We urge friends of Vietnam, in particular, to write to the Vietnamese Ambassador to Australia at the Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 6 Timbarra Crescent, O'Malley, ACT 2606, expressing their concern about the fate of Nguyen Chi Thien and asking information about his health and his whereabouts.

John McLaren

Sharkey's

# Lives of the Poets

No. 9

Bless  
you

