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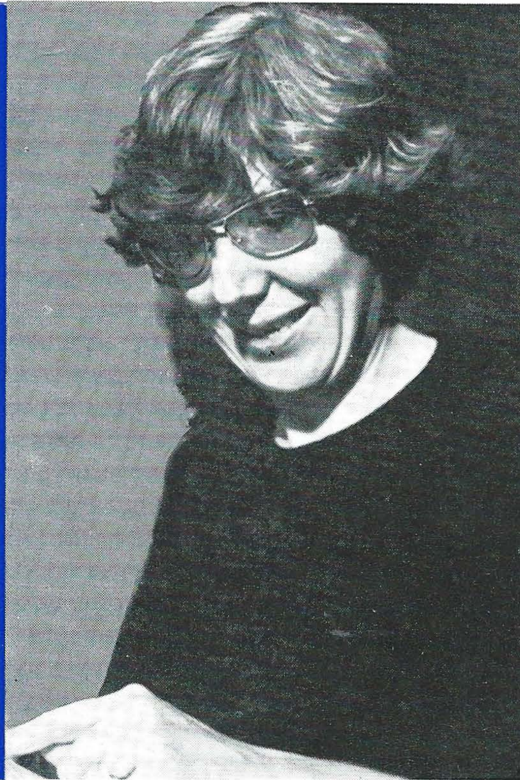

Mary Rose Liverani
Letter from Wollongong

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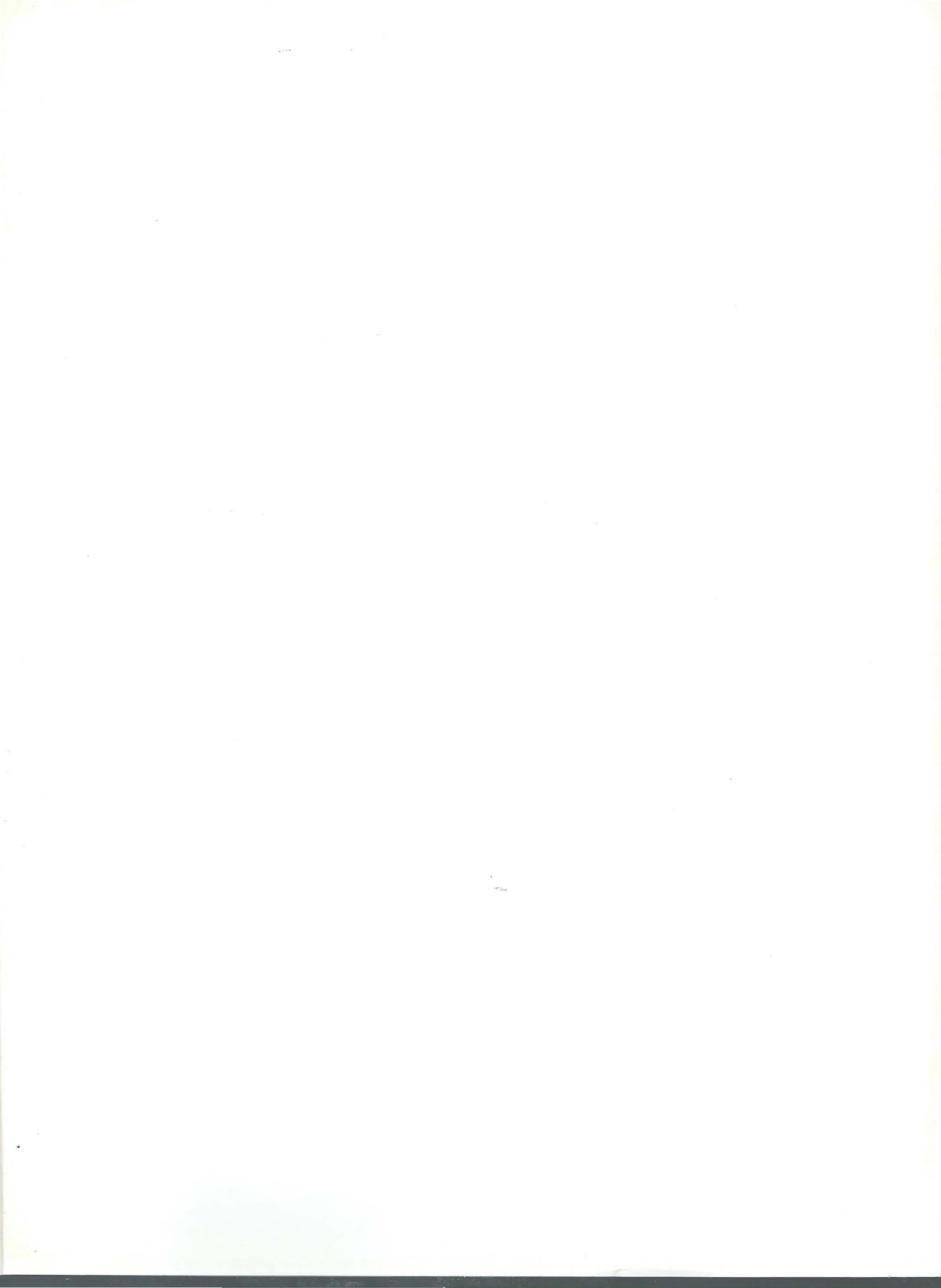

stories SERPENT'S TOOTH *Roger Milliss* 2

THE DAY OF THE SEARCH FOR BERNARD KROPT *Dennis Douglas* 13

A WORLD OF SHINING HOPE *Carol Cohn* 37

features LETTER FROM WOLLONGONG *Mary Rose Liverani* 8

CHRISTINA STEAD IN ITALY *Desmond O'Grady* 16

HELEN PALMER *Doreen Bridges* 17

SAME WHYS AND WHEREFORES OF OVERLAND 20

THE POETRY AUDIENCE *Fairlie Szacinski* 30

SWAG 32

COUNTRY STYLE *Edward Kynaston* 34

A. T. *Eric Westbrook* 41

MY FATHER *Margaret Luers* 43

FREDERIC MANNING AND THE TRAGEDY OF WAR *Bruce Clunies Ross* 45

BOOKS 50

poetry *Max Harris* 24, 29, *W. Glen Washburn* 25, *Gig Ryan* 25, *Rudi Krausmann* 25, 29, *Frank Kellaway* 26, *Hugh Underhill* 27, *Ray Carmichael* 27, *Geoff Page* 27, 29, *Dorothy Featherstone Porter* 28, *Jennifer Maiden* 28, *Philip Neilsen* 28, *R. H. Morrison* 29, *Virginia Leinart* 44

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August 1979

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ROGER MILLISS

Serpent's Tooth

The first part of this extract from a forthcoming autobiographical novel appeared in Overland 69.

I RANG them from a phone box in the Cross just before seven one Sunday evening in July. I hadn't seen them for a fortnight or so, or spoken to them since a few days earlier when my mother told me that my father's physician had said his heart was badly overworked and urged him to go into hospital immediately for treatment. He didn't want to go, she said; he was worried that she wouldn't be able to cope at home without him. She'd spent a couple of days in bed with neuralgia and a violent toothache the dentist had at first been reluctant to touch. Nonsense, I told her brusquely, he was sick, he had to do what the doctor said: she was better now, she'd manage all right by herself. Will I, Roger? she said, strangely. That was almost a week ago, and I had no idea what had happened since. I didn't have the phone on, so they had no way of contacting me, but somehow I assumed that everything was still all right. Anyway, I could always count on my brother coming in to let me know of anything untoward. The day before I'd been taping up at Channel 7, with the usual delays; when the train back into town pulled in at Strathfield station I toyed for a moment with getting off and calling in to see them, only half a mile away, but it was late and there was a party on that night. I'd ring tomorrow. At the party I picked someone up, I think, and brought her home to the flat. In the morning I impatiently made her a cup of coffee and she left about eleven. I spent the rest of the day in bed with a hangover instead, getting up late in the afternoon to play squash. I mean to phone them on the way down to the courts, but I was running late and put it off until after. On the squash court I lathered the grog out of my system, strolled home, and then finally went out to make the call. The phone rang for some time before anybody answered, and I was on the point of hanging up. Maybe they'd gone out? Strange, at their age, on that bleak night. I'd ring again tomorrow, then. Or the day after. But at last someone replied. Instead of my father's increasingly uncertain hello or my mother's quavering tones — God, she was beginning to sound like Grandma Clampett, twenty-three years dead! — there was an unexpected voice at the other end, but one I still knew. It was Stewart, the local doctor my parents used for the everyday complaints of old age. I've got some very bad news for you, he said. *Is it my father,* I shouted at him, *Is it my father!* He was patient, firm, professionally sympathetic. No, it's your mother. I'm afraid she passed away suddenly about an hour ago. A coronary. Your brother called me. I'm sorry . . . He meant it. He was sorry. How many times I'm afraid your mother, I have very very bad news, she passed away suddenly, I'm sorry . . . I heard him say, I think you had better come out here as soon as you can.

I got a cab at the top of William Street, Strathfield, off Parramatta Road, just past the lights. The driver reached across and swung the flag down. Bloody freezing, brass monkey weather . . . Easts done the Tigers, eh? Twenty-three-seventeen, Beetson off in the second half . . . I sat looking numbly out at the city. Everything was cold, clear, terrifying precise. The wind bit through the lonely Sabbath-black streets. A bunch of wowsers performing at the bottom of Pitt Street close to the plonk bars and the four-dollar-a-night beds, for a drunk and two sailors with their girls sending them up, accordion, banjo, tambourines and a woman handing out tracts. In the backyard of the old cottage in the mountains town Grandpa Clampett ties up the swing all day; Sunday is for God and rest and little Edie and Ernie suffocate dumbly until evening service in the Methodist Church and tea and cakes for the faithful afterwards in the adjoining hall . . . At

Central a girl crosses the zebra bars yellow in the swinging lights above, skirt thigh-high and more in the wind. The University, alma mater, *kindly mother,* best five years of my life, the new Fisher glass-and-concrete garish as a night-shift factory below Wentworth's gothic tower, never like that in my day. The good old Governor Bourke, three more middies of new and a gin-squash, love, get that into you, Pam, bloody good leg-opener, ha-ha, if I were the marrying kind, sir, chug-a-lug. Camperdown Smash Repairs.

Ellinikon Kafeinon and La Napolitana in the Leichhardt ghetto. The Petersham Inn, somewhere down there to the left she was born in eighteen ninety-nine, God, the nineteenth century, how many light years ago, horse-and-buggies, Queen Victoria and the bushmen off to fight the Boers. Colonel Sanders' Fried Kentucky Chicken at the bottom of Taverner's Hill, handy to Fort Street Boys'. She went to the other Fort Street, the real Fort Street, perched high on Observatory Hill, marooned by the expressways and Caltex and the developers now, back in the days when a girl had to battle to get beyond sixth grade . . . Bob Wilson's Ashfield Autos, up there the old house where they lived for twenty years, now sacrificed like everything at the black altar of progress. Arnott's Biscuits. Go Well with Shell. Where? "Somewhere a heart stops beating", another poem that would never get past the first line. The juices have dried up in me, the song is ended. She wanted to sing, she could sing like a bird, everyone said so, a beautiful modulated voice of exceptional clarity and purity the Eistedfodd judges said, the pride of Katoomba in the nineteen-twenties at every local concert for whatever cause, "Where E'er You Walk" sung by Miss Edith Clampett soprano, proceeds to the Red Cross, on VE Day in nineteen forty-five we will now hear from Mrs Bruce Milliss, the kids clap madly, that's my mum up there, the wife of the local Red sings "The Empire Is Marching" under the Union Jack in the Town Hall. Who cares, a voice keeps asking? I care, I should defiantly, I care about it all. Any man's death, or woman's. *I shall in all my best obey you, Madam.* But only an hour ago I'd said she'd do anything, even invent an illness, to prevent me going overseas again, over to Africa, back to the hub of the world, the borders of black and white, the crucible of struggle, away from Colonel Sanders and the new Holden Monaro and the poker machines and the hire purchase and the backyard barbecue. She'd try anything, I'd said. Only an hour ago. The old emotional blackmail bit. Don't worry about us, Roger, you go away if that's what you want to do, you may not see us again, we'll be dead soon, but don't you worry. At that moment she was already dead. Good Madam, what's the matter? *What's the matter!* . . . Burwood Road. Next one left, mate. Past the home units and a brace of ageing unkempt cottages and the exclusive girls' school. And round to the right, thanks. Just here'll do fine. The house was ablaze with lights; in the downstairs flat they'd taken over for themselves and only finished doing up a couple of weeks previously she was dead, after seventy years of living through a cataract of change like all of us she's never really understood. Had they laid her out already? What happened when somebody died? I didn't know much about it, no one close to me had ever died, only Grandma Clampett when I was a kid of twelve or so and they led me bawling out of the chapel, crying for whom? For her, for myself, for all that monstrous tragicomedy that ends up in a rosewood coffin and a Wood Coffil parlour and a few unctuous platitudes from some sanctimonious minister who never knew or cared what once ticked or why in the cask before him? God knows. A dollar eighty-three, mate. Thanks, keep the change. He took the two buck note with a grunt. A knockback, another row with the missus or the girl friend? Maybe he even guessed what it really was. My brother opened the door without a word. The old man struggled to his feet out of an armchair. She was sitting in the corner of the settee, her favourite position, and dressed as I'd seen her so often over the years; an old neat grey woollen twin set and plain grey skirt, and thick brown winter stockings. Her hands lay in her lap, as naturally as if she'd just dozed off, as she often did, with a magazine beside her on the couch. She seemed — what was it they always said about the dead? — composed, comfortable, almost at peace. Only a small white cotton handkerchief someone, Stewart presumably, had discreetly placed over her face gave some clue of what had happened. It was the first corpse I'd ever seen. I sat beside her and took her hands in mine. Already death had set in, her fingers were like cold, hard claws, the joints grotesquely swollen by the arthritis that had plagued her for the last ten years or more. Only the last time I'd visited them, we gathered around the piano after dinner as we used to twenty, thirty years ago in the mountains town and her voice had cracked on the high notes and her fingers stumbled over the keys, and she cried *I can't sing,*

Roger, I can't play, I just can't do it any more! And she pounded the useless, wretched stumps down on the keyboard in a dumb cacophony of protest at life and age and at encroaching death while the tears poured down her cheeks. Sitting there now, I tried to rub some life back into those twisted talons, to bring her back for long enough to say I'm sorry, please forgive me, I didn't really hate you, I loved you, I came out of you, you gave me life, you gave me everything you could, I want you to know I'm grateful, that it wasn't wasted and that the love that life is all about was there and please, please forgive me. Bless me, mother, bless me. I wanted to take her in my arms, to lay my head on the big shapeless breasts, to stroke those thin, dry grey-and-white wisps of hair straggling above her forehead, to pluck the handkerchief away from her face and speak the few words of tenderness and love I'd never been able to bring myself to utter, to hear her say in response *It's all right, I understand, please don't blame yourself, it's not your fault, you have nothing to ask forgiveness for.* But I do, I do. The old man stood staring vacantly at us. I wanted to say to her, there, you see, it *was* all worthwhile, you have so much to be proud of, you stood by him, with him, while he fought and battled for what he believed to be good and right, you were his pillar, his rock for forty years and he loved you, we all loved you for what you were and what you did. But I choked on the lie, I knew his enormous shadow was both her fortress and her prison, that his very achievements only served to underline the starkness of her failure, that what she was she did not want to be and what she'd done had never been enough, that the love she longed for in return for the flood of affection she tried to pour on us had never been forthcoming, and that deep inside her was a bitter spring of pain and fury at the unfulfilment of her life which only the day-by-day minutiae of home and family she sank herself in stopped from welling up and over till she pounded the piano keys and cried *I can't play, Rog, I can't sing, I just can't do it anymore!* And I knew it was this I hated her for and that because I knew but never could accept that it was time and circumstance and the mountains town and the Methodist Church and the genteel pretensions of her parents that had made her what she was I hated myself and it was this I wanted her to shrive me of. So I just sat there mutely keening, blindly kneading the cold hard claws of an old inert dead woman with a handkerchief over her face, waiting for a benediction and an absolution that would never come. I looked up at the old man. He hadn't moved, his eyes still dazed with sheer incomprehension. I got up and went over to him, put my arms on his shoulders and suddenly he pulled me to him. *Rog, Rog,* he sobbed, and his big body shuddered as the grief ebbed through him. I led him to a chair and knelt beside him while he cried like a child. My brother stood quietly, almost lugubriously by the door, *A very great shock,* he said, *a very sad blow to all of us,* so gravely and sincerely I couldn't believe he really meant it. I wanted to scream, *Is that all you can say, you bastard, is that all you can say?* She was our mother, she bore us and brought us up and was proud of us and wanted us to love her and we never really did, and we are her sons and all you can say is *a very great shock, a sad blow to us all?* He stood there stolid in his blue corduroy jacket and slacks, the art teacher turned university administrator, the thick glasses hiding the shy self-conscious eyes, the dull black hair showing flecks of grey now in his fortieth year, and I saw his diffidence concealed a sensitivity that I would never know, that suddenly came tumbling astonishingly out in the rush of color of his landscapes. For all my passions and presumptions, he was the one with the real compassion. I shouted my emotions from the rooftops, proclaimed my deep involvement in mankind, but to me the word humanity was ultimately an abstraction. To him it was not even a word but a simple everyday fact. While I eschewed my parents he stood by them, in their times of crisis he assisted them, as their idiosyncrasies increased with age he accepted them with almost a resigned detachment. He could see them as they were, I could only see them as I wanted them to be. When I heaped my supercilious scorn on my mother for her petty failings, for the narrowness of her vision and the emptiness of her existence, or when I assailed my father for the absurdity of his new political dogmas, my brother would say, Look, don't you see, they're old and they're going to get older, you've got to understand that, you've just got to make allowances for it. But I couldn't. Yet he was right, it was obvious to him, it was obvious to anyone but me, and now it was too late. And here I was on my knees beside the old man, wallowing in a mire of grief that was really self-pity and self-guilt, and standing there by the door he could see so clearly the simple fact that they were two elderly people one of whom had died two hours before and that maybe the other one

would shortly follow suit. *A very great shock, a sad blow*. He was right. And yet was that all that could or should be said? Gradually my father's distress subsided, and I was able to piece together what had happened. They'd spent most of the afternoon outside in the wind pottering about in the garden. It was typical of them both. Some years before, he had chosen a blistering summer's day to paint the roof of the old place at Ashfield and even when the inevitable southerly change sent the temperature plummeting he stayed on to finish the job and only came down towards dark with a chill that laid him up for the best part of a month and had serious long-term effects on his health. This time, however, the cold was too much even for him, and he decided to go inside. But perversely my mother refused to come, despite his entreaties. The usual flare-up, the usual piddling row ensued. Don't you start telling me what to do again, Bruce, I'm all right out here and I'll do what I want to do, thank you very much. He went inside alone, leaving her to herself, and started reading. She finally came in about five, complaining of feeling tired and faint. She'd lain down on the spare bed and he'd made her a cup of tea, and she seemed a little brighter. They needed some things for breakfast next day, eggs and bread and oranges, and he offered to go down to the shops to get them. She wanted him to drive the car, he insisted on walking. Another petty quarrel, which this time he won, though she managed to make sure he wrapped himself up and even put on the quaint cloth cap she'd bought him that made him look like a retired Bradford mill-owner. When he left she was still lying in the back room, saying she thought she'd take a nap. When he came back he opened the front door and found her sitting on the couch where she was when I arrived, in front of a radiator, ashen, semi-conscious, gasping for breath. He rushed out and called my brother, who immediately rang Stewart. She kept on fighting for life, the breath coming in huge desperate torrents through her body. She tried to speak, but the words were strangled, unintelligible. My father thought she was saying *Don't, Don't . . .* Once or twice it seemed she was trying to say his name. Stewart arrived after about ten minutes. By then she had weakened considerably. He ushered my brother and my father out of the room. A few minutes later he came out and announced that she was dead. A massive coronary. Massive. After hearing as much as my father could recount of what had happened, he said he thought she must have decided to go out to the loungeroom to get some warmth, switched on the radiator, settled herself on the couch, and then suffered the heart attack. Later he told my brother it could have struck her while she was actually bending over the radiator, and then she had collapsed backwards onto the settee. My father broke down, blaming himself for leaving her when she was obviously unwell: if only he'd stayed he might have been able to help her, he could've called Stewart sooner, she might not have died. Stewart was firm, emphatic. There was nothing my father could have done, he said, nothing anyone, even he himself could have done. The occlusion was so great, so sudden, so violent. He repeated this categorically to my brother later. He gave my father a light sedative and rang for the undertaker, leaving shortly after I'd phone. There was nothing more he could do. It was as simple as that. I thought is death always such an anticlimax, is it always so trivial, so banal? A woman lived seventy years, by some strange and unwanted irony her exact biblical span, her life bridging two utterly alien eras. When it began, the motor car was a monster horses bolted from, the wireless an infant crackle of tapped morse messages, the aeroplane an earthborne joke, the machine age — in Australia at least — still largely a matter of the steam combustion engine and sweated labor in small-scale workshops, while the bulk of the nation's wealth lumbered leisurely to rural railheads for eventual trans-shipment and processing overseas. When it ended, machines punched holes in cards which programmed other machines to spew forth endless streams of objects people devoured insatiably and hoped would make them happy, the motor car had become a fetish-monster extant horses hardly looked up at but which man worshipped and propitiated and exultantly killed himself in, rockets hurtled themselves through space at thousands of miles an hour and men-monsters pranced inanely around the moon, the images of their grotesque pantomine flashed instantaneously back to earth and gawked at by inert millions, while farmers grew hundreds-fold more and were still obliged to sell up and discontentedly join the new gold rush to the sprawling El Dorados of asphalt and brick-veneer hugging the eastern seaboard of the world's biggest island-continent. When she was born, life was sedate and secure, as ordered as the universe it mirrored, with God in his heaven, the Queen on her throne, and all well with the world. When she died, that order had been shattered by the

cataclysms of the century that followed. She had seen them all, but what impact had they made upon her? When she was eighteen, Russia erupted. Had she even noted the event, which was to interdict the whole course of her life, in the sober columns of the Sydney Morning Herald? She was twenty-three when Mussolini marched on Rome, a year older when an obscure Austrian house-painter and his henchmen staggered out of Munich beer-hall for their ominously abortive putsch. Had any tremor of alarm disturbed the smug mountain air? The Depression scarred and pitted her, as it had all of her generation in one way or another, even though neither she nor my father was among the multitudes thrown on the scrapheap. By the time the second world war broke out, she was swept along by my father's zeal enough to share or, if she could never fully comprehend, at least to accept his faith that life could be re-shaped, that out of the wreckage and the ruins a new world must be built. She had lived through the two great slaughters of the modern age, the rise and fall of the great dictators, the concentration camps and the gas chambers, the crumbling of empires, the razing of Hiroshima and the new era it had ushered in of the nuclear terror on the edge of which mankind had balanced for her last two decades, and finally the new night of the long knives, of napalm, defoliation and search-and-destroy, of body-counts and overkill, of Lazy Dog and My Lai, of the devastation of a simple peasant people by all the awesome means of mass destruction man's ingenious technology had devised, in a fresh orgy of bloodletting that had ripped her society apart. The age of cant, hypocrisy and sham had given way to the age of death. She was never able to articulate coherently the changes she had seen, to define or analyse their overall significance, she was only aware that some vast and baffling transformation had occurred. She'd simply say, *My word, but things are different now,* and launch into an immensely detailed recollection of steam-powered trams in Sydney, of charabanc trips to Jenolan Caves, of a wistful holiday in bucolic Tasmania in nineteen twenty-six, of her honeymoon in remote and undeveloped Coolangatta in nineteen twenty-nine, of Canberra when it was only a freezing plain of Parliament House and two hotels and a handful of hapless civil servants. She remembered vividly the poverty of her early days, the struggle of her family to make ends meet and preserve the *decent* appearances so vital to them, and now she found herself in the age of affluence, and though she came to acquire many of its trappings and use much of its gadgetry, she was never completely at one with it. Natural enough, perhaps, in one of her age, most likely the disease she suffered from was — what did they call it now? — future shock. As she grew older nostalgia gripped her more and more, she yearned increasingly for the simplicity of the past, she clung tenaciously to the manners and conventions of her youth. When sex emerged from the privacy and embarrassment of the bedroom and flaunted itself nakedly on the movie screen and the magazine cover, it became a further manifestation of the decadence of declining capitalism my father spoke of, and the sight of long hair roused her to splenetic indignation, no matter that within her memory her own grandfather had sported hair and beard as thick as Tolstoy's. But it was more than mere reluctance to accept reality or inability to comprehend it. The tins and packages came tumbling obligingly off the supermarket shelves, the deep-freeze units overflowed with automated ersatz chickens and bland pre-packaged meat, department stores towered with pyramids of clothes, discount houses cut-priced refrigerators, washing machines and vacuum cleaners and all the other quondam luxuries that had now become today's necessities, last year's car was traded in for next year's already superseded super-model, the great Australian dream of a red-brick bungalow, a picket fence and a quarter-acre block had at last materialised, but she sensed that in this new society of things, this brave new ad-mass world, people had grown as discardable and disposable as a tissue or a nylon pantyhose, and as she saw around her the aged being shunted by their apologetic children into nursing homes and twilight hospitals where the burden they imposed could be reduced to a conscience-salving weekly visit, it seemed she had become herself just one more bio-degradable, throw-away commodity, another used-up unreprocessable item in the refuse and the litter of the built-in obsolescence of the age of plenty, and maybe this was one of the things that had killed her. This was what she'd lived through, this was what she'd come to, this was her story, her personal tragedy if you liked, you could sing it if there was an air to it, the story of an ordinary woman who had somehow survived the first seventy years of the twentieth century. And in that itself perhaps there was something worthy of note. Nothing she had ever done had altered history, her life could be parsed for the most part in the passive rather than

the active voice, the core and purpose of existence had always lain for her in the making of a home, the consolidation of her marriage, bringing up the kids and giving them *the opportunities that she had never had,* the washing, ironing, cooking, cleaning, mending and sewing, she had repressed the dreams and ambitions of her youth and sublimated herself instead in the thousand tiny details of family life that were supposed to constitute happiness and fulfilment for the woman of her times. She had let this become the major outlet of her creativity and my father, too, for all his other advanced ideas, was happy to let her rusticate at home while he went out into the wider world and lived and did. But there were times when she was caught up almost involuntarily by the pure momentum of events and my father's fervor and flung despite herself into the public forum. Maybe the causes were minute, the Infant's Mothers' Club, the parents' bodies of the primary and secondary schools, the moves to establish a Day Nursery and a children's library, the raising of war-bonds and the evacuation of city kids to the safety of the mountains after the scare of Japanese invasion, but they were the stuff of life in her community emerging out of the Depression into the maelstrom of mankind's most crucial and appalling conflict, the *Real-politik* of her time and circumstance, and it was no small step to take for one whose family and friends recoiled in horror from political engagement, let alone my father's brand of burning opposition to the status quo. She had been behind him in all his running battles with the town establishment, the shopkeepers and guesthouse-owners and professionals who resented him most for the fact that he was really one of them but had turned against them, and when he first proclaimed himself a Red had bitterly endured the sudden ostracism by her lifelong friends in the hysteria of the incipient cold war and the passions of the great coal strike. A few years later when he was arraigned as a minor exhibit before the espionage commission and for a few intensive hours his whole proud public life was put on trial, she found not just her private loyalty but her native sense of old-world *decency* outraged as she sat rigid and enraged in the body of the court fighting back her fury to restrain herself from jumping up and shouting at them in her own terms *Don't treat my man like that!* And then in her last few years when his world began to crumble she had gone three times to China with him, into the depths of the distant unknown land where he thought at last he'd found his true Nirvana and as they grew older and more isolated and at last utterly dependent on each other she, who had always spurned his ideology, now found herself a neophyte of the Chairman's word and the magic of his little red book.

Brother, fill my glass. And now this life was over, a life no more unique than anybody else's, no better or more valuable, maybe somewhere else that very evening in the enormous twilight city the light of another seventy years had been suddenly snuffed out and the same laments were spilling forth, but like all such lives it should be celebrated, it should be sung, some honor should be done to Edith Isabella Milliss *née* Clampett, born at Petersham on December 9 eighteen hundred and ninety nine, died at Burwood on a bleak and lonely winter's night on July 19 nineteen hundred and seventy at approximately six p.m., and not just in the death certificate that would list the bare essential facts officialdom demanded or at the funeral service and cremation by the cluster of dutiful relatives gathered to pay the last respects propriety required. All that she was and was not should be recorded, a balance sheet drawn up of her successes and her failures, her strengths and weaknesses collated and presented to the world to say, this was a human being, and there but for the grace of God or man or circumstance for better or for worse go you! And who would perform the silent ceremony? My brother, to whom she was perhaps basically a biological fact, the woman who had given birth to him, to whom he owed a certain set of obligations which he carried out without demur or questioning, with neither passion nor antipathy, but from some deep intrinsic sense of *decency*? Myself, whose alienation from her in my adolescence had given way to disrespect and then a sheer hostility she sensed with dumb astonishment, hurt and bewildered by the shabby recompense for all the unabating love she tried to shower upon me? My father, shattered by the arbitrary end of nearly half a century since he first observed the neat, efficient young brunette in the town emporium, in whose death now he found himself confronting the stark truth of his own mortality? None of us would or could, none of us dared to probe the dark recesses of our memories, dreading the unknown demons that might be released if the lid of the Pandora's box were raised. She would go unheralded, unsung.

MARY ROSE LIVERANI

Letter from Wollongong

The very best time to write a letter from Wollongong is after a trip to the country to an embryonic property where there is only an inch of hard water for washing dishes, where all the money has been buried in the land and dinner is a souffle lighter than lung and just as empty, and where a soiree at the local pig farmer's uncovers a middle-aged daughter scuttling off like Kafka's beetle into a dark room to emit little whimpers through a keyhole. Then Wollongong becomes powerfully, irresistibly attractive. For the first time in twenty-five years one equates it with civilisation.

Sorry, we say, just remembered the monthly cleanup on the coast tomorrow. Can't miss out. Too much urban rubbish in the yard. And after three days instead of the promised fortnight (were we *mad,* did Wollongong seem all that bad?) we break the speed limit getting back to our adopted country, singing cheerily in our dark departure:

> The wonderful Gong for me
> A jewel half set in the sea
> Let them keep all their land
> Give me steelworks and sand
> Wollongong's the place for me. Tra-la.

Never thought it could happen but there we are shrieking with delight to come on it in that marvellously unexpected way where the road and the edge of the escarpment almost converge and tip you out into the ocean.

We wave at the hang gliders taking off nearby. They swoop like giant bats over the rain forest that still slips its stealthy way down the escarpment right to the roofs of the brick veneers and weatherboard cottages so minutely cute in that deep distance, a cosy crusting of the seashore. And we wave at the sea, dazzling it with the gloom of our welcome: hi, you sea, you beauty you, that never has an off-day.

We even turn and bow to the steelworks, puffing furiously on the right. Forgive us, O B.H.P. for ever calling you rate-shirkers, or for cursing that pusseous umbrella with which you shelter us from the rain. We love your rainbow-colored fallout and the smell of sulphur is heavenly. Give us pipes for sewerage, aluminium for electric frypans and fertilizer to bring forth green salad.

Oh, a visit to the country does wonders for Wollongong.

But never write a letter after a long visit to Florence, for then poor Wollongong, my country, is bad news. Then you might slump onto the floor of the car beastly bringing you back from the airport, so as not to see the multitudes ensconsed on the highway, paying large sums to be near the roar of the traffic and to eat the fumes. There's a mentality for you. A voice prattling in your ear may be saying, perhaps I ought not to tell you this so soon but I fear you will see the evidence in any case. The tenants in your house committed suicide. Quite independently, at different times, one by hanging himself, the other by putting her head in the gas oven.

Death by proxy, I think, gloomily. Poor creatures. They should have gone to the country for a bit.

An hour later the voice rejoices with: there you are. Bet you haven't seen a view like that for ages. I raise myself an inch or two to rest listless lids on the rim of the car window. Ah, the sea below again, breathing itself in and out across the globe, and these idiot hang-gliders above it, playing Bat-man. They'll kill themselves. And on the right, those foully smoking totems of A.I.S. sending up their call signal:

Arrogant Investors and Spoilers Ltd, the biggest rate-shirkers in town.

Very pretty, I mourn. Very pretty.

Now, now, my dear, responds the voice in the tones of a hearty nurse. We know what's the cure for you. Off to the country for a bit.

When I return I see that Wollongong is in the throes of a mini-Renaissance, about to enter its Ventecento. An art gallery has appeared out of white plaster on quarry tiles, fronted by a huge stainless steel anaconda without a head or tail. Someone has dented the coils making a tiny hollow that becomes a glittering sequin on the steel hide.

A few of the citizens glower at the great snake looped out before them: paying all that bloody money for a bedspring. I could've given them one of me own for nothing. But the patient lawyers and academics who have successfully jousted with the suburban swimming bath brigades, and won, make daily visits to the exhibits, after reading the new art column in the Mercury.

The Gallery will mirror our culture: table upon table is crowded with plates and pots of the local craft groups, cushions and tea-cosies embroidered with antique stitches from vegetable-dyed threads, rugs woven from pre-mechanical looms. What a pity there are no peasants for our new Populists to woo. High above these tributes to the hand two huge photographs boldly light up the steelworks in ultra violet and infra red, placing the furnaces in the company of giant-size predatory insects, all mandible and searing green. Amazed, schoolgirls in checked tunics goggle at the glass doors, waiting for the signal to enter.

It will come from the new Gallery director, an ex-high school teacher. Each week he meets with his superior, the City Librarian, a wrestler and greyhound trainer of renown, to work out the week's cultural program. Thus a visit from Tokyo University wrestling team may be matched by a display of Japanese contemporary art. The City Librarian is absent from today's opening, having torn his neck muscles while wrestling the Japanese. Something will surely come of this.

Four miles away in the mock-Tudor residence erected by the founder of the steelworks, the Musicians' Party is creating discord, battling with the Community Arts Centre crowd for possession of this best of all possible sites. The Musicians' Party is mainly lawyers and academics. They have brought Suzuki to Wollongong and taken Wollongong tots to Suzuki. They have established the Wollongong branch of the Sydney Conservatorium and formed the Wollongong Symphony Orchestra. At night they are even in there among the fiddlers, winning applause from those whose conveyancing they've done or whose essays they have corrected.

Over at the University on the foothills of Mount Keira, almost the entire city is thinking. Its income geared to a head count instead of a head examination, the University is admitting every man and his dog. Well, nearly. In discarding elitism it must not take on mediocrity, so a few people are excluded on principle. Now with the recent establishment of a philosophy department, vox populi is as reasonable as it can ever be,

The other night I went to the University to see a Jean Genet play, whose theme of servants being dehumanised by their masters is appropriate to a city of trade unionists daily making faces at their various corporate bosses.

The ticket seller, an amiable student, appealing in her Botticelli curls, announced that she had two classes of tickets and after some thought finally worked them out: a dollar for students and a dollar fifty for adults. My friend, a mature age student in her thirties puzzled over this. Did the girl mean students and non-students? No. Students and adults it was. But what if one were both? The student clapped a hand to her forehead. Was such a thing logically possible? Look, I interrupted — just give us two, adults' tickets, and my friend here a student's ticket. Fine. But there weren't any normal seats left. Uh-huh. Tell us the characteristics of the abnormal ones. The ticket seller's vague hands fluttered heavenwards again. They had forty normal seats. That was all she knew. Can we sit on the others, I wanted to know. Can we see the show? She couldn't say . . . if George were here he could tell us. Oh, give us the tickets then, I urged her, thrusting money into her hands. If we can't see the show we'll come back for our money.

Inside the common room about thirty people were seated, and about thirty chairs were empty. They were all identical. Apart from climbing into the actors' laps we could have sat anywhere. So much for Scientific Method at Wollongong . . . but two years' supply spreads thinly over 200,000 minds.

In that small audience which, incidentally, included no Faculty members other than those directly involved in the play's production, I saw

something to gladden the hearts of the Good Neighbor Council: a black-eyed, black-haired Calabrian girl slight enough to slip through the holes of a colander, sitting with her fingers entwined in those of her boy-friend, a huge blonde front-rower, ruddy-cheeked blue-eyed Anglo-Saxon type, though to be true the cdd Greek or Italian sometimes slips past in such a disguise.

I remembered the girl: at primary school she would come home weeping to her mother as her classmates screamed "greasy wog" over the front gate. How her mother boiled with rage. She could kill them with her bare hands for upsetting a quiet little girl like that. Instead the mother spent the next eleven years preparing herself for an Arts degree and urging her three children to do the same. We'll show them!

Now, at the end of the performance, little Rosa, her face illuminated with pride, was drawing the boy forward to introduce him to a family friend. Was she, I wondered, delighting in the boy himself or in his protective coloring?

In Wollongong some fragile souls feel a powerful need of disguise. Witness Julian, who died recently near the end of a twenty-year transfiguration. Julian, which is a name he might have chosen for a new identity, commanded great respect among certain Italians, for he had actually succeeded in getting himself appointed to the monthly staff of the steelworks, a feat so extraordinary as to provoke the wildest speculations how it came about: the direct intervention of the President of the Republic? Or perhaps some connection with the Mafia? Nothing was too preposterous.

But there he was, directing the drawing office at the A.I.S., keeping law and order among the young trainees whom he commanded to get their hair cut. Long hair is *out* in this office. In, are collar and tie, English tweeds, a pipe, short back and sides haircut from an Australian barber. On his increasingly rare visits to the coffee lounge run by one of his compatriots Julian would discuss the horrors of the younger generation, trade unions and labor governments, but always in the most controlled manner, masking the severity of his pronouncements with bluff hearty smiles and affectionate squeezes of his compatriot's communist shoulders, in a way reminiscent of Calvin and Servetus. He would issue invitations to his former friends to visit him: why don't you drop in one night, we'll have a bite to eat, a bit of a natter — like old times.

No one accepted the invitation. Perhaps they were intimidated by his wife's reserve, sensed a vague disapproval of them, or at least unease. Maybe the wife was only shy. With Australians it was hard to tell. They were impressed by the two teenage daughters, pretty girls, tall and fair like the mother, brilliant students at Wollongong High School, ladylike well-mannered girls punctiliously obedient. They were equally impressed with Julian's house, a large two-storeyed affair in the steelworks enclave of Keiraville, near the University and the mock-Tudor mansion coveted by the Musicians.

Every time they encountered Julian in the street he was wonderful. His wife was marvellous. The girls were fine. Only once did he utter the mildest complaint. His elder daughter wanted to work in David Jones during the school holidays. He could never agree to that. Bad enough in Wollongong, but she had found a position at the Warrawong store and everyone knew what a rough place Warrawong was. What was rough about it? Oh, you know, the kind of people who live there, not the sort you want a young girl exposed to. You mean wogs — Yugoslavia and Italians? Ha, ha! At this Julian laughed uproariously, but he positively refused to let his daughter work in Warrawong.

In the months that passed Julian grew very thin but his smile never failed him. It was reported that his younger daughter had collapsed at school and had fallen into a catatonic state, thereby compelling the entire family to accept psychiatric treatment, but Julian kept this news to himself. The family remained wonderfully well. Some of the later encounters with him provoked anxious enquiries: why are you so thin, *amico?* We heard you were in hospital. A hearty slap on the back diminished such silly anxieties; oh, it was nothing at all, old friend, nothing at all, an ulcer or two, the kind we executives are prone to. You know how it is.

Three weeks later his death notice appeared rudely in the Mercury.

Julian was forty-two when he died. The aged in Wollongong are so rarely seen one might expect most people die around forty-two. In twenty-five years the oldest people with whom I have been acquainted are my parents, who are not yet pensioner age. One misses the old. There is always an element of mystery about them. Why does that woman from the Housing Commission

flats, the one I see at the bus-stop, have both arms lined with vaccination marks? Did she get humped around India by her mother who was married to an Indian army private? Her hair is bravely dyed pre-forties and her bare winter arms witness her young blood. All by herself she unscrewed the railings round the shower of her single-room flat. "They make you feel so old," she complained gently to the Cat-lady, who never goes to town unaccompanied by the big Tom that wedges his head in the handles of her shopping bag. "I don't want to feel like eighty, so I just took them out and put them up for the tea towels."

"What, dear?" purred the Cat-lady.

"Those railings in the shower. I'll have to put them back when I leave."

"Are you leaving then, dear?"

The answer came a little vaguely. "Well, not right at the moment, but I couldn't live there forever, could I? I mean, how could we?"

The cat began to leap around in the shopping bag, suddenly anxious. "There, there" its owner crooned soothingly. "You'll be right," patting the bundle, but smiling at the brave brown-haired woman.

Age erodes inhibitions and makes the old disarmingly eccentric. For the last two hours, so the large bosomed Cat-lady had recounted in the hearing of the old man also waiting at the bus-stop, she had been running round her flat in the "nuddy" trying to put her undies on but constantly distracted, she was, from her task, by the phone ringing incessantly. "It made me feel quite indecent," she gurgled from under her big straw hat, trimmed with blue linen flowers.

"What would people think if they could see me like that, I thought. In the nuddy at that time." She twirled round on her surprisingly high-heeled sandals to encompass the three of us in her smile, but the old man stared straight ahead, pinched and indifferent.

Catching her eye I grinned at her. What on earth would an old fat lady look like, running naked, so importuned by interested phone calls, panting to put on her knickers but just too busy.

"You're looking very nice in your uniform, dear," she said.

My uniform! In my new cream skirt with the nipped-in waist and a matching shirt, I felt pretty smart. But to tell the truth there had been six of these outfits on the rack at David Jones, and there were lots like them in other stores. This old biddy was jibbing me.

"Illawarra Building Society, is it?"

I stared down at my shoes, blushing. Was this a geriatric satirist?

No, I don't work there.

Ahead of us the bus was just drawing in to the kerb and the old man had his foot uplifted, reluctant to waste a minute. "You've got cataracts, Gwenda or sump'n," he threw over his shoulder, before clambering up the steps, "that's David Jones vegetables."

That same night, after alighting from the bus not far from where we had boarded it in the morning, I started to run up the hill, only to be halted abruptly by the sound of the Cat-lady hailing me: "Don't run like that, dear. Why are you running," and catching up with me surprisingly quickly, "there's nothing at the top of the street."

I followed her pointing finger. She was right. A four-inch vista of dead tussocks out of an empty paddock.

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The Day of the Search for Bernard Kropt

DENNIS DOUGLAS

We met the chaps from Search and Rescue at one of those bays on the south coast of Tasmania which must have reduced many a whaling craft to shreds and splinters one hundred years ago. Paved with large smooth stones they are, on the beach and under water, and perfectly bowl-shaped — perfect mills in stormy weather for grinding wreckage down to sawdust and sand.

We were sitting on the edge of the scrub munching biscuits and cheese, and nuts and raisins, and chocolate. Behind us, hidden by trees, was one of those three-sided huts which are designed to shelter walkers, but not to encourage them to settle in. If you put in a fourth wall, huts have to be cleaned out regularly, and they start to be infested by mice. The three-sided ones in the South-West harbor the odd snake, and there are always ants about, but neither the snakes nor the ants trouble walkers a great deal. Ants seem to keep pretty regular hours for waking and sleeping, and walkers and snakes take precautions to avoid each other when they know a meeting might occur.

There were two searchers. They were about twenty, slightly built and lightly dressed. They carried a radio and daypacks. One of them had on a white leisure-knit shirt with a yellow penguin on the left breast. There was a smear of mud across it. I wondered if he had been called away from a tennis party to join the search-and-rescue exercise. He was brisk in his manner, and clearly found the search frustrating and annoying.

We had heard about the lost walker from parties we had met on our way in. He had been on his own, carrying a torn tent, and not in good health. He had fainted on the track, and been found unconscious by one party, but refused to turn back with them and go out. It was known that he had been into the South-West once before, with a friend, so he ought to have known what he was up against.

We offered the searchers water, which they politely declined, and we talked about the search and its chance of success. The lost walker's father had flown over from Melbourne with photographs and they were carrying one. It told us very little. Bernard looked like any other young Melbournian of Middle European descent. Kropt was his surname. I could not place it geographically. We memorized the face, and asked the searchers what the track ahead of us was like. Like the offer of water the question is a basic ritual of bushwalking courtesy. Nine times out of ten the water is not needed, and the track ahead is "all right". Just occasionally you learn something you need to know, or which may spare someone a waterless half-day. The track ahead, we were told, was "pretty filthy — rough and slippery. There was no chance of getting off it to look for him in the bush. Once you're off the beaten path, it's mile-a-day stuff."

The breeze rippled the leaves. The speaker shivered slightly in his leisure-knit shirt. "We'll take off," he said. "The launch that dropped us is to pick us up further round . . . Good luck." His brisk manner made more sense when you understood how early that morning he must have landed, and how far he must have walked that day.

He was right about the next section. The first half-hour was good, though very up and down. The scrub was fairly open, and the way dry — for Tasmania. It was rather pretty, in fact.

Once the ascent proper began to the next rangetop, however, the scrub closed in, and the track became a steep uphill trudge. Roots crossing it formed steps. Between them the soil had eroded away. It was a natural staircase, unevenly hacked into the sharp incline.

I love walking — for the magnificent views, and the privileged sense of seeing places only walkers get to see, and the sense of achievement every walk gives, and the break that walking offers from the pressures of city life. But it is often a painful business, tedious and exhausting. I have to trick myself out of panicking on long uphill climbs, by counting paces as I go. The counting helps, too, with the steady, slow rhythm you have to keep, so that you don't move in fits and starts. I was counting on that climb, and then I started resting every hundred paces. Eventualy I was down to resting every ten. Not for long. Five or six seconds, to catch my breath. But there was no other way to do it.

There were four of us. Doug and Jeff were fit and experienced, and they were pushing on somewhere above me. Lou was behind somewhere. She made heavy weather of uphill climbs, but she had plenty of endurance.

Doug and Jeff stopped for lunch eventually, and Lou and I caught up to them. The track was running alongside a watercourse at that point. For stretches of twenty feet or so further back, it and the watercourse had intermittently joined, so that there were river stones as well as gnarled roots to give boots purchase. Enough water was running down it for the replenishing of our bottles to be a simple matter, but not enough to get into our boots.

Lou came up ten minutes after I eased myself down onto one of the steps and stairs and slipped my shoulders out of the straps of my rucksack. The four of us sat at different levels on the track, one above the other, like clown dolls on shelves at a show booth, waiting to have wooden balls of doubtful weight and bias hurled at us. It looked awkward, but it was comfortable. There was no rain, for once. The thick wall of scrub each side of the track held us together. We joked about the track, and our food, and got onto the subject of the lost walker.

It was Doug who surprised me by saying he knew Kropt. He had done two or three walks that Kropt had been on. There were always problems. Kropt was keen, dead keen, but he never seemed to have the right equipment. He never stayed with the party properly, but always had notions of his own about the way they should be going, or pushed off on his own until hailed back into contact. He never seemed to be persuadable about anything.

Doug is one of those walkers who have been around a long time and have seen a lot of country. He said very little ever. Most things that could be said did not seem worth saying to him. He said more about Kropt than I had heard him say about anything that trip. Kropt was mad — madness was not something Doug liked thinking about, and he seemed a little embarrassed by having to accuse someone of it. His verdict sounded deliberate, and was neither callow nor facile. Doug had not enjoyed having Kropt on walks. He knew of one club that had declined to admit Kropt to membership. It was tough on Kropt, but the decision had been justified. All this Doug said, in many fewer words, looking reflectively down the track we had just been on.

We rested there, lunching, and chatting, for a good hour.

The scrub was very thick. To get off the track into it would not have been easy. It was like the moss jungle we encountered later at the foot of western Arthurs. High rainfall created thickly tangled growth, with curiously-angled trunks, sometimes curving over each other like huge serpents frozen into fossil immobility. You could not see into it. Six feet from the track, everything was shadowy and confused, colorless, streaked patterns of light grey and dark grey.

I wondered as I lifted my pack up my right arm, shouldered it, and swung it around my back to put my left arm through the strap, what it would be like to stagger, foot by foot, through that dense, forbidding half-world, and whether it would be possible even to fall, without first clearing six feet of undergrowth in front. How had Kropt managed to hide himself away? Had he wanted to die? Had he never even thought of it? Had all the talk that goes on in walking clubs about the South-West influenced him to prove that he, too, could cope with the toughest bushwalking challenge? Not that the South-West is all that impossible, but it is accessible to many people who never afterwards forget what it is like, and usually depict it in terms of a fairly grim struggle. I remembered how aggressively cocksure the fear of failure had often made me when I first took up walking. Had Kropt gone down with his heart singing, flushed with excess adrenalin, never doubting he would get out of it?

My pack was heavy. Sometimes it was easier to put it on sitting down, and then roll over onto my knees, and stand up that way.

Doug and Jeff took off first. I stayed back with Lou. Fatigue generates fatigue, and finally induces panic, and she needed help. We rested every ten

paces. Situations like that overawe me into a semblance of the patience I have never possessed. It was a rigorously, unremittingly cruel slope. For two hours we worked at it, reducing the distance between rests until we were sometimes down to three steps at a time. Lou did not say very much. Near the crest the scrub thinned down to shoulder height, and we picked up speed a little. It was with relief like a shock of surprise that I saw the top of the range.

There was an oasis there — trees of medium height, a mossy lawn dry enough to sit on. Doug and Jeff had a primus going, and were making a pot of tea. There was a faint murmur of thunder about. The tea really restored us. We had our packs on again when a few large drops of rain fell.

The other side was barren, and dropped away sharply. You could see a wide, green, varied plain. The track had ground deep into the gravel slope. Lou moved well downhill, and was ahead of me by the time we hit the foot of the range.

Three miles away was a river crossing which could hold parties up for days at a time. On the plain the growth was mainly waist-high grass and shrubs. Fire after fire had stripped away most of the tall trees the marshy ground would support. Slow rain coated our japara parkas, and misted our view.

The river bed had widened and deepened at the crossing. Encountering sandstone boulders ten or twelve feet below the level of the plain, it had scoured itself a picturesque ravine. The immediate surroundings had a touch of desolation about them — wet grassland, blue-grey from the rain, monotonous and featureless by contrast with the spectacular scenery we had walked through all that day. In the ravine there was a dramatic contrast of rushing water, curving banks, rocks of many colors, even small trees. It did not take long to work out how to get across, hopping from one rock to another, and scrambling on the muddy paths up and down the river sides.

On the other bank, where the plain recommenced, Jeff eased off his pack and chuckled, "This is it." The rain was still gentle, but it was settling in, and a grey mist had come down on the tops of the grass. Night was falling. We had hastened through the afternoon to be sure of the crossing, since the river often rose overnight. Uninviting as our surroundings might have seemed, this was it. There was no better campsite within reach.

Lou and I had a ritual for the evening which required little conversation. I pitched the tent while she fetched water and set out the cooking utensils. Then I spread our sleeping bags inside the tent and juggled our packs up into the bell-end. While she cooked soup and a dehydrated meal out of a Vesta packet in the front end of the tent, I dozed. Lou had the knack of cooking over a primus stove inside a three-man tent down to a fine art, but it was essential for me to stay pretty well in one place until the operation was complete.

I lay there while Lou's primus purred, wondering whether Kropt had reached this river crossing, or missed the track on one of the plains near the start of the route. Had he ever seen this valley from the range above? What vision of green plateaux and high ridges had possessed him to come in on his own? Had he been driven by fear and misery, or had he persuaded himself that he would surely cover the distance, and triumph over the silent, beautiful wilderness in the midst of which we had made camp?

Lou passed food up to me on aluminium plates. When the tea was made, and a little hot water poured into the utensils to wash them, so that they could be poked out around the corner of the tent overnight, the primus would go off, and outside sounds would be audible again. Tonight, feather dusters of rain were brushing the roof, from the ridge-seam of which single threads hung down like canvas stalactites. I sometimes wondered whether I ought to snip them off. When a torch was turned on they cast spidery shadows on the eaves. Sometimes when you sat up in the dark they would brush your face. Jeff and Doug were telling each other about walks they had thought of for next year. Their voices could just be heard. Jeff's laugh crackled like static from time to time.

Later on, I put on tennis shoes and my parka and clambered out of the tent. The grass was wet. The rain made the night sky seem as close as a roof and four familiar walls.

One mid-afternoon the previous summer we had disturbed two small green hawks nesting on a grassy slope in a remote corner of New Zealand. One of the pair, perhaps the female, buzzed us. She would fly off until she was scarcely visible, and then zoom back, gathering speed all that way, flashing by just in front of us, or just overhead; a bird no bigger than my two fists clenched together, but fearless, combative, determined, obeying a prompting too urgent to be denied, which she would never formulate into a thought, flashing in

out of a blue sky to contest our intrusion on her territory.

It was warm and comforting inside the tent. Lou had settled herself to sleep. One eye watched me sleepily out of her cocoon of down as I shrugged my hips and shoulders into my sleeping bag. My mind was foggy as I groped for a plastic bag of spare clothing to put under my head for a pillow.

"I don't think they'll find Kropt," I said. Lou grunted in a way she had which implied that she had succeeded in following one of my remoter trains of thought. "No," she softly agreed.

DESMOND O'GRADY

Christina Stead in Italy

The Italian critical response to Christina Stead's *The Man who loved Children,* published as *Sabba familiare* by Garzanti in 1978, has been enthusiastic. It is the first of Christina Stead's novels to be translated in Italian, and joins Martin Boyd's *Cardboard Crown* and several works by Patrick White and Morris West in the small group of novels by Australians in Italian.

In the Milan daily Corriere della Sera, the leading critic Pietro Citati saw the novel as "the last echo of the Dickensian tradition". Dickens has taught Stead, wrote Citati, " . . . that life cannot be represented without loving it totally; and without letting oneself be inspired by the tremendous alcohol of tragfiic hilarity".

Most reviewers borrowed from Randall Jarrell's perceptive essay on the novel, included with the Italian translation. But Silvia Giacomini, in the Rome daily La Repubblica, observed freshly that while the father in the novel is an ogre and the mother a witch, the children grow normally because children enjoy ogres and witches. Jarrell claimed an orphaned humanity could recreate the idea of the family from *The Man who loved Children.* Giacomini, however, argued that the novel does something more than give an image of family life: it "explains the pathology of the normal and the normality of the pathological".

Several reviewers saw it as a feminist novel. But in the feminist magazine Noi Donne (We Women) Rosetta Loy underlined its Australian background. She attributed the force of feeling in the book to the fact that it was written by an Australian who came from a "less 'cultured' culture [than America's] where the imagination and sentiments, without the limits imposed by a solid tradition, could expand in a vital, free, untamed space . . . "

Uomini e Libri (Men and Books) compared Stead's ability to create characters to Patrick White's "extraordinary skill' in character drawing.

Franco Loi in the Milan daily Corriere d'Informazione praised Christina Stead's linguistic invention and the translator's skill in conveying it. Floriana Bossi's translation won wide praise. But it seems hard to justify the change from Christina Stead's descriptive title to *Sabba Familiare,* which means "Family Sabbath" in the sense of a witches' sabbath.

Helen Palmer: A Personal Memoir

DOREEN BRIDGES

Helen died three days before her birthday. She would have been 62 — too young to die — but she had already packed into her life about twice as much as most people achieve before reaching that age.

I first met Helen 35 years ago when we were both officers in the WAAAF, I very junior and she relatively senior. A trained and experienced teacher, she was in charge of education services for WAAAF personnel throughout Australia, and I was one of her small team of officers, each responsible for organising WAAAF education within a particular geographical area.

My first impressions of Helen were probably similar to those of others with whom she had fairly brief contact. She was a stocky, rather solid figure with straight dark hair and a brisk, efficient, 'no nonsense' air. She spoke in a measured way with calm authority but without any trace of aggression. I thought her one of the most competent, well-organised people I had ever met, but there was a certain cool remoteness about her. When I came to know her better during her 'inspection' visits to Brisbane, where I was first stationed, I found underneath the aloof exterior the real Helen — a warm, humorous, sensitive and perceptive person who loved music and poetry. For me, living in the philistine atmosphere of an air force mess, contact with her brought back the world I had known, but gave it a new dimension. Helen introduced me to the political facts of life.

She did not do this by preaching. Looking back, I realise that one of her particular gifts was the ability to listen and, by occasionally interposing questions, get people to talk and work things out for themselves. She would then sum up, interpret, explain, or express a point of view, choosing words carefully and using them economically. When she told me she was a communist I was neither surprised nor shocked, despite my innocence. What did surprise me was that a communist, far from being a ranting red-ragger, could be quietly rational, reasonable, and human. It was quite clear that Helen's political attitudes grew out of her concern for people and her intellectual grasp of radical philosophies. She had, of course, been nurtured in a humanist atmosphere, for her parents, Vance and Nettie, and her sister Aileen were well known for their espousal of causes involving civil liberties and human rights, especially during the 1930s.

Because her parents were writers, Helen herself had inhibitions about writing, though she felt the need to express herself through verse. When we were both living in Sydney just after the war at "263" (an old terrace house which must have many associations for those who knew Helen in the 1950s), she would often sit with paper and pencil "exercising", as she called it, trying to solve problems of rhyme, rhythm, and metre. She regarded Aileen's poetry as far superior to anything she herself wrote, and only a few weeks before she died insisted on reading me a poem from Aileen's *World Without Strangers* (published by Overland) which had been running through her mind.

During 1950 and 1951 I conducted a singing group. We were looking for Australian songs, so Helen wrote the words of "Ballad of Eureka" and "Ballad of 1891", both of which I set to music. Only a month before her death, when she was quite ill, she gathered the strength to attend the final performance of "Reedy River" which had been running at the New Theatre for three months, and probably for the first time received in person public acknowledgement for her "1891" words — a focal point of the play.

Helen was one of the first Australians to visit

the new China; she represented teachers in the small Australian delegation to the 1952 Asian and Pacific Peace Conference, thus incurring the displeasure of the Education Department and prejudicing her advancement in the teaching service. Despite obstruction from the federal government (including refusal to issue passports) the delegates managed to get away, beginning the journey on an internal flight. Tension must have run high when the plane developed engine trouble and returned to Sydney. I received from Helen a page torn out of her diary, on which she had scribbled the following poem, wryly describing the experience:

> When turned back at midnight because one of the engines isn't all there —
> Que faire?
> Answer: be the victim of circumstance —
> Take what is offering at the company's expense —
> Twenty-four hours in one of the best hotels.
> Sleep in the small hours — ah, there's the rub-oh —
> Remembering that the last was over Dubbo!
> Next, one of the longest, deepest baths in history, to lie on one's back
> Leaving one's mark on Sydney, rich and black!
> And then — what now?
> Invisibility, where abidest thou?
> What's that, Graham? Speak up! The local flea-house is your tip
> Watching the lean desperadoes gallop down the gulch, gun on hip?
> So be it! And then begins the game again,
> The bus, the aseptic waiting room, the small talk about hotels, the free cup of tea, the plainclothes man
> (Who may be the local parson); but OK Hughie, it's fair enough —
> You've done your stuff!

On her return, Helen wrote *Australian Teacher in China,* probably her first substantial piece of writing (apart from theses for B.A. and B.Ed. degrees). Though she was in the Education Department's bad books, her excellent qualifications could not be ignored in a period of teacher shortage. She was appointed as a 'temporary' teacher to Fort Street High School — a position which she held till she died. Throughout her life she wrote and spoke on many educational issues, but one of her main concerns was the lack of books for young people on Australia's social history (although her main teaching subject was French!) In 1954 Cheshire's published *Beneath the Southern Cross,* a story about Eureka which she then scripted as a radio play, serialised in the ABC Children's Session. But even before this she had begun to collaborate with Jessie MacLeod, whom she had known since university days, and who shared her desire to produce simply written and attractively presented historical information based on primary sources. Together they wrote *The First Hundred Years* (1954), *Makers of the First Hundred Years* (1956) and *The Second Hundred Years* (1961), all published by Longmans. They had begun to prepare an updated version of this material before Helen's last illness. Helen wrote also for Longmans' "Australia Landmarks" series a little book, *Fencing Australia* (1961).

By this time she had established herself not only as a social historian and writer in her own right (and not as the daughter of Vance and Nettie) but also as the founder and editor of Outlook: An Independent Socialist Journal. Following the events in the USSR and Hungary in 1956, and the Australian Communist Party's suppression of information and clamp on open discussion, many party members resigned in protest. Helen was not amongst them. Instead she insisted that issues related to the facts coming to light should be freely debated within the party and that long-held beliefs should be re-examined through party publications. She was not supported by the party leaders, so she set out to establish her own independent forum. Soon after publication of the first issue of Outlook in 1957 she was expelled from the party. This was ironic: she had a talent for getting herself expelled from organisations, but this had usually been because of her refusal on principle to answer questions relating to her left-wing associations!

Outlook was Helen's child and the diverse and highly talented people she gathered round her to work on Outlook until its demise in 1970 (when it had outlived its usefulness) were like her extended family. Outlook went to press six times a year. It had no subsidy and was kept going by Helen's determination and drive, the dedication of the Outlook team, the voluntary assistance of friends, donations from subscribers, and a good deal of Helen's own money. Many Outlook supporters subscribed also to Overland hence the quip (Ian Turner's ?) — "Outland and Overlook".

During this period Helen's friends not directly concerned with Outlook saw little of her unless they were connected with one or other of the

various causes she espoused. She needed to conserve all her energies and therefore built a protective wall around herself, perhaps to exclude demands which her friends might make on her. It was natural for many of us to want to talk over personal problems with someone of her wisdom and humanity, but she reserved this part of herself mainly for "the kids", as she called those whom she taught at school, and for the children of her friends.

There is so much more to say about Helen — Helen the teacher, the scholar, the counsellor, the administrator, the speaker, the writer, the historian, the poet, the political activist, the lover of music, of theatre, of good food, of laughter, of sand and sea, of long bush walks, of cricket — no single one of us knew every side of her. But most of us are the richer for those parts of her we did know.

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Wherefores of Overland
Some Whys and

Glen Lewis in our last issue raised some questions regarding the role and future of Overland, and his views roused interest and comment from many readers. Without becoming too self-conscious about ourselves, the editorial board thinks this a good moment to ask our readers to tell us what they think of us. A selection of comments will be printed, if we get enough. (One of the first lessons an editor learns is never, *if you can avoid it, say something will definitely appear in a future issue.) To help things along, we print two "internal" documents. The first is a statement on Overland, made by Acting Editor John McLaren to the Literary Magazines' Editors' Seminar in Adelaide last year. The other is a minute of discussion on the magazine held in an all-day conference at the editor's home late last year, written by the editor.*

JOHN McLAREN

Overland is explicitly a magazine of the democratic Left, indeed one might say of the eclectic Left, and has never wavered in this commitment. On its masthead it describes itself as being of "'temper democratic, bias Australian". We see our major service to this commitment as promoting the best prose and fiction we can discover together with critical writing on those issues which we consider of importance to Australia.

The difficulties which Overland has are those which are common to most little magazines: distribution, publicity, maintaining the circulation list, paying writers adequate fees for their time and finding the money to commission writers for special articles. Because Overland has now been running for a quarter of a century, the actual overheads built up would be sufficient to keep the editorial staff fully occupied merely maintaining correspondence with subscribers and contributors without ever actually publishing an issue. We attempt not to give mere curt rejections to those writers who show promise. However, we do not have the resources to act either as a literary agency or as a writer's workshop. We have now adopted a policy of referring writers who show some potential to such organizations as the Fellowship of Australian Writers and the Australian Society of Authors. There is however still a great deal of editorial work to be done with people whose work is just short of publication standard. We consider one of our major contributions to Australian writing has been the number of these people that we have been able to encourage to go on and write for us and for a variety of other publications.

We endeavor in each issue to have a mixture of new and established writers. To newer writers in particular we prefer to give some continuing publication rather than just the occasional single piece. This means, among other things, that at any time we have a large backlog of work which we have accepted and want to publish but which may have to wait for up to twelve months before we can find a place for it in our pages.

Overland is neither an academic nor a popular magazine but rather the expression of a community which includes its editors, its subscribers and its contributors. All these people affect its change and development. Our aim is to maintain conversation amongst a community of like-minds from diverse backgrounds and with diverse interests.

EDITORIAL CONFERENCE

This conference grew out of the feeling expressed at a recent board meeting that a "vacuum" existed in Australian cultural and political affairs for a magazine of Overland's philosophy and nature, more vigorously promoted than the magazine is at present; more specifically, the conference was inspired by a message received from Nancy Keesing, in Sydney, that she herself saw the need for a vigorous development of Overland, both generally and more particularly in the Sydney scene; and that she was prepared to take an active part in advancing the magazine's interests. It was therefore decided to have a day's discussion on issues of general policy rather than the details that normally dominate editorial board meetings.

Discussion during the day ranged extremely widely and was often critical of present performance. Some of the issues raised, opinions expressed and recommendations made follow.

In our desire to fill vacuums and carry out the task of being an organ of democratic socialist ideas generally, we have to recognize that the magazine is essentially run by busy people in their spare time and that major changes in terms of periodicity of issue, or of content, would involve setting up an office and staffing which might have far-reaching effects on the kind of magazine Overland is. In other words, while we must certainly attempt to carry out more actively and effectively the role we see for ourselves, we should also recognize that, if Overland were to do all that those who believe in Overland want it to do, then it would not be Overland, and it would be necessary to establish another kind of periodical for these purposes.

To express this in another way, several present felt that we should not forget that Overland is first and foremost a literary magazine, a journal concerned with the function of art; and not only is it, but it is expected to be by the Literature Board. This should not preclude however our frequent and indeed systematic discussion of social and political issues, for of course we refuse to see art as existing in a vacuum.

It was felt that we had not done well with the early discussion of major political issues and important academic debates. We have not identified these quickly enough and established an Overland 'line' on them in time to influence general debate. An example of this would be problems of government funding and ALP policies in this area. We have not discussed the significance of the Australian New Wave in film, have had little on drama and virtually nothing on the rise of a Far Left.

Similarly we need to develop our reportage on the Australian experience, to extend our own and our readers' knowledge of Australian society. Interview material of the Wendy Lowenstein type would be particularly desirable.

John McLaren produced a series of discussion points. Those which he claimed to be non-contentious aroused the fiercest debate. One special point John made was a plea to attempt to establish in our critical work, and to make apparent, the values we stand for: "What we mean by good and bad".

Stephen however rejected John's suggestion that we should aim "to provide thoughtful reviews of all significent new books of fiction, poetry, history or society by Australian writers and intended for the general reader", and felt that not even Australian Book Review can fully carry this out. Stephen also said that he felt the review section had been a notable feature of Overland over the years, especially when contrasted to other mags. Barrie Reid was however critical and felt that we missed far too much. Stephen said that he felt the main criteria for reviewing should be (a) books we are ourselves particularly interested in (b) books for which we have an outstanding reviewer ready to have a go (the Percy Grainger review) (c) some idiosyncratic reviewing to show, for instance, that we have a sense of humor or don't fiercely stick by a line. One thing Stephen feels we should never return to is stock reviews of books simply because they have come in and should be mentioned somehow. Our books should, in his view, either be reviewed by the best person possible in the field, or not reviewed.

There was general agreement that we have in Barrie Reid an outstanding poetry editor, and Barrie convincingly and strongly defended himself against charges (which were in fact not raised) that he only published "difficult" poetry. He agreed that we want more "job" verse and the like (see "The New Father", p. 36, no. 72) but was sceptical that anything of real value in the ballad line was still appearing. I think we all glumly accepted the point — a point in any case made in a series of short articles in recent Overlands — that we do have a contradiction on our hands, a "democratic" magazine going for a mass readership and believing in poetry but

our frozen south...

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believing in poetry at a time when the poets do not believe in a mass readership.

Vane Lindesay spoke on some of the art problems, saying for instance that he wanted to shorten the page by two lines and make other improvements. It was the general feeling of the meeting that Vane has overall control on the art and design side and should make what alterations he wishes, subject only to ultimate veto by editor or board if an irreconcilable conflict should take place. Vane was congratulated on the enormous changes he has made to the journal. Stephen did however make the point that he never wanted Overland to come to look like an avant-garde art magazine (a point Stephen believes Vane agrees with). And Stephen also voiced what is quite a common dislike of the coated (and very heavy) paper we are using. Vane was asked to discuss this with Bob Cugley, and also to investigate if a font of 9pt. type could be bought, which Vane thinks is badly needed. Stephen does not like the small type we are now setting poets in. Barrie, who once rejected smaller type because he said it showed that we were racist about poets (or words to that effect) now accepts it because it gives him more poems per issue. (Vane: "A quarter of the bloody issue, you bastard!" (Can this be true? Anyway, who's counting?))

Congratulations were also heaped upon John McLaren for the notable feat of getting out five issues (nos. 69-73) while Stephen has been on leave. It was sternly pointed out to Stephen that it will be necessary to have firm quarterly dates, not only for the convenience of editors and the satisfaction of contributors, but because it is fairer to the press.

Although no-one was formally keeping minutes, partly because it was not supposed to be that kind of meeting, the following decisions or implied decisions were taken.

It would be desirable to revive and encourage the "Comment" section.

We welcomed with great joy Nancy Keesing's agreement to join the editorial board as Sydney editor. We all regard this as a highly responsible and potentially demanding field and have been touched and impressed that Nancy, with the achievements and appointments to her name that she has, has offered her services so openheartedly. We see Nancy — and she we hope sees herself — as a kind of alternative editor of Overland, speaking with authority for the magazine, heading a Sydney committee and not afraid to spend the magazine's money in promotional ventures and on her own responsibility. In other words we regard this as one of the most important things ever to have happened to Overland, for we have always been aware of our lack of "penetration" in Sydney and in New South Wales. More than this, however, we hope that Nancy will as far as possibly participate fully in normal board meetings and that she will be in the position to meet with us say twice a year.

During the day we discussed the age and sex composition of the existing board. The usual dire warnings were made of our increasing ages, for instance. I said that I thought a cohesive board, of people who were genuinely fond of each other and had a pretty good understanding of each other, was better than a warring board of a better sex and age composition; nor have I ever been particularly concerned with arguments stressing the need to provide for the indefinite survival of Overland. All the same, the points made are sensible ones and we should act where possible.

This is one of the reasons I think we were all delighted that Leonie Sandercock agreed to join the board. She will be as we all know an accession of great strength, and has agreed to take special responsibility for keeping us in touch with rising academic and intellectual issues, with the younger writers and scholars and with keeping an eye on the review pages. Ken Gott, to the very considerable satisfaction of us all also, has agreed to join us, and is welcome not only as an old friend but as a man not easily swayed by fashion, trends and bull. His special area of economics and social change will fill an obvious gap.

POETIC GEMS EXPERTLY REVALUED

A sequence by Max Harris

I SOLOMON REVISITED

I sleep but my heart waketh.
Intensive care. My love, my dove,
My undefiled, my pump maketh
Much pounding, all push and shove
Inside the Adam of my ribs.

Ah, but the world is much given to fibrillation
And therefore we would use sleep
Willingly to escape the tintinnabulation
Of the passions, to a quiet of grief
As we silently shake the locks of the night.

Let not the heart wake at the sound of a vice
Or it will be consumed by the little poxes
That eat the tender vines of the aorta. Incise
The cardiac surgeon's knife and endure the shocks
And anesthesia. You may love your little sister's breasts

For they are tender, bring comfort, clarity and sleep;
Are there to quieten the heart. While you weep.

II FATS WALLER REVISITED

"One never knows. Do one?"

Ashes to ashes and dust to dust,
If the liquor don't get you the women must.
Poor fat Fats. A man of sensitive lust
Who found big feet something you just don't trust.

"Your feet's too big". Therefore you hated
All such unfortunates. You stated
You'd leave all flat-foot women unsated.
Mad Fats! Whom do you think created

Big feet? God, of course. One never knows,
Do one? You were a killer-diller. It shows
In fastidiousness, dimmed only by glows
Of rye euphoria, footaphobia, and a nose

Kept clean and dry to sniff out good fun
And fine sounds. All of us, every one,
Has his own Harlem. My skin is rather more dun
Than white. But my heart is black. I too hate the sun.

One never knows.
Do one?

III GEORGE HERBERT REVISITED

Sweet day, so calm, so cool, so bright,
The bridal of the earth and sky . . .
Irretrievable breakdown. Divorce. Not right
That elements should live a lie.

Earth and sky in wedded bliss? Kids who?
There's no dead planet left to rhyme with June.
Red dead sands wed skies of blue?
There's nothing of honey about the monsoon.

Alas, a day can be quite sweet. And night
Can come both cool and calm;
The earth can be so green and bright.
But both these villains mean much harm.

Mother earth and father sky, we their progeny
Declare that Herbert was a fool.
All who join us in this misogyny
Know that divorce is nature's rule.

ARCANE BIOGRAPHY OF A JUNIOR PASS

Haunted by the ghosts of five former wives
six fat blind cats
a half grown stunted son
who stammers a lot
and does secret things to himself
on the days marked in green on his BP calendar
and the sherds of that unfinished novel
about a sculptor who works with rope nails and babies
Herburt Sempleton lives sort of alone

Herburt Sempleton picks his nose
plays with his dinky wee-wee
every Sunday morning before mass
and isn't bothered in the least
that his palms are turning hairier than Hobbitt feet

Herburt Sempleton is Editor-in-Chief
of the Literary Magazine of the State Police

We are his fey legatees

V. GLEN WASHBURN

THE EMIGRANT

was released
from a psychiatric clinic
(some time ago)
& sacked from a sausage factory
because his hands
were not suitable
for the acid water
(some time ago)
he had lost his bride
in a fatal car accident
(only the vehicle could be repaired)
now he walks the streets
and talks about an uprising
(in Hungary, in 1958)
yet he hardly knows anyone
& remembers little
(of some time ago)
but in Sydney
in spring 1977
he jumped from a window
& survived.

When you see him at King's Cross
glancing at progress
& shop windows
the steppe of his homeland
blossoms between his feet.
Was that a poem?
(some time ago)

RUDI KRAUSMANN

7 MILES OUT

She sways over the photo-album
singing "You belong to me" with the record,
the pale blue dress, clingy as lipstick,
saying the first name, she's no kid,
but for you I'll be gooey and crazy.
Mum's a two-faced bitch.
7 miles out / and that lounge-room's death.

This is me. The cute hippy
writing baby letters. It was him you know.
Love love. The police file's buzzing
brutal and insignificant, the suicide note.
Now that did it. He fancies himself, he does.
This is me. She prepared that one,
working herself up chain-store blue,
breathing hot as nylon.

After a few gins at the Leagues Club
Dad still loves the stupid bitch. She's stagey now,
a razor sound where the thighs are rubbing.
She enchants you like a record-cover,
trying to be neurotic, which is.
This is me. The acid queen
with junk earrings and purple velvet.

All those familiar looney faces splash a sequence.
She'll impress you with her bathroom skin,
the eyes slow as plastic. Her no-suburb dreams
wiped on chiffon drapes. Burt Bacharach,
Mum thinks Lovely, mind you
she never listens, the old bat.
You step onto the nature-strip,
the sweet biscuits stuck in your teeth.
You can't read those bits. She's being 16 now.
They're personal. Hoping.
7 miles out / that lounge-room's death.

GIG RYAN

MY MINUSCULINITY

Little pieces of me
seem to be falling off
according to some execrable plan
I'm not fully aware of.

V. GLEN WASHBURN

THREE POEMS BY FRANK KELLAWAY

STARLING

What splendor the starling has.
Hear him wheeze once,
That high quick-dropping sigh of joy,
And you forgive him
All his squalid ways,
His lice,
His city-slicker strut,
His empire-building thrust
That claims the nesting hollows
of the backward natives.
See once the irridescent sheen
Of his gutter plumage,
Black mother-of-pearl,
Rainbow or oil-slick
(No shot silk has such glitter)
And you forgive and praise him.

KISS EVER FOX

KISS EVER FOX, her midriff bare,
the letters peep out neatly from her hair.
I read the words again and sip my beer;
I wonder what they mean and why she's here.
In biro on her webbing bag quite clear
KISS EVER FOX, I crane and peer.
I enjoy curiosity; I want no cure.
Mysteries are self-supporting; facts impair.
She eats her counter-lunch prim and demure.
Are those her parents registering my stare?
Of letters lower on her bag I can't be sure.
She gets up now to go, quite debonair.
KISS EVER FOX, I've had my share.

PEACE

At the eye of the whirlwind there is calm
and there are other natural violences
which carry at their eye the core of peace.
The river shouting and chattering over stones
carries the stones' stillness to the sea.
Even cascading over some fearful edge
its roaring distils quietness
which rises above the rocks, a silent mist.

The eye of the forest fire circles no calm,
exploding as savagely as warfare can,
and yet its frenzy orchestrates a silence,
the flames roaring like jets above the tree-tops
carry a white stillness to the earth.
Even cascading up some precipice
its scream embodies misty quietness
which in its dying raises peaceful smoke.

In water, fire, earth and air we know this calm;
we feel it in the violent pulse
and noisy havoc which envelops silence
when half a mountain rockets to the ocean,
carries the stones' stillness to the sea.
Lava cascading from the crater's lip
is burned to ash in airy quietness
which holds both smoke and mist in a dream of peace.

We, who are creatures of all these, pray too for calm.
Give to our earth our water, fire and air
which whirl themselves as often into frenzy,
an eye from which to see ourselves in silence
and carry a white stillness to the earth.
Even cascading over some fearful edge
let us roar into final quietness,
rising above the rocks in misty peace.

MARRIAGE AND FRIENDSHIP

Lance Stokes, a loping knotty-haired
man, a terrific cricketer, would slam you a six
for the asking, but a reader too. He scared
people till they knew him a gentle giant.
in a bar in London, *Australia Felix*

was the watchword he gave me: I told him to stew,
but he got me reading the book. We travelled light
to his lucky country. When he married Wendy Donahue
I helped build the house. They seemed so right.

Later, the two of us drinking cold beers. "Of course,
allowances have to be made," he said.
I nodded. The sun showed no remorse:
singed grass, soil cracked; his eyes red.

"The kids drive her crazy. She cries
for nothing. The monthly slough of despond, my own
moods, bedlam at mealtimes . . ." The flies
harried us; summer was dry as the proverbial bone.

"Always excuses — tiredness, headaches, the old thing.
Before, with her, there were never excuses. She says
she's the same, perhaps she thinks she is . . ."
In the hot yard, over beers, he unshelled his distress.

For a year and a half he said nothing more.
Time redeemed that summer's drought. One day
we rabbitted in out of the rain, at his place:
she looked up from a book in a nice way.

I saw, between them, it was all right now (and after,
in a word or two, he told me so). Marriage and friendship
can outwait those things — must. Disaster
is trying to give that wait the slip.

So I moralized then, after my own fiasco. But all I know
is I envy him his *Australia felix,* his place we built, boys
almost as handy with a bat as him now — but for him, I'd go
home. I watch a white rage of cockatoos tatter the sky,
descend on a dead tree, and make their inconsolable noise.

HUGH UNDERHILL

NEWSPAPER

The baron has a banner-line
as fine as his banter
      is barren.

The leader pleads the
      studied reader
      of the copy from
      sub to pub

from not-quite-sober, not-quite-drunk
through cloak-choked fashion pages,
      tips for all the races.

I yawned with advertising space
at the sad funnies; at the shares
I laughed,
            sharing the lost and found.

And somewhere in the tides
the gossip-columns drowned.

RAY CARMICHAEL

NORDIC

Wafting
down these corridors
her smile is pitched

to the middle distance.
Teachers — women
men also —

avoid her eyes
for different reasons.
The landscape of her bones

is from a photo never taken,
a form far north beyond
these conjugalities

which shiver a little
as she passes
and never quite completely

does truth come circling back . . .
flesh grown thick
on subtle ankles;

the hasty marriage with a clerk
who has the trick
of not quite noticing her beauty;

the daughters
who in twenty years
will walk these corridors and turn

our marriages to water.

GEOFF PAGE

AIRPORTS
From "The Nashville Poems"

John Denver is always booked
  on my plane
"mah bags are packed
I'm ready to go"

that knot
  of sentimentality
  in the gut
that jerks facial expressions
and makes fingers drum
  on horrible polished tables
    in cocktail lounges
    just like real tough feelings
    just like war
    just like walking alone into a sunset
    squaring with a love affair's mortality
    just like Bogart
    at his most sublime and loose-limbed
in a white jacket.

We said goodbye
  in a dull awkward fashion

we were mundane
  unglamorous
in our bulky coats

a salty Australian ballet

I never told you
  I was a member of the Resistance —
while you held me
    clumsily
my eyes were cool
    and level
watching the exits
I have enemies
  everywhere

John Donne
was a spy too —
be cool, baby,
he said very skilfully
in "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"

Now off you go
  You sentimental bastard
I tell you
  softly
I have enemies
  everywhere
I just caught
  James Mason's
(sardonic smart Nazi)
    eye

DOROTHY FEATHERSTONE PORTER

THE ROOF

In the glade where I lopped off boughs
the light was a woman's face.
Boughs fell in heart & art shapes
cat-pawed by the breeze, & had
the syntax of her features
wherever they lay.
The wren sips & hops
in a cold which trembles.
There is a nerve too which hops
beneath her eye in that way.
In this cold a giddiness
like the treetops comes
into her. Now I make
a roof for her, & she wants
me to lower the ceiling since
she will watch a long time
in the attic for me, hold
her cat which kicks to fall
because it hates to touch.
She says it wants to be dropped
like a baby in her hands.
She says she has buttered its paws.
It would land on them like a drunk
if so, & die like a crucifixion.
But I know she knows
it will not run. I have felt
& its paws are like tree-bark, the same
as the scratch of its tongue on your face.

JENNIFER MAIDEN

A FAMOUS AUSTRALIAN WRITER

It wasn't the fawning academics or psychic groupies
that made him such a disappointment —
I think it was the way be leaned attentively towards
the loud librarian who crossed
her legs and talked about public lending rights:
Of course — that's reality:
but something about it all is maddening:
the neat light fittings on the ceiling
the predictable reflections on glass doors
the fact that Lawson burns slowly somewhere:
Later that night Jack got drunk and smashed his VW
and Jill had a bad trip and Jerry's girlfriend
got compromised

hey — you gotta stop looking for heroes

out there somewhere
Lawson's minding the store
taking messages
getting headaches

PHILIP NEILSEN

A MUG'S GAME

The Sturt Arcade Hotel is a bit like an elephant burial ground.
Odd place, the elephant burial ground. Mostly silent, except for the sound

Of pachydermic breathing, raspings, hoarse trumpeting, then a mound
Of flesh, a cairn of bones. Then only the poor beast is at last alone
As it wished to be when it set out from the herd to find its unknown
Inadequate identity. Just once before keeling over. On its own.

Well, the Sturt Arcade Saloon Bar is just like that. About the same.
Gregarious, query. No, incestuous. Places where elephants tame
Their ways for death; and bars where men drink solemnly in the name
Of the name someone will carve on a piece of stone. Bloody fame,
Dear friends, shouting a round to honour your own mortality.

A mug's game.

MAX HARRIS

GARDEN PARTY & RHYME
for A.O.

A perfectly cut lawn
three imported trees
several late model yachts
passing

Twenty illustrious guests
eating chicken legs
french cheese & fresh strawberries

Discussion: Ecology

In the branches
sits an old owl
& howls:
I understand you perfectly well

One of the guests
carries in his trouser pockets
a silver figurine
THE SPIRIT OF ECSTASY
(unscrewed from the radiator
of his old Rolls Royce)

When the guests later
have coffee & cream
the owl whispers
to the figurine:

Tonight
I make you love
& scream.

RUDI KRAUSMANN

ON A FORMER FRIEND WHO IGNORED THE GIFT OF A BOOK OF POEMS

Has my new ex-friend permanent writer's cramp,
or wasn't friendship worth a twenty-cent stamp?
No — it's not worth a nine-cent telephone call:
too old a friendship has no value at all.

R. H. MORRISON

COLONIAL

The grantees
with their Home connections

ride a pale landscape
split between them.

Sheep browse away to the sky
becoming clouds

nosing the shattered trees.

Road gangs pause under muskets.
Shepherds tip their hats.

Three natives group quietly
down to the left

helping to
set the perspective.

GEOFF PAGE

The Poetry Audience: Does it Matter?

FAIRLIE SZACINSKI

I have read the comments spread over a few Overlands on the writing, marketing and reading of poetry today. These were introduced by the Editor's remarks in Swag (no. 64) on the quality — and quantity — of poems submitted in the C. J. Dennis competition, and followed by the views of a number of readers.

As a rigid middle-of-the-roader (how come I subscribe to Overland?) who likes reading poetry, I'd like to add my observations to those of the pundits, mostly in the vein of what the hell? I accept that readers of poetry are a minority group and somehow I don't believe in poetry for the people, although I remember that the dynamic Yevtushenko, reading Russian, filled the halls. Otherwise, you can't eat it. You can't use it. With a few exceptions, e.g. John Donne and a few Indian ancients, it doesn't improve your sex life. And much of it is heavy-weather as Stephen Murray-Smith rightly affirmed, after helping with the judging of 8,000 poetic efforts.

Without back-up or statistics, I rely on my own judgement to categorize my fellows on the subject of poetry:

Honesty — "Never touch the stuff". (The majority.)
Antagonism — "Can't stand it. This modern stuff's a load of garbage."
Versatility — "Oh yes, I *love* poetry . . .". Banjo . . . Patience Strong . . . of course Judith Wright . . . Rupert Brooke . . ."
Trads — "I wandered lonely as a cloud . . . I love a sunburnt country . . . rhyme and metre naturally."
Trendies — "I swing along with Erica Jong, Danny Abse, Bob Dylan."
Lower Trendies — "I've bought all of Pam Ayres. She's for real."
Poetry Norms — "Read a fair bit, like some." (Me.)
Poetry Abnorms — "Read a lot, buy a lot, evaluate as I go." (You've one in five hundred, chum).

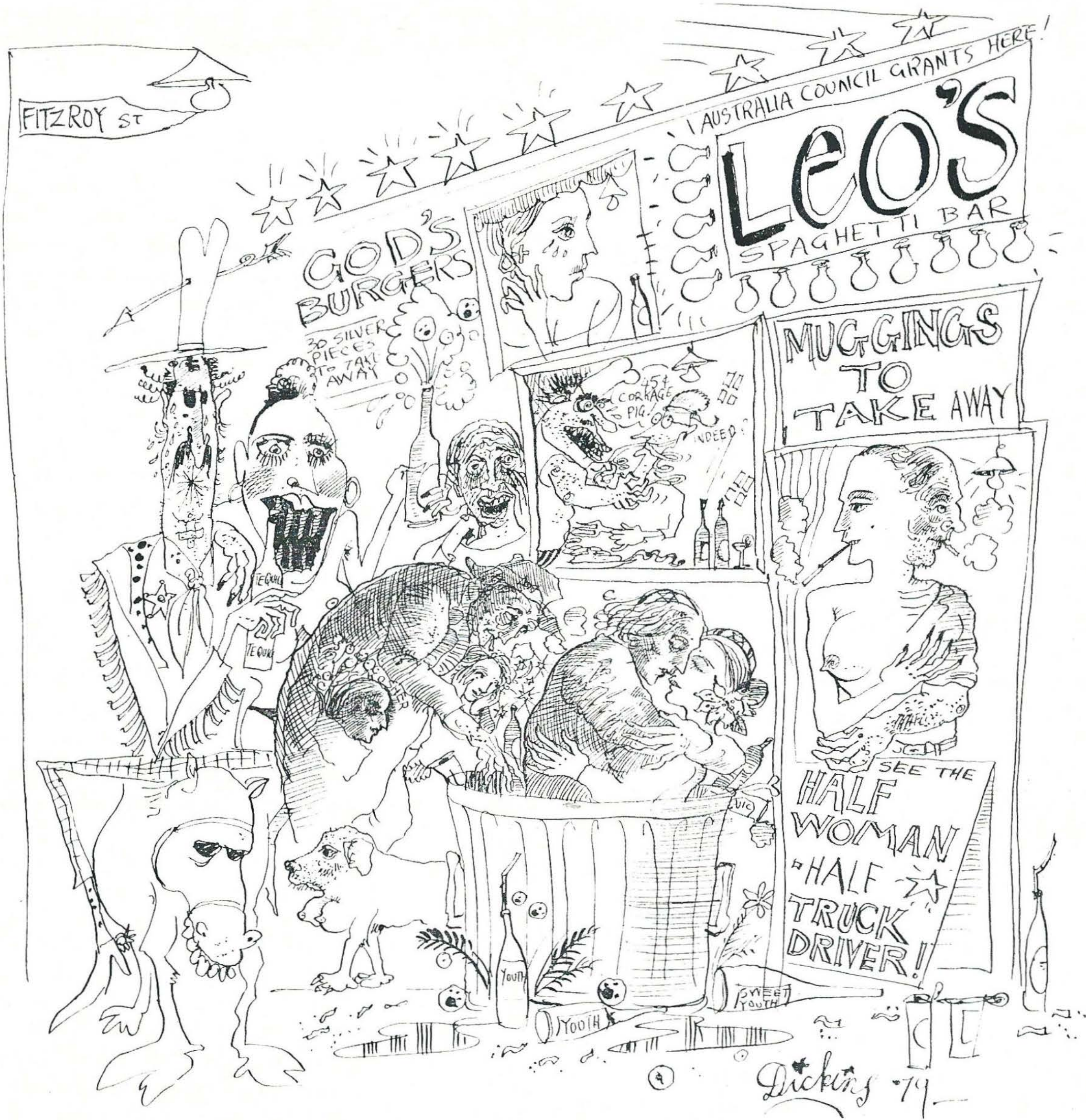
For the most part, I find poetry for the people a waste of time. I've heard some displeasing dirges on 3CR — unhappy, disjointed manifestations of their initiator's neuroses. Sure, there's been the odd ray of sunshine, but I wouldn't blame anyone for switching over to Bert and Patty. And the poets handing out their work in Swanston Street? On the face of it, a beaut. idea and bully for Melbourne. But, in fact, why give what no-one wants? Hands that thrust eagerly forward for itemized Sale Specials withdraw coldly if you dare offer anything potentially involving, even a humble page of free poems. We live in a K-Mart society and most K-Martians' literary needs are answered with a catalogue of Hot Spot bargains. Poetry readings? Here, I'm less cynical; at least the audience is made up of people who have *chosen* to listen to poetry, give or take a few who have come for a free night out or a glass of red.

I have no quarrel with the 97 per cent indifference towards reading or buying slim volumes of verse. Why should I? It means you get a good look-in at library and bookshop without being shoved aside or trodden on. And surely there must be an equal 97 per cent indifference towards lace-making or anthroposophical study.

However, I am ready to veer sharply from the middle of the road, and to fight tooth and claw, should the K-Martians forbid our minority the stuff we need. Which doesn't mean I like the lot! But the apt phrase, the proffered insight, the feeling of identification and the occasional revelation of a poet's inspiration is like finding water at the end of a long dry trek.

Of course there are phonies about. Sometimes it's hard to tell where honesty ends and pretentiousness or gimmickry begins. A volume entitled "A Safety Catch For A Ginger Powderball" turns me off, off, off, as it must any seeker of the honest word. Though I suppose there's nothing to stop a Trendy, or a Versatile Vera or Victor, or the mother of the Powderball's creator, from tuning in and being captivated.

All of which adds up to a so what? solution to a non-issue. Perhaps I'm just saying let's not get too serious about Poetry Today — a lot of big words and so-called answers or generalizations aren't going to magnetize the masses into reading poetry beyond Patience or Pam. Does it matter?



STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH

swag

A night in a coronary ward concentrates the mind remarkably. There's nothing like it to make one bitterly reflect that good health is wasted on the young, and the grey shadows of those recently struck down, who shamble in as broken men from the post-coronary ward, unpleasantly suggest that a person who has had a heart attack thereafter lives on a different plane, in a different world, to others. Yet the experience — provided one is there for observation and not for real — can have its amusing side. To be plugged in to so many consoles all at once is like playing a bit part in "Modern Times", and young technicians of serious mien withdraw large quantities of purple, highly-born blood with all the sobriety of an American motorist milking a petrol bowser. I wondered if heart cases are different because the sufferers know there's nothing wrong with themselves except an inefficient pump. They're not really sick at all. And therefore it seems so unjust that one, small, deep-seated component should be able to put paid to all that robustness. And that, in a module-ated world, it shouldn't be possible just to switch to a standby motor or a spare part or to eliminate the nuisance altogether.

I'm sure Ian Turner felt like that. The doctor who did the post-mortem twisted the knife when he reported "This man was in admirable physical condition." I would like to remind readers that the next issue of Overland will be one that commemorates the life and work of Ian, and that I should particularly welcome from those of you who knew him that anecdote, or sidelight, or moment that sticks in the mind about Ian. It's strange how, by some secret process, it's often just that one momentary insight, that flash of memory, that we do remember our friends by — or anyone else, I suppose.

We are delighted to announce that Gwen Harwood, of Kettering, Tasmania, and Martin Duwell, of Brisbane, have joined our panel of contributing editors, and will be exercising a watching brief on behalf of the magazine in Tasmania and in Queensland. Gwen of course is one of this country's finest poets. She's also a beaut person, and that she cares to be nice to me I find a bit surprising, in view of that famous poem she had in the Bulletin of 5 August 1961, "Abelard to Eloisa", the initial letters of each line of which read FUCK ALL EDITORS. She was certainly on the Black List for a while after that! Martin Duwell, who is associated with the University of Queensland, has been editor of the magazine Makar and of the splendid Gargoyle series of poets (and monographs). Barrie Reid says of this that it represents "the most innovative and serious poetry publishing seen in Australia for many years". Makar and the Gargoyle Press are unhappily closing down, though Makar Press will continue to do some occasional publishing. Martin says he had "hoped to get away from magazines after ten years", but to our gratification has joined our board.

As those of you who read in this issue the notes on a recent editorial meeting will realise, we are anxious to extend the range and number of contributions coming to Overland from New South Wales, and also of course the number of people who read Overland in that state. We should be very pleased if intending or actual contributors, and anyone who thinks she or he may be able to help extend knowledge of this magazine in New South Wales, would get in touch with Nancy Keesing, 3 Garrick Ave., Hunters Hill, NSW 2110.

I have long been an immense admirer of Norma Ferres's morning ABC program, "Speaking Per-

sonally". Consisting of readings, usually from books, often by the writers themselves, the program has produced some of the most memorable radio of my listening life. And it's run on a mended shoestring, though I am told it has one of the highest ABC ratings. "Speaking Personally" would be at least one compensation for being blind. Who could forget, for instance, Alan Marshall's magnificently effective readings of his own autobiographical books, or Mary Rose Liverani reading *The Winter Sparrows* in her marvellous Scottish burr, or (more recently) Walter Crocker's sensitive and opinionated and civilized reflections on his life and times?

Not long ago I pricked up my ears to hear a voice I couldn't place reading from a book I'd never heard of, all about a Chinese girlhood in Hong Kong, membership of the famous Ho Tung family, marriage to an Englishman years before the last war, eventual settlement in Australia after proving to the immigration authorities that the author and her children looked European enough to be allowed to live beside the rest of us. And in Australia Jean Gittins, the author, became a member of that small group of elite and underpaid women secretaries and administrators who in fact run the University of Melbourne; and while she was there for good measure she wrote a history of the School of Pathology. *Eastern Windows—Western Skies* is not stocked by Australian bookshops, but since the "Speaking Personally" program has been broadcast in Hong Kong has become a best-seller there, where it was published in 1969 by the South China Morning Post. I don't know where you'd get a copy, though Mrs Gittins herself might help, at 171/193 Domain Road, South Yarra, Vic. 3141.

The West Australian arts magazine Artlook has taken on a new lease of life, which involves amongst other things the offer of prize money amounting to $1000 for previously unpublished poems. Details from Artlook at PO Box 6026, East Perth, WA, 6001.

The shameless John Bergin has been sending us some more limericks. Some of you may remember one we published in Swag on Henry James at a party. Here are a couple more:

Mata Hari, when caught on the patio,
Indulging in shameless fellatio,
  Excused herself thus:
  "Don't make such a fuss,
This here is my hot line to ASIO."

Some archaeological gangs
When seized by severe hunger pangs
  Eat dinosaur, raw,
  With knife and fork, or
Pterodactyl apart with their fangs.

Martin O'Connor's article, "The Greying of the Underground", in the last issue of this magazine aroused a furious response from those who felt themselves impugned, and an enthusiastic response from a number of others who confessed that they had been puzzled as to what really had been going on in that twilight world of poetry. Robert Harris replies in a verse we are happy to print but which I confess I do not understand (which of course is why people don't read poetry any more, except poets, one of the points O'Connor was trying to make):

Reply to Mark O'Connor

TEDDY BEARS' PICNIC

I

saw that gentleman for
the first time since Korea.
to my amazement he clearly remembered
our friendship
and like the true saint & hero
he is, he gazed through me and space equally,
and held out his paw.

2

you come not frightened
by anything
but once you have been
you do not go down there
lightly.

Robert Harris

EDWARD KYNASTON **Country Style**

Magpies flute and warble in the trees behind the house, mist still hangs on the hills round about, the morning light grows slowly over the icing-sugar of frost on the fields. Still dressing-gowned and dream haunted and unfit for human consumption I make tea: a slow groping process, a reluctant still vague encounter with today's reality. The tea runs brown and hopeful and in an hour I know that I shall be able to cope with even the adder that a bright day might bring forth.

Before I can sip the tea and savor some of its heart-starting warmth steps thunder along the back verandah the back door crashes open and my farmer neighbor comes, like an anti-personnel bomb exploding, into the fragility of my morning and my kitchen and my cringing consciousness. He looks at me and laughs loudly and crashes the door shut behind him. His ruddy, hateful face is radiant with good nature. He points a mock-accusing earthy forefinger at me. "Late this morning aren't we?" he says, and laughs until the magpies outside fly up in panic from the trees. Then he delivers the soliloquy that is possessing him and for which I am the most convenient local audience.

He, or his wife, or members of his family usually call on us like this. The first we know of their presence is the door flying open and their beaming smiles of self-welcome. It is shocking, disconcerting, occasionally embarrassing. Our neighbors seem perfectly unaware of any of our thoughts or feelings, which is probably rather a good thing even if it makes communication difficult sometimes. Once, we put a box behind the outside door, which won't lock, and locked the inside door. Our neighbor's wife pushed door and heavy box aside in one smooth unstoppable motion, reached the locked door, and seizing the handle shook it, like a terrier shaking a rat, with astonishment and disbelief alternating on her good natured features, until we ran to unlock it. She came in smiling her superiority. "City types," she said, "no one locks their doors in the country," which may be strictly ungrammatical but is still true.

Moving to the country is a salutary and sometimes traumatic experience. It should not be undertaken lightly. When people say, "But why did you move to the country?" we say "Because it was there." Anything else, rationalisation or pseudo-explanation, is too taxing to make, a web too complex and delicate to unweave without getting into Idi Amin-ish fantasies and Hitlerian untruths. Real explanations are always too unsimple to be really satisfactory.

We might say, truthfully, that there wasn't anything in Melbourne to stay for. We doubted that we should miss the cultural brilliance, the élan of the cheerful sidewalk cafe life, the gaiety and cheerfulness of the citizens, the liveliness of the artistic groups, the flashing wit and wisdom of the newspapers, the charm and vitality of the irrepressibly ebullient suburbs.

We might also talk about the rat-race (we're mice) or the impatience we had begun to feel with the rudeness of shopkeepers, the arrogance of the urban jeans-generation, the ruthless ripping off by tradesmen and service sellers, the plain cheating in shops, the inability to be able to drive a day without seeing car accidents or narrowly missing being in one, not to mention being abused and threatened for going too fast, or too slow, or too in-between or simply obeying the traffic rules.

We could also talk about the insanity of the people in cities but it is always very difficult to make the insane realise that they *are* insane. I realised this one day last year when I drove into the large asphalt waste of a suburban

supermarket parking area. The usual game of find-a-vacant-space was being played out with a number of cars circulating up and down the rows of parked cars. It was a familiar enough scene, all tension, and fuming, and repressed anger and resentment. A car began to back out of a space. Two other cars converged on it at speed. One, inevitably, got there first. The other backed off and drove in determined fury straight into the back of the winner with a shattering crash. It was as funny as an old silent film and as sad as Charlie Chaplin.

This is daily life in a major city of one of the richest and materially most secure countries in the world. To us, at least, the citizens look aggressive, rude, boorish, thoughtless, and greedy with all the avarice of a backward child-miser and the cynical ruthlessness of a massage parlor Madame winning her way to the top in politics. Melbourne seemed to symbolise itself perfectly by choosing Mickey Mouse as king of Moomba: a cartoon character for people living cartoon lives, a plastic image, depersonalised, dehumanised and made fit only for small children and desperately regressed adults. Mickey Mouse, the ultimate trivialisation of western society, glittering funereally with the tarnished synthetic glamor of a tawdry Hollywood dead and buried decades ago.

The country is very different. We live, in a small valley running down to a large lake, almost twenty miles from the twin growth centres of Albury and Wodonga, names corrupted already by the unerring Australian preference for the ugly and the inept into the chip-board sounding, and looking, Aldonga. Our nearest village is almost two miles up the valley. It has a pub, two shops, and a post office. Except at weekends we hardly see any traffic passing. We live in a peace that passeth urban understanding and our garden is always full of birds.

There is no doubt that country life is easier than city life, and that country towns are infinitely preferable to cities. Shopping in Wodonga is a relaxed pleasure. People have time to be civil and courteous. Services are no slower than in the city but once jobs are done they tend to stay done. People are money conscious but not greedy. The rip-off mentality, with the occasional exception, is absent. And there are surprises.

A few weeks ago I broke the click spring in my wristwatch. I took it into Wodonga for repair; it took only twenty-four hours and was quite cheap. While the watch was being repaired I was lent a watch to save me any inconvenience!

Country life is fine. We are recovering our health and our mental and emotional equilibrium. There is one quite major drawback. We have become third-class citizens culturally. Outside the great cities the decisive cultural influences are radio and television. Local newspapers don't, or can't, carry much cultural weight. Out here city newspapers seem feebler, more remote, and more unreal than ever. Bookshops are few and small. The largest of them are invariably evangelical-sentimental-religious with loudspeakers pouring out the strange slow-flowing saccharine muzak that we may, presumably, expect in hell. The muzak is a powerful atheistic deterrent, but so are the books. What Ella Wheeler Wilcox was to a past generation, Kalil Gibran and all his smarmy works have become to ours, and he is always well represented amongst the Bibles and the sermons in modern dress and the books of moral exhortation with impossible amiable persons cartooned woodenly (perhaps *chipboardly* is a better word and certainly fairer to decent timber) on the jackets.

Radio and television are the influences, and television is the decisive one. There are only two television channels, ABC and one commercial. The commercial channel is the usual fair average purveyor of vulgarity, stupidity, and constant appeals to greed and cupidity, but is aimed rather at the average six year-old than the city seven-year-old. Almost all commercial station films turn out to be western, if they aren't very old tenth rate Elvis Presley movies. So what's new?

The ABC brings to mind the Eskimo tribe that always sent its ugliest woman to accompany the hunters out into the polar icecreamscape. After many days, when the woman began to look beautiful, the hunters knew that it was time to return home. Auntie ABC looks quite ravishing sometimes out here, unless the Test series of cricket matches is on, when she drops her drawers and whores unashamedly amongst the cricket fans. Anything in the way of the Test(e)s is brushed aside ruthlessly.

FM radio, the best thing to happen since the elevated cultural despotism of Sir John Reith in Britain, is not available to the third-class characters in the country. It will come all right, and will probably be shared between earnest access groups and rock groups with names like Soiled Vest, Stinking Feet, and The Nose Pickers. It will certainly not be used for the

broadcasting of music for which it is superbly suited.

Ordinary radio, which means the ABC, seems to be directed carefully and insultingly at an audience of footballing-cricketing-peasant-fascist-deaf morons with hay in their hair and cow shit where their intelligence ought to be. The bulk of programs are pop music, western music, the weather, a pretentiously trendy academic exercise called Broadband, and what might loosely be called Agricultural Pursuits. The News is the culturally most significant happening of most days, followed by the height of the river at Olsen's Bridge.

Everyone knows that there is a serious drift of population from the country, and no wonder, but keeping people blind deaf and ignorant of the best things in life smacks of *1984,* and one can't help feeling that 'Boy' Anthony (Australia's bucolic Peter Pan) and his National party have a vested interest here. I find it sad to have to say of ABC radio that we asked for bread and that it gave us *The Stones.*

Of commercial radio, dedicated as it is to the stupefaction and brutalisation of its audience through a diet of infantile rubbish, there isn't much to be said, except that its disc jockeys have the minds of timidly extroverted mice and the manners and ingratiating approach of Cairo pimps. "You like my sister? No stairs! Gramophone playing all the time!" The gramophone is still playing all the time but there are no mental stairs to Big Sister on country commercial radio.

Things really are culturally crook in Tallarook and all the other places beyond the big cities. When ABC local radio announcers can be heard, on almost any day of the week, struggling to recognise all the words with more than two syllables in their scripts, and then struggling even harder to pronounce them (usually wrongly), it is time to do something.

Minorities get a good hearing nowadays and it is time that we heard it for the culturally oppressed. They have human rights like everyone else. Cultural dilution is a serious threat to civilised life. Mental and emotional imprisonment is as serious as physical imprisonment. Perhaps we should try to get President Carter to speak for us.

It is on the ABC that the real responsibility for catering for minority interests (as well as general cultural education) rests. One argument says that the ABC regards country people as expendable in future and therefore not worth bothering with seriously. This sinister argument says that the political planners really believe that the happy day will soon arrive when we can (rub-rub of bloodied backstairs hands) blackmail the rest of the world with our uranium deposits. Australian food production will then be rendered unnecessary because we shall be able to buy all that we require from overseas! The Arabs with their stranglehold on oil can do it. Britain with its coal and steel did it in the past. Status in the international power game in the seventies seems to have come to depend on whether you soil your economy at home or shop, clean finger-nailed, amongst your less fortunate neighbors, disregarding world food needs, the home producers, and all the other political and economic consequences. This argument is being seriously canvassed in Canberra at present.

There *are* cultural deprivations if you live in the country and something ought to be done about them. The real question seems to be whether, in a few year's time, living in the country is going to be possible at all. Other industrial revolutions have coerced people back into cities. There is no apparent reason why the next power revolution shouldn't.

CAROL COHN **A World of Shining Hope**

It had rained earlier, she'd heard the sound like dull footsteps on the office roof and now the cars, sliding past, trailed their colored streamers down the wet roadway. High and shrill, birds chattered in the dripping palms like mad children, setting her teeth on edge. It was the kind of evening she was coming to hate, and almost to fear. Dark had come in the bat of an eyelash and now, at 5.30, it was night already, and biting cold.

Winter, she felt, having taken the city, had moved in and established stubborn residence within herself, and there was no promise of spring in its chillness. Pulling up the collar of her beige trench coat, she crossed the road and commenced the walk towards the railway station.

The pavement was a moving mass of cold, stiff-mouthed faces, most with the hell-bent looks of people hurrying home to someone. And even this early, there were couples. If she'd learned nothing else in the nine months since she'd left her husband, she knew now that the couple was the essential social unit. Divide it, and you don't become single, you become half.

On a safety zone, a young girl leant like someone leaning on a ship's rail, gazing into the darkness like a traveller gazing out to sea. She looked rapt and happy, and whatever her vision, Liz envied her. Rain was falling now, thin and sleety. The crowd was sweeping past St Francis' Church and, for the first time in three years, she turned off and joined the people trickling in for evening mass.

Inside, there was warmth and light, but little comfort. As a child she'd been religious in an intense Catholic way, and her adolescent senses had wallowed in the ritual beauties. Disbelief when it did come, though, was sudden and total, and the Infinite, if it existed, was no longer to be found in incense and plain chant.

And more than faith had gone. Here, high altar mass had been exchanged for service before a low table, and vernacular replaced the Latin that had rejoiced her youth. She regretted the lost certainty, the brandied breaths and cadenced tones of Irish priests in the closeness of the confessional, the sweet bells, and incense hanging like thick yellow pollen on the air, regretted them sometimes with a painful nostalgia. But the memories were far off tonight, and didn't move her.

"On the night he was betrayed, he took bread and gave you thanks and praise, he broke the bread . . .".

A Christ with the face of a bearded David Cassidy looked down from the wall opposite. The plump woman beside her smelled of talcum, and menstrual blood.

"This is his body, which was given up for you . . . Happy are those who are called to his supper."

Feeling sick, Liz rose, bowed low to the gilded host, and left by the side door.

Wedged into a corner of the railway carriage, she looked around her. Faces wore the closed, set looks of people at a funeral service, looks of a not-to-be-intruded-on privacy. She studied the woman opposite, a tall, thin, fortyish lady with ringless hands and an oddity of manner and appearance Liz had seen before. She had seen it in women who had never married, who lived alone without the presence of a man to reflect them back an image of themselves, before whom to rehearse their public faces.

Beside Liz were an elderly pair. They were talking about gardens.

"Now that wattle, it's a native, they don't like to be moved . . .".

The husband reminded her of her father, a small, nut-brown, taciturn man, whose only way

of showing love had been to plant her gardens. He had died twelve months ago.

"We'll leave the wattle where it is and get . . . a silver birch now, that's a showy tree . . .". "Or a crab apple, say, or a ginko . . .".

They had had a ginko, she and Paul, a young tree with a lovely look of pale green adolescence about it, of not quite knowing what to do with its arms and legs. It would be bare now, stripped of its elegant butterfly leaves, a spindly shadow ringed round by fruit trees.

The garden had been hers. Her father had planted it. She had weeded and watered and nurtured it, nursing it through the last late frost-bitten spring and its slow, painful leafing. Leaving the garden was like leaving a child. Paul, her husband would sit and watch it die, she knew that.

"Stay. You must stay." "I can't. I can't bear it."

It had been hot. The bodies of Christmas beetles exploded round their feet like tiny time bombs.

"You'll be sorry. You'll be lonely. You'll wish you'd stayed."

He was a semi-professional actor. When he talked to you in his soft, longing voice, when he wanted to charm you, he had the gift of making you feel that you and he were the only two people in the world. You fell in love with that, then the charm ran through your hands like children's sparklers.

"You must stay."

I don't love you. I don't love you.

"You belong to me."

The hallway was strewn with locusts, one of them dead. She had picked it up and placed it gently in the waste paper basket where it lay, its delicate front legs crossed on its chest like a man praying.

"You'll be lonely. You'll be alone."

Yes, yes.

She was out on the street again, there was shopping to do. The rocky clouds had blown aside and now the moon stared blandly down, her whiteness as perfect, as irreproachable as prize roses, and equally chilling. She could, Liz thought, be a disembodied snowman, or the bandaged head of a burnt god. There was no rain, but the night was bitter, and suddenly Liz

Meanjin

The Winter *Meanjin* begins with two complementary articles, one tracing the decline of British precept and practice in Australian life, and the other, by Diana Brydon, drawing useful comparisons between the study of Australian literature and that of her own country, Canada. Then there's an interview with David Williamson, two articles on film, Humphrey McQueen on the media, A. A. Phillips on Frank Dalby Davison, Peter Pierce on recent novels, and Russel Ward on John Manifold. There are stories by Laurie Clancy and Peter Goldsworthy. Poets represented include Alan Gould, Cornelis Vleeskens, Tim Thorne, and Phillip Mead.

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longed for heat — for heat which boiled down, squeezed out, ground the mind to powder, leaving no room for loneliness. Outside the railway station the darkness had the quality of some solid substance, she could feel it setting, like bronze or concrete, round her, and for once she was glad to walk out of it and into the noisy, tawdry main street.

". . . When you're down and out, when you're on the street . . .".

The words floated out of the record shop and drifted along the crowded pavement.

". . . When evening falls so hard, I'll . . .".

This was a sad street, a gaudy neon street where the pros. were out and hustling from just on noon.

She lived beyond it, in a small quiet street a stone's throw from the sea.

Men were already out in force. They looked at every woman, pro. or not, in the same way, as an item to be consumed, and it was sad that desire could wear so ugly a face. You walked down the street and the eyes, was this the beginning of paranoia, looked out at you from everywhere. In such moments, it was possible to lump all men together, and hate all of them.

It was a strange street, a busy lonely street where a strip joint stood beside a huge supermarket, and a Jewish delicatessen shared premises with a Greek nightclub. As she walked along, a couple of drag queens sailed past, their faces bizarre and highly colored like faces out of "Cabaret", and disappeared into a cinema billing a skin flick called "The Virgin Damned".

She was reminded sharply of her own initiation. They had gone together, she and the man she later married, to see a Bergman film, "The Virgin Spring". She could recall still how acutely she had suffered for the young raped and murdered girl. Afterwards, Paul had taken her back to his flat, a new flat just rented, unheated, unlit and scarcely furnished, the bed with nothing but a bare mattress. She was freezing. It had been quick and rough, a single act curiously isolated from anything she had ever imagined as a setting for love. It was a kind of rape, and although she'd married him, a part of herself had held separate from him, and never forgotten.

The supermarket, though heated, gave off an impression of vast white cold. Rows and rows of chrome and wire trailed off into seeming lonely infinity; vapor rose from the dairy cases, like breaths from the mouths of school children on winter mornings.

She moved from aisle to aisle slowly, taking what she needed. Slowly she approached the check-out, paid, and passed through. Outside the check-out, she stopped and put her parcels down.

This was the moment she had been told of, warned of. With a sudden, sickening sense of having come to an end of something, unable to go any further she stood and felt the tears rising slowly in her eyes and forcing themselves out through her tightly closed eyelids.

Unable to go any further, she stood and, opening her eyes slowly, looked straight into those of a middle-aged man, thin, brown-eyed, lined, a stranger.

The man had an armful of packages, and he looked at her and without saying anything, he reached out his free hand awkwardly, and touched her face, and without a word gently brushed the tears from her face and the strands of dark hair back under the brim of her blue knit cap, and without a word left.

Liz picked up her things, breathed deeply, and walked quickly out into the bright street.

floating fund

Once again, Overland must thank those subscribers who regularly add a little extra to their renewal cheques, as well as those whose donations arrive quite unexpectedly. With increasing costs, these donations are absolutely necessary to our survival, and we welcome them for themselves and as evidence that we are still giving our readers writing that they prize beyond its market value. The following are the most recent donors:

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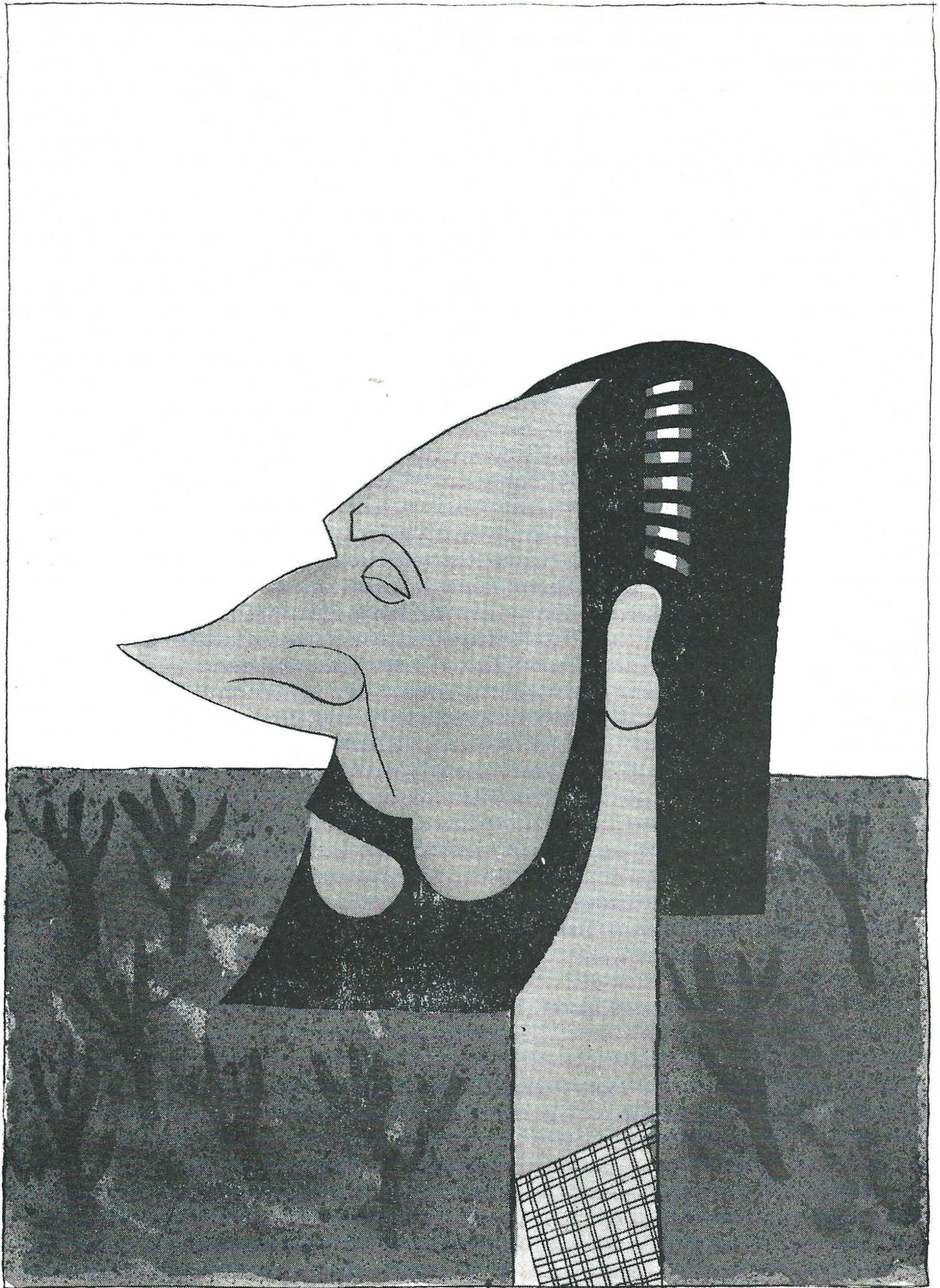

ALBERT TUCKER

RICK AMOR '78

ERIC WESTBROOK **A.T.**

Any newcomer to Melbourne in 1956 wishing to read the map of contemporary Australian painting would have found inhabitants ready to point out the main trade routes, even if they disagreed on the importance of some of the other features. The faded, if faintly charming fields of Sydney would be passed over quickly, together with the unproductive paddocks of the other capital cities. Only immediately south of the Murray was the country rich and fertile. In this region, on the right, was Bushland, prolific in its vegetation but well charted; while on the other side, and sometimes rising to such heights that they could be seen from distant lands, was the Kelly country which had been explored by the intrepid Nolan, and the Brueghel Heights discovered by the mystic Boyd, although it should be said that some of the stay-at-homes, sitting under their gum-trees, called them Bosch.

The new arrival would soon become familiar with all this and with the right equipment (a breast- and especially a back-plate were very useful) learn to negotiate the terrain with comparative safety. But there was one heavily shaded part of the map which, even on the ground, was elusive, and which was whispered about only in the darker corners of the base camp of the Swanston Family, or privately discussed in the state-rooms of the distant court at Heidelberg. Was it an evil and treacherous swamp? An unscaled mountain or a new, if harsh, promised land? Or had it disappeared after a violent and noisy earthquake? Whatever it was, the whisperers were obviously disturbed by its name. This made it even more surprising when in 1958 this dark territory was illustrated in some detail in that most unlikely of atlases, the Australian Women's Weekly. And the publisher of this atlas had actually paid £1,000 for the privilege. After this, the facts were public property although various cartographers and economists differed about their value. But to the newcomer this land was of great interest and to learn more of it then, as now, one turns (with some relief) from geography to biography.

It began in Footscray much about the same time as the opening shots of the First World War were being fired. There was no family tradition of art, but a talent and passion for drawing and an ability to make direct pictorial statements were matured during a brief period as a sign-writer and classes at the Victorian Artists' Society. In retrospect, a long sequence of self-portraits becomes an autobiography with an ever-deepening understanding of the character on each side of the mirror. The man we see today is there behind the thin film-star moustache of the 1940s; the hair is brushed back to heighten the temples in much the same way as it is today, and it is much the same color. It was not until the 1950s that the anchor-shaped beard was grown, and this has remained. At its most superficial the face is the mock-sinister poster portrait of the stage magician, but at its most truthful it is a powerful and almost threatening mask in which narrow eyes rarely smile in parallel with the lips.

The young man turned to the left in politics, but would never surrender the artist's personal responsibility to the demands of any Party. "The artist must be free from violence, regulation, coercion, want and moral blinkers. If in his role as a social being he is to co-operate with any political movement, he must be assured of creative freedom at all times. Rest assured, his interpretations and beliefs will assert themselves through his work." This statement, made nearly forty years ago, has remained a reliable buffer against pressures from whichever side they have come. This freedom to 'interpret' led first into the war-time jungle of St. Kilda, where the wrought-iron lamp-standards

twisted like the arabesques of giants above the thick night-growth of prostitutes, war-profiteers and G.I.s. Sex and money could be bartered for, but sometimes the dealers in both got more than they bargained for, as when three women were strangled by the American soldier Edward Joseph Leonski, who in his turn was officially strangled at Pentridge.

These works, first shown under the overall title of "Images of Modern Evil", were later renamed, less aggressively, "Night Images", but their power has not weakened. Their original angry label could be given to a group of portraits which followed, and which had as subjects the casualties of a society by then said to be at peace. These faces (and in them one is reminded of Gericault) do not belong to the bad but to those who have first been *made sad and then mad.*

The protest behind the pictures of both groups was honed sharper in Melbourne on reproductions of works by the Germans Beckman, Grosz and Dix, and then from 1947 by the direct experience of poverty and corruption in post-war Germany, Italy, France and England. It is often difficult to obtain political asylum, and the self-proclaimed "refugee from Australian culture" found it even more difficult to be granted cultural asylum, so that by the 1950s a hunger had grown in his belly and his mind for images of Australia. This hunger may in some part have been fed, or made more acute, by photographs of the landscape, but the energy it bred issued in paintings in which the spear-like forms and the scarred and weathered surface seem capable of tearing the hands and minds of those who come too close. And the spears are made more piercing in that they are forged with love. It cannot be a coincidence that alongside these works, others were being produced which took as themes those who betray, and foremost among the last were Judas and Pilate.

The return to Australia was marked by an exhibition of some of these searing images at the Melbourne Museum of Modern Art, then doing fine work at Tavistock Place before it decided to grow bigger and more social elsewhere, and the impact was considerable. The financial returns did not, perhaps, quite keep pace with this impact. There may be no immediate connection, but in the works which followed, the images are more bland and the sales seem to have become considerably larger. Now there is a cast of explorers and parrots set against plastically bloated gum trees which come dangerously close to caricaturing the works which had preceded them. This parade of chic toughness seemed acceptable to the nationalistic mood of the period and its affluence, but in front of these pictures one seemed to hear the small sharp voice of Dorothy Parker chiding Hemingway, "Oh, Ernest, do come from behind that false hair on your chest." At times those who sensed the real power lying there largely unused were close to despair as this flood of vapid Vosses and paper parakeets surged out from Smith Street on to the walls of smart decorators, advertising agents, and those who thought that they were investing in a painter's Poseidon.

The sigh of relief from the old believers was audible when the National Gallery of Victoria, in looking back at the rebels and precursors who had laid the foundations for the structures of achievement in the 1950s and 1960s, hung walls of Images and Portraits which showed that they had not been mistaken and that the stream of talent was so strong that it must once more flow into its proper channels. Since then, through chasms of agonising and agony, it has seemed to do so more and more often. The history of art (which is not that written in terms of instant geniuses just released from art schools) shows that major painters — say Rembrandt, Turner and Renoir — have in their sixties thrown off the ready-made suits of style which have been hung upon them in the market-place, and put on less fashionable clothes within which they can move more freely, but which do not always admit them to the best clubs. There is every reason to believe that this has now happened in the present case, and that in the next years that freedom of movement will bring back a vital element into Australian culture from which this time there will be no need or desire to escape.

MARGARET LUERS

My Father: A Poet Against War

Last October the Melbourne Age was serialising Patsy Adam Smith's recent book, *The Anzacs*. On page 349 one of the author's respondents says this:

> Members of Parliament, ministers of religion, civic leaders, all had told us it was our duty to go to the war. Now we got a shock. One M.P. published a bit of verse describing us as paid murderers and describing the dead in such a way that must have horrified all those parents bereft of sons. We expected a storm of protest but there was none, so five local lads decided to act.
>
> They called on the M.P. and took him off to pour treacle over him and dust him with feathers. He was left at the local baths to clean himself up.
>
> The five were arrested, and heavily fined and dressed down by the judge, who would not tolerate that sort of behavior from returned soldiers. Not a word against the M.P. who called us murderers.

This inaccurate account of a deplorable incident of 1919 is a smear against a pacifist, poet, and politician whose only crime was his fierce denunciation of war.

My father, John Keith McDougall, was a farmer who lived in the Ararat district. Born on 10 August 1867, the son of early settlers, as a young man he became known for his part in the closer settlement movement. He entered the federal parliament in 1907, the first Labor man to win the Wannon seat, and helped King O'Malley launch the Commonwealth Bank. Although only in parliament for seven years, he remained active in politics and in local affairs. He was a Hebrew scholar and a man of wide reading, and in his lifetime published five books of verse, including *The Trend of the Ages* (1923). His final book was *Shadows in the Sun* (1948). Many of his poems dealt with war and war profiteers. He died on 11 April 1957.

John Keith McDougall never at any time denounced the Anzacs; indeed, as the verse in question was written and published in 1902, it could not possibly have referred to the Anzacs. There was no word or line that made the slightest reference to Australian soldiers. The Boer War had just ended, and the poet, in satirical language, described the holocaust and aftermath of such a war.

The First World War had been over for twelve months when the tar and feather incident took place. The soldiers were returning home and being discharged from the army. Many of them were disillusioned. The promises with which William Morris Hughes had sped them on their way were not being fulfilled, and there was bitter resentment amongst the rank and file. Prime Minister Hughes had at one time been the leader of the Labor Party. When the party split on the conscription issue he formed the Nationalist Party. McDougall had strongly supported anti-conscription, and had often attacked Hughes in both prose and verse during the bitter campaign.

In December 1919 elections were in full swing, and feeling was running high. The Nationalist campaign council resurrected the anti-war verse and printed deliberately distorted versions on leaflets which they distributed throughout the country.

Protest was useless. In a letter to the Age my father said:

> Seeing the verse was written by me about 1902, it must be manifest to every honest man in the country that anything in the piece could not have been designed to apply to the late war or those engaged in it. Even the crooked geniuses employed by the Nationalist Party cannot alter the laws of reason, how-

ever frequently they desire that power in order to speed and give point to their work of political falsification.

Before the letter reached its destination the writer had been tarred and feathered by five returned soldiers who had called at his home in Western Victoria on the pretext that their car had broken down. He and his wife invited them in for supper, but they said they were in a hurry to get the car fixed. Father accompanied them out to the car and, while he was inspecting the so-called damage, the men whom he had so readily gone to help pounced on him, throwing him head first into the car. They bound and gagged him and drove off. When their mission had been completed, they dumped him outside the public baths of a country town, and continued on their way. All but one of the perpetrators lived in Melbourne, and all of them had held commissioned rank in the army. The victim's home was situated twelve miles from the nearest town. His wife, not knowing what had happened to him, tried to pacify their young children. It was hours before she learned the truth.

I was one of those children, and I am deeply concerned that the same lies and innuendos which were used to destroy my father's image in 1919 are being echoed as history almost sixty years later.

I have, in safe deposit, a collection of letters, documents, and newspaper reports referring to the 'tar and feather' episode. Amongst them are many messages of sympathy and esteem to a man long since dead; some are from returned soldiers. A newspaper comments: "The incident cannot fail to have a marked effect on the approaching Federal elections, and it is quite possible may be attended with results not anticipated nor desired by the National Campaign Council when it issued its leaflet. The fierce denunciation of the Prime Minister naturally inflamed the minds of the soldiers. Indeed the whole business bears the appearance of a stupidly blundering election dodge."

THORNBURY, VICTORIA

Those still birds in a tree
the dusky smokers, the late
porch sitters are giving that
effect. You're leaning

on a top step in this place
where spiders hang a web along
your ear. This life is

not itself, its white arms
flash in eastern cloth and colors
of the broom. Cut the stem

and thrushes make a sound
or light takes time in leaving
its own sky. A house without a light

the night is meant for walking
without shoes. Linoleum and you
not in the nude. The city settles

cool without its breath and lets
go seven loud boys over kerbs.
You came to watch a father in

his light, a last smoke leaves
him fingering a hand. The feeling
that you get

an air. The neighborhood is all
effect, your local art form in
a local mood. The workers
have come home again. The street
will start the night.

VIRGINIA LEINART

Frederic Manning and the Tragedy of War

BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS

The Middle Parts of Fortune, written by the Australian expatriate Frederic Manning, was published anonymously in 1929 in an edition limited to 520 copies. In 1930 an expurgated version, *Her Privates We*, appeared under the pseudonym "Private 19022". This was often reprinted and maintained a steady, if select, readership. The new general edition of the first version (Peter Davies, $12.20) will enlarge its reputation and guarantee its place as the finest account of soldiering in the trenches of all the war books which came out around the end of the 1920s.

The expurgations in *Her Privates We* consisted largely of four-letter words common enough in military speech but unacceptable in print in 1930. These are now restored, and the difference, though slight, is important, for the idiom of common soldiers pervades the book and is central to the experience it explores. *The Middle Parts of Fortune* is a book where nothing is incidental or merely circumstantial. Every detail is implicated in the grand design of depicting the human side of war, and the authenticity of his characters' speech underpins Manning's whole venture.

In his introduction to this new edition, the military historian Michael Howard sets *The Middle Parts of Forture* "apart from, and indeed above, the work of such better known war writers as Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon". This is a fair judgement. No other book presents such an insistent and perceptive account of trench warfare from the viewpoint of the common soldier, with its boredom, rumor and gossip behind the lines and its terrors at the front. Fine as they are, Blunden's *Undertones of War*, Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* and Graves' *Goodbye to All That* are books which cope with unimaginable experience by distancing it, through irony, allusion or grim farce. *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, though it is steeped in allusions to Shakespeare, engages directly with the experience, and enters into the consciousness of the men who went over the top, to lay bare the nature of human endurance, fear and comradeship.

Like many of the best books about the war, it approaches the borderline between memoir and fiction. Sassoon's memoirs were ascribed to the fictional George Sherston; Graves, Blunden and E. E. Cummings in *The Enormous Room* employed some of the formal devices of fiction and, in some instances, passages of fictive invention in books which are essentially autobiographical. A recent book about the soldiers of the Great War, Denis Winter's *Death's Men*, quotes extensively from *Her Privates We* as if it were a memoir, and this is not entirely mistaken. Manning declared in his prefatory note that the events in the book actually happened, and in one of the best essays ever published on the book (Quadrant, August 1970) Laurie Hergenhan demonstrated some of the connections between Manning's own war-time experience and that of his fictive protagonist, Bourne. But for all this, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* is a novel. Its distinction as a searching account of the experience of men in the trenches and, indeed, its superiority over other books about the war stems from Manning's understanding of the way fiction enabled him to make sense of his experience and order it, as memoir, paradoxically, might not. Fiction released him from certain constraints, so that instead of distancing himself, which seems to be an inevitable aspect of the memoirs, Manning was able to confront and dwell upon the behaviour and feelings of men *in extremis*. There is a truth and honesty about this more convincing than even the memoirs convey.

Frederic Manning therefore found a way out of the dilemma which has obsessed Kurt Vonnegut Jr. since he witnessed the Dresden air-raid and which he was never able to resolve successfully,

even in *Slaughterhouse Five;* how to find a language, or create a fable, which would match the horror of real experience. In *The Middle Parts of Fortune,* Manning evolved a fictional mode which did just this, by preserving, without strain, a strong link with actual experience, and by setting squarely at the centre of the novel the theme of war as an essentially *human* activity. A remarkable strength of his narrative is its unifying and organising tendency which pulls these together, with other aspects, in a profoundly integrated vision.

The actual event upon which the book is founded occurred during the battle of the Somme, a sequence of engagements which went on for five of the last six months of 1916. No other campaign would have served Manning's purposes so well (leaving aside the fact that he had participated in it himself), for the Somme was the exemplary event in the war, from the British standpoint. It was the terrible baptism of fire for the volunteer battalions of Kitchener's New Army, many of them regional or occupational in composition, like Bourne's "Westshires", and it exposed the errors and futility of the strategies devised to use these troops. Its military significance, considered as victory, defeat, or another exercise in holding the line, pales besides its appalling waste of human life. The participants, most of them not regular soldiers, but men who months before had been farmers, clerks, laborers, shopkeepers and the like, emerged from it as victims of the incompetence of the general staff, heroically carrying into effect plans which could achieve nothing but the bloody cost of war by attrition. There is the stuff of authentic tragedy here, celebrating the nobility of common men who in the death throes of European civilization were found to be heroes appropriate to the sacrifice it was their destiny to make. It was just this that Manning realized by setting the novel in the middle of the Somme campaign.

Many details in the book, such as the orders not to stop for wounded, down to the problem of going over the top wearing greatcoats *en banderole,* capture precisely the conditions of soldiering in this campaign as it is described in two splendid recent books — Martin Middlebrook's *First Day on the Somme* and John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* — though Manning's novel succeeds better than either of them in conveying the experience of ordinary soldiers.

This is the book's great achievement. While Graves, Sassoon, Blunden and the majority of English writers about the war fought and wrote as junior officers, and many of the Americans, like Hemingway and Cummings, enlisted in the ambulance corps (which, as Malcolm Cowley pointed out, gave them a concentrated view of the slaughter), Manning fought as a private soldier, as does his protagonist, Bourne. This gives us an entirely different perspective on the war. The point is made in the important discussion about honor in chapter III where Bourne reflects that it is no longer possible to consider the army as a class or profession, "the war had made it a world". An age inured to world wars may miss the significance of this.

The size and nature of the army which fought on the Somme made it a world of its own, representative, in a sense, of the whole country, or at least large pockets of it, but cut off from it by geography and much more, as the war progressed, by experience. Villages, regions and trades enlisted together and went into action side by side. The New Army preserved the diversity in age or background of these regional and occupational groups, but imposed the uniformity of soldiers upon them. Kitchener's volunteers were men, they became soldiers and if they survived had to become men again. Theirs was the experience of common men (not professional soldiers) carried to limits where humanity was reduced to simple animal needs; yet they were engaged in an essentially human activity.

This process, and this insight, is central to Manning's book and it is what gives it the dimension of tragedy entirely appropriate to the age. It is also what causes Bourne, throughout the book, to insist on the modesty, the sobriety, the veracity to be found in war; qualities which are suggested by many of the Shakespearian allusions in the book. This war, and particularly the events drawn upon in *The Middle Parts of Fortune,* forced men, in the sharpest way, to face the terrible truth of their own nature, and understand the delusory, yet indispensable, notions by which they hide it from themselves. It enabled them to recognize, too, that even at the ultimate extremity of peril and despair there remained a positive quality which made them stop for wounded 'chums', show concern about their mode of death, acknowledge a bond with their fellows.

The Middle Parts of Fortune is plotted to bring the ordinary business of soldiering into sharp focus, and it succeeds brilliantly in exploiting its dramatic potential. Its broad organisation, begin-

ning with the withdrawal of survivors from a futile attack, recovery in the rear, a period holding the line, and ending with another futile attack and a raiding party, is significant. It reflects, in miniature, the whole Somme offensive, with its disastrous first day and drawn-out sequel of inconclusive renewals until halted by the winter, and probably conforms to many soldiers' actual experience of the events. But more importantly than both these, it places at the centre of the book not deeds of individual valor or glory, but the common shared experience of men in the forces: marching, training, laboring on fatigue duty and carrying parties, holding the line, waiting. Some of the finest passages in the book are accounts of the more tedious aspects of soldiering, in which Manning explores their effect upon individual and group consciousness and traces their part in "war as a moral effort", where the ultimate test of battle is inextricably related to all the rest. The account of the night march up the line at the end of chapter eleven, with its insistent yet subtle rendering of the interplay of thought and feeling in Bourne's consciousness as it merges with the others' into a collective sense of the moment, and description of the gradual growth of "the spiritual thing in them which lived and seemed to grow stronger, in the midst of beastliness" is a splendid example. The two pages leading up to these words are not only one of the finest pieces of writing about the war, but by any standards a magnificent passage of exact, yet evocative, narrative. The same might be said of chapter fifteen, which is almost entirely devoted to the day of waiting before battle, surely one of the most poignant periods in a soldier's life, but one of the most difficult to recount.

All this is not to deny that the scenes of battle with which the book begins and ends are not both thematically important and masterly in descriptive power. They are of a piece with the rest of the book, and probe the consciousness of men under fire with the profound insight apparent in other pasages. Indeed, one of Manning's major achievements was to trace (as no other war writer) the process linking the feelings and behavior of men behind the line to their capacity in battle to cope with terror and perform acts demanding great reserves of courage which, rather than singling them out from their fellows, expressed their uniformity. Heroism was revealed to be not the individual virtue of great men, but the common property of men collectively, when at the extremity of despair they were brought to face war, and their own nature, squarely. Hence the significance of the despondent and disillusioned Weeper Smart in the second half of the book, and his crucial role in the final chapter.

In this aspect of the book there is a nest of paradoxes which challenge certain common assumptions about the war. Manning suggests that it is not the army which suppresses individuality and imposes uniformity on men, as some of the American war novelists, like Dos Passos, in *Three Soldiers,* insisted, but battle as it was experienced on the Western Front; and it is not so much *imposed,* as felt to be a collective bond. Out of the line, the men revert towards individuality, and other than Bourne, resent Weeper Smart because he refuses to allow them the illusory consolation of hope, but under fire they recognize that it is precisely this which enables him to act with resolution: he embodies the residual strength which they all feel, and must acknowledge, if they are going to have anything at all to depend on. Furthermore, Manning recognized that while the experience of war involved the stripping away of the lineaments of civilization and the reduction of human beings to the level of animals, this very process fostered the growth of comradeship, a distinctly human feeling.

The Middle Parts of Fortune is therefore not an anti-war book, at least, not in any superficial sense. Yet nor is it a book which celebrates war or the martial virtues. It is a tragic book, which, if it deplores war, does so because it is an inevitable part of human nature. This is its central theme, which is expounded in intimate detail, yet with ruthless objectivity. There is a sense, then, in which it answers the memoirs of junior officers like Graves and Sassoon with the profounder understanding of the common soldier.

Junior officers — platoon commanders and company commanders — have a characteristic role in the legends of the First World War. Armed with a holstered pistol, occasionally a sword and sometimes just a walking stick, they went over the top with their men and suffered appalling casualties. At the height of the war — during the Somme campaign, for example — their life expectancy from landing in France was less than three weeks. Their job was not so much to fight and kill (in fact John Keegan suggests that they shrank from killing), but to lead. Yet often it was death, rather than conquest, to which their men had to be led. They were caught between having to carry out orders which they knew would result in

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slaughter and their responsibility to a platoon or company of men who depended upon them, hence the highly developed sense of self-sacrifice which drew men like Wilfred Owen back to the trenches again and again. Not surprisingly, they saw their men not as the agents of death, but as victims of impersonal, mechanistic forces. Through their memoirs, this became one accepted view of the war, and of course, it accords with the actual experience of battle on the Western Front, where the artillery piece and the machine gun called the tune.

Manning was aware of this, and he understood why junior officers saw the war this way — that was the point in making Bourne a private soldier, but officer material, in line for promotion. But he also recognized, and confronted unflinchingly, the fact that war is essentially a *human* phenomenon. Men wage it: men suffer it. It is his refusal to bypass this fact, but rather to dwell upon it and explore its consequences that gives his book a more profound dimension than *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* or *Goodbye to All That.*

Both sides of war — the human and the inhuman — are present throughout the book, particularly at those moments when Bourne thinks about promotion:

> . . . when one became an officer, one became part of an inflexible and inhuman machine; and though he thought the war as a moral effort was magnificant, he felt that as a mechanical operation it left a great deal to be desired.

Manning's hero recognizes here the perspective which led officers like Graves and Sassoon to view and record the war the way they did. But it is that, precisely, which makes him reluctant to accept promotion. He agrees to it eventually only because it is put to him as a duty, and then with a sense that he will have to forego the essential humanity which it has been his lot to discover in the extremities of war.

Bourne is aware, from the beginning of the book, of the different obligations of honor which apply to officers (who were still, in the First World War, gentlemen) and to private soldiers — a difference acknowledged by Martin Middlebrook in *First Day on the Somme* when he pointed out that many junior officers were "victims of a code of conduct and dress which had not yet been adapted to the conditions of the Western Front". The private soldier's honor is tacit and essentially rooted in his common humanity, and most of the book is devoted to delineating it. That is why,

until the final chapter, there is very little about night patrols and raiding parties like those which earned Siegfried Sassoon the nickname of Mad Jack and the Military Cross which he shortly afterwards threw into the mouth of the Mersey. Significantly, Bourne is finally implicated in such a venture because of his commitment to becoming an officer. He joins the raiding party with the same reluctance that he agrees to promotion, sensing that his action is foredoomed. His comrades share this premonition. Weeper Smart instantly volunteers to go along with him, and Sergeant Tozer tries to extricate him with honor. Bourne could quite easily decline to volunteer without dishonor among his comrades — they know he has exceeded his obligations to them — but he realizes that having initiated the process that will lead to his commission, he has new and different obligations. He is separated from his comrades the moment he makes his choice and therefore has to face the ultimate test of leadership in the field — exemplary self-sacrifice — even before he is wearing pips.

Bourne's acute sense of the conflicting obligations of soldier and officer is a major source of tension in the book, and its ending is entirely appropriate. He has been reluctant to become an officer not because he discounts the nobility of the calling, but because it is only by remaining a private soldier that he can experience the human side of war; he concedes that it is a terrible bloody waste, but insists on the extraordinary humanity of the men who fought it.

There is a superb insight and understanding in this which is achieved through focusing the story on Bourne, who is not a representative common soldier (if there is such a thing) but who is placed in a situation which constrains him to acknowledge and explore the experience of the men in the line. Everything about Bourne fits him for this: a self-consciousness which makes him sense a slight distance from his comrades, even when entering fully into their society, a delicacy of feeling which causes him to hesitate about accepting the hospitality of higher ranks but which is the very thing which causes them to offer it—hence the importance of his relationship with Tozer and the R.S.M., an honest refusal to conceal his difference, as well as his taste for champagne, from his fellow soldiers, but rather an openness in sharing it with them, a readiness to accept certain demands upon him because of this difference, his superiority as a scrounger, able to produce "the needful", which together with the preceding qualities makes him seem, occasionally, the battalion Jeeves — he even says "They were a most devoted couple, sir" at one point, even his Australian affinities; these all contribute to the impression that he is something of an outsider who enters into the life of the battalion at various levels, but always with a certain reserve. His 'chums' occasionally remark upon his oddness: Bourne acknowledges it, but it is precisely this unforced awareness which makes him the ideal consciousness in which to reflect the story. This exact matching of viewpoint to the incident and observation of the book is another mark of its quality, and contributes to the objective impression which underlines its tragic inevitability.

This objectivity is procured through the conflation of the views of a few soldiers and NCOs at the front, as they impinge upon Bourne's consciousness. By this means we learn that though the private soldier may see the war more narrowly than the staff officer, he sees it more clearly, for there is a range of emotion and experience which only war evokes and only he knows. The limitations of his perspective are far less restricting to our understanding of the phenomenon than those of the officer or strategist, for the soldier knows what is at the heart of our pre-occupation with war: the terrors of battle, the capacity of the human spirit to surmount them, the manner of living and dying under fire.

The Middle Parts of Fortune focuses upon these matters and relates them more insistently than any other book about the experience, including the recent studies of men in battle by John Keegan and Martin Middlebrook, hence the high praise which Manning's contemporaries, like Hemingway and T. E. Lawrence, bestowed upon it. Many of the books about the First World War described its monstrous horrors, its destruction of human individuality and civilization: only Manning uncovered the deep positive qualities which enabled ordinary men, time and time again, to walk slowly into a lethal hail of lead and steel on the Western Front.

books

FRANK DALBY DAVISON

John Barnes

Owen Webster: *The Outward Journey* (ANU Press, $17.50).

At the time of his death in 1975 Owen Webster had completed only the first volume of his planned life of Frank Dalby Davison. He had intended that *The Outward Journey* should be followed by a second volume, *The Inward Journey,* covering Davison's life as a writer. What we have is only half of an ambitious design — and what would probably have been the less interesting half.

The Outward Journey is devoted to the family antecedents and the first thirty years of Frederick Douglas Davison — it wasn't until just before *Man-Shy* was published by Angus and Robertson in 1931 that F. D. Davison adopted the name of Frank Dalby Davison. (I find it impossible to think of him as Fred, and refer to him as Frank throughout this review.) Webster's decisions to give so much space to Frank's life before he emerged as a writer was ill-judged, I'm inclined to think, though one must be grateful to have a biographer who cares enough about his subject to want to portray his life in such detail.

Owen Webster approached his task convinced that Frank Davison deserved a biography on a grand scale. In his eyes Frank's experience was representatively Australian — and to write a life of the man involved, at least in part, a history of his times. It was a near-impossible task which Webster set himself, all the more daunting since, as a comparative newcomer to Australia, he had to acquire so much background. Just over a year before Davison's death Webster conducted a very successful television interview with him. In writing the biography he made much use of Davison's memories as they were recorded at the time, but he also did a vast amount of diligent research: this volume is crammed with factual material.

The most striking instance of this is the detailed account of soldier settlement at Injune. Frank Davison took up land there in 1919 on his return to Australia after the Great War (during which he served in the British Army). Webster looked up all the official records relating to Davison, and much more besides. The second part of *The Outward Journey* contains what amounts to a short history of the working of the soldier settlement scheme in the area, with a quite extraordinary amount of authentic detail on the everyday lives of the Davisons and their neighbors.

But facts about official policies, boundaries, rainfall, the spread of prickly pear, how the settlers got their supplies, the conditions in their houses and so forth finally matter less in a biography than facts about relationships between people, their attitudes and feelings, and the influences that shaped a man's sense of himself and his private destiny. Webster gets across very well the feel of the actual hardships endured from day to day; and the sort of detail he assembles of how Frank, his English wife Kitty, and their infant daughter lived over a period of four years gives a vividness to his narrative. He is good, too, on relationships within the little community of settlers, and the anecdotes about the neighbors — the young man lying helpless in his hut, the unexplained death of Mrs Fergy who was buried on the selection — are well worth their place. Yet, for all the (at times) evocative detail of the pioneering life that Frank Davison lived at Injune, one gets disappointingly little insight into the man himself.

Even more disappointing is the account of

the most important emotional experiences in Davison's early life — his war service in France and his wartime marriage in England. Characteristically, Webster can cite dates, names of places, landladies, telegrams and the like, but none of the circumstantial detail seems to be of great consequence. Webster treats the relationship between Frank and his first wife in a novelettish fashion, giving Kitty Davison's memories of meetings and partings a quite disproportionate emphasis.

Throughout this volume Webster's enthusiasm for Frank Davison and anything connected with him leads him to write more like a family chronicler, to whom every little scrap of information is precious no matter how trivial, than a biographer whose prime concern is to distinguish what is significant for an understanding of his subject. Frank is not born until the end of the second chapter, by which time the reader has been led through the maze of family history two generations back, and absorbed — or at least faced — a collection of largely irrelevant titbits. One learns that at the age of three Frank's father got a picture book from his aunt in England; when Frank's parents were married his mother wore "a dress of eau de Nil trimmed with guipure lace that she had made herself"; baby Frank's first outing was a tram ride; and so on . . .

At the same time the narrative is often seriously short of substance, most noticeably in the account of Frank's childhood and youth. Snippets about the boy's experience tend to be sandwiched in between extended descriptions of his father's activities and published work. Generally, in this earlier part of the narrative Webster fails to establish the boy's perspective, or to explore the relationship of father and son; but he does certainly make one realize what a strong personality Fred Davison was, and so incidentally draws attention to what was the most powerful influence in pushing Frank towards writing and, at the same time, the most powerful influence inhibiting his development as a writer.

Fred Davison was a man of inexhaustible energy and conviction. After initial success as a printer in the city, he went into real estate in the Elsternwick district at the time of Tommy Bent's ascendancy. In 1897 at the age of twenty-nine, he published his own journal, Advance Australia, which was eventually taken over by the Australian Natives' Association, in which he was a most active member. An uncompromising patriot all his life, he nevertheless chose to move his family to America in 1909, when he was forty. The professed reason for the move was to promote a flyscreen he had patented, but the real reason seems to have been simply a restless desire for new horizons. Once in America he founded and inevitably became the President of the Australasian Society of America. During the war he returned to Australia determined to fight for the Empire: he dyed his hair, lowered his age, and joined the AIF. After the war he set up as an estate agent in Sydney, and began creating journals which would give him a platform — Australia Post in 1920, and then Australia in 1924. These publications carried Frank Davison's first serious attempts at prose writing, beginning with sketches written while he was still battling it out at Injune.

With a man like Fred Davison for a father it could not have been easy for Fred Davison Junr. (as some of Frank's early work was signed) to be his own man. In choosing his own name later on he was symbolically asserting his independence. Throughout the period of his life covered by this volume one sees the young Davison under the dominance of his father. At the age of thirteen he was up at Kinglake attempting to fulfil his father's vision of pioneering the land. In 1914 he at first resisted his father's determination that he should join up and fight, but before long he was on his way from New York to England. What part his father had in his decision to go on the land after the war Webster does not say, but his decision was in line with his father's thinking. By 1923, when it was obvious that the venture had not been a success, he agreed to join his father in Sydney to help with a new publishing enterprise. Webster seems to have found little in the way of family letters and recollections which bear on the relationship of father and son — but he may perhaps have intended to leave development of this theme to his second volume.

There was much of his father's spirit in Frank Dalby Davison. Self-reliant, proud, strong-willed, he summed up an essential element in his own make-up in one of his Injune stories which is quoted by Webster: ". . . you know how it is when you've set your mind on carrying out a job: you'll do it — or bust your guts trying" ("Fields of Cotton"). He was a compulsive worker, whether it was clearing the land at Injune or writing *The White Thorntree* many years later

at Arthur's Creek. Of course, something more than energy and determination is needed to make a writer. Frank Davison had imaginative gifts that his father lacked; and the story of how he became a creative writer — or, more accurately, discovered his talent as a creative writer — would be worth telling. He lived a varied and intense life, which gave him the raw material for his fiction.

Towards the end of *The Outward Journey* Owen Webster shows how Frank Davison started to turn his own experiences on the land into stories. This is certainly interesting, and there is much in the book that anyone who has read Davison will enjoy. Yet it contributes rather less to our understanding of the sort of man Frank Dalby Davison was than one would expect, given the great effort that went into the writing of it. The dustjacket shows a drawing of the head of the young man with none of the facial detail filled in. Unhappily, that seems all too appropriate as a visual comment on this piece of biography.

AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING AND POLITICS

Robert Horne

Richard Harding: *Outside Interference — The Politics of Australian Broadcasting* (Sun Books, $6.95).

Many of us who have worked for it have a favorite story about politicians and the A.B.C. Mine is one told of the late Johnny O'Keefe, when he was rousing the nation's teenagers with his "Six O'Clock Rock" some twenty years ago. Amid the roistering at one recording session he heard that the Prime Minister was in the next studio making a political telecast. So the story goes that Johnny, ever alert with bright new ideas, called out, "Hey, Bob Menzies is in the building, let's get him in the program!" Then, as Johnny told it, "Here was this A.B.C. guy, waving me into a corner shouting, 'No, No, No'. Don't you know that if you have Bob Menzies this week, you'll have to get Doc Evatt for the next program".

Lord knows what happy precedent might have been set if Johnny had managed to get both of them onto "Six O'Clock Rock", especially if properly politically balanced in the same program; but both were adept at handling the broadcasting media, and both were capable of castigating the A.B.C. for things done, or left undone, to jeopardise or promote their respective political fortunes. There are some still with us whose memories ring with echoes of the dressing down that Dr Evatt, in tandem with Jack Beasley, gave the Commission when they summoned it to Canberra early in 1942 to tell it what the new Labor Government expected of it. But no political leader, of either party, could claim the record of sustained hostility attributed to Malcolm Fraser and some of his colleagues by Professor Richard Harding in the book under review.

In his summary of "Patterns of the Past" Harding lists ten steps of the strategy by which he says the Liberals brought the A.B.C. "back into line" after a period of Labor rule, when "a return of the conservative status quo in politics had to be accompanied by a return to conservative broadcasting". The list begins with, "Political pressure throughout 1975, in the period preceding the events of 11 November," and ends with, "Once the taming had been completed, the offer of an olive branch". It includes financial cutbacks, actual and threatened legislative action, and the appointment of a chairman "hostile to the values and aspirations of the organisation he was to lead".

Although he has called this chapter just "Fraser", Professor Harding concedes that others helped with the strategy, naming Anthony, Nixon, Withers, Carrick and Cotton. "Nevertheless", he says, "the available evidence suggests, in my view, that Fraser's personal participation in the process of the taming of the A.B.C. went far beyond the general supervision of policy matters which one would normally expect of a Prime Minister".

In a fast-moving and well-documented narrative chapter entitled "The Trouble with Harry", Harding traces the frenzied effects of the crucial act of Fraser's personal participation — his appointment in mid-1976 of Sir Henry Bland as Commission chairman. This tragi-comic interlude lasted only five months, but during that time the new chairman succeeded in alienating most of his fellow commissioners, top management, pretty well the entire staff, and a large section of the public and the media. The whole unhappy story is here — the "Alvin Purple" affair, the threat to censor Manning Clark, the conflicts and confrontations within the organisation, the dogmatic and disturbing private and public statements about policy and procedures, and Sir Henry's ultimate fall from favor with his political sponsor.

When Sir Henry burst upon the A.B.C. scene Professor Harding had been a commissioner for

nine months. Professor of Law at the University of West Australia, he was appointed by Labor in October 1975, just when the coalition heavies were intensifying their intimidation of the A.B.C. in the events leading up to November 11, and the election that followed. These threats were a prelude to the swift assault they made as soon as they were able to use a more legitimate and effective weapon — their control of A.B.C. funding. Claiming that the country could no longer afford alleged Labor force-feeding that had pushed up the A.B.C. estimates for 1975-6 to $132.1 million, compared with $70.5 million in 1972-3, the new Government began by refusing the supplementary funds that had normally been granted each January to cover rises in costs since the previous July 1st. Harding describes the frenetic efforts of management and the Commission to find ways and means of saving over eight million dollars in five months without too greatly damaging the program structure, and the organisation itself. With financial cutbacks of such magnitude, says Harding, the A.B.C. had to "become pre-occupied with the sheer question of survival."

Harding does not, of course, question the government's right to make cuts in A.B.C. funds, but he says it is difficult "not to conclude that they were ideological rather than financial in motivation." He does, however, condemn the parallel order given to the commission to reduce staff from 7,600 to 6,300 by June, 1977. "As far as the A.B.C. is concerned," he says, "all such 'orders' in relation to staff are illegal — nothing more than manifestations of bureaucratic bullying. There exists not a skerrick of lawful authority for such instructions. A procedure which for Government Departments was a direct and lawful intervention was, for the A.B.C., simply an illegitimate intrusion into the statutory independence of the Commission".

Lawful or not, the A.B.C. complied, and the problem of achieving set ceilings still bedevils it. Among the staff the situation had perforce to be accepted. Early in the process I remember one officer threatening to end one of his more drastic submissions for expenditure cuts with, "Item, 10 cents, for one bullet to shoot myself", to be reminded by a lugubrious colleague that his epitaph would be written next day by the Staff Review Committee: "Position x, vacant, natural wastage, no replacement recommended."

Implicit in Professor Harding's treatment of events is a feeling that the A.B.C. may profit from times of tribulation because they stiffen its resistance and rally friends to its defence. Be that as it may, it is useful for all of us to remember how A.B.C. programs have developed — in scope, depth and incisiveness — in times both of quietude and stress, over the past fifteen years or so. "The A.B.C. guy" who waved Johnny O'Keefe into the corner no doubt had more in mind than the problem of balancing Bob with Bert, for he knew that, to get any politician of those days into any program, he had to have the permission of the General Manager himself. In the mid-sixties urgent current affairs programs like "This Day Tonight" put an end to that sort of bureaucratic timidity, and gave the politicians their first regular chances and challenges to stand up and be broadcast.

Just as "Four Corners" and "T.D.T." led the way into current affairs television, so other innovative programs in both media rejuvenated broadcasting. The A.B.C. introduced "A.M." and "P.M.", topical radio with real bite, and extended its news cover with direct reports from all the continents. It provided background for intelligent thinking in a range of enterprising contributions from its Radio Special Projects and Science departments. It refined local television drama with quality productions like "Power Without Glory", and local film documentary effort with "Big Country", "Wild Australia" and other notable series. It showed us all the major sporting events; it widened our cultural horizons with programs on the arts. In short, it really began to fulfil its designated function of providing "adequate and comprehensive programs".

It is not Professor Harding's purpose to remind us of these achievements; his concern is with the threats to progress he saw emerging during his three years on the Commission. Having dealt with the pressures blatantly applied in the flurry of the Bland regime and the scurry to offset budget and staff cuts, he goes on to assess the more subtle effects of the succession of John Norgard as chairman, and of the appointment of three new commissioners who shared their new head's conservative view of the A.B.C.'s role. Harding saw this conservatism reflected in "unadventurous" appointments to senior staff positions, critical scrutiny of the radio program "Broadband", which the Commission discussed in seven of its eleven meetings in 1977, and the closure of the access station 3ZZ. The government was able to claim legality for cutting off funds for 3ZZ under

a clause in the Broadcasting and Television Act not previously applied, and clearly not intended, for such purpose. However, Harding describes the Commission's defence of its right to maintain the station as "pusillanimous", and one that "could leave nobody in doubt that the A.B.C. was now well and truly tamed".

Whatever the rights and motives for the closure, the community had lost a valuable service, and the A.B.C. had lost, through staff resignations or transfer, the assembled expertise of a group of young people who had enthusiastically pioneered access radio. I understand that a book by another author to be published soon will give us a fuller account of how the experiment lived and died.

Of the other emerging threats to the A.B.C., Harding gives fullest treatment to the competition of commercial stations, and particularly to their success in outbidding the Commission for exclusive rights to telecast cricket, tennis and the forthcoming Moscow Olympics. There is, of course, gloom in the A.B.C. over such developments, made deeper by occasional statements in high places that this is just the way of the competitive world, and that nothing can, or should, be done about it. And the gloom grows deeper still when it is further said that this and other popular program areas would perhaps be better left to the commercials anyway, while the A.B.C. should concentrate on "things it does best", by which is too often meant programs that have the least appeal for the greatest number of people.

There is a good deal in the book about commercial broadcasting, its place in the system, its aims and ambitions, and the machinery established to regulate it. Harding considers the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal to be a potentially more effective body than the old Control Board in enforcing program standards. Moreover its direct authority over licences provides a barrier against improper political interference. "The sickly pallor of the A.B.C.," he says "throws the rude health and swaggering strength of the commercial sector into high relief. The task, however, is, not to weaken commercial broadcasting, but to control and re-direct its strength".

Professor Harding's book is of value, not only for its precise account of events crucial to broadcasting that have made or marred the record of recent years, but also for its thoughtful prescription for the future. It may be reckoned rather academic by some who expected a more angry book from this progressive among the commissioners, but one can hope that it will not just find a honored place in book lists for Media Studies. It should indeed be required reading for broadcasting managements and staff, for politicians friendly and unfriendly, for those who will be sitting in judgement on the A.B.C. in forthcoming enquiries, and for all people who will want to defend this beleagured organisation against forces interested in seeing it debilitated or destroyed.

MIXED MARRIAGE

Bill Irwin

Noel Hilliard: *The Glory and the Dream* (William Heinemann, $12.50).

The strains inherent in a mixed marriage comprise the main substance of Noel Hilliard's latest and best novel. It describes a situation specific to New Zealand — a Maori girl married to a white man, a pakeha. Here in Australia, now one of the most multi-cultural of countries, mixed marriages are likely to appear more often than in the past as a general theme in our fiction. *Coonardoo* by Katharine Susannah Prichard was a famous early example. Today the field is diverse and the possibilities are endless.

We can be pleased if our writers explore them as honestly and compassionately as Hilliard does. His new book is the last of a tetralogy which began with *Maori Girl* and continued with *Power of Joy* and *Maori Woman,* all of which won literary awards in New Zealand. Nevertheless, *The Glory and the Dream* stands on its own. The writing is highly professional, and the brilliant evocation of Netta's extended family suggests Hilliard's own fruitful connection with the Maori people.

The book has other facets. What happens to a man of gentle middle-class upbringing who is trapped in a laborer's job in a remote paper mill? A man hungry for good music and poetry, a man acceptable to his workmates but of completely different interests? What happens to a housewife, working class, without formal education and content to leave it at that, bored and devitalised by separation from the easy-going gregariousness of her Maori community? We have our parallels here: unfulfilled lives, isolation and boredom, love eroded by mutual uncertainties and irritations.

Hilliard develops this situation without sentimentality, but his uncomfortable frankness is off-

set by understanding and compassion. Similarly, the severe material circumstances in which Paul and Netta are placed, and the brutal harshness and alienation of Paul's job, are counterpointed by lyrical evocations of the natural beauty of their surroundings, described with exact and loving observation.

The uneasy marriage of Paul and Netta and their struggle to transcend their cultural differences may be seen as symbolic of the larger adjustment of Maori and pakeha, lending the story and title a further dimension. New Zealanders are fortunate to have a writer who so honestly and beautifully enlarges their vision of their country.

A STRAIGHT REFLECTION

Gwen Harwood

Frank Kellaway: *Mare's Nest* (Overland, $3.00).

Those who read Frank Kellaway's perceptive reviews know that in poetry he prefers "architecture, shapeliness or completeness" and looks for "real intelligence and a concern for truth and goodness and for individual human beings". His own poems reveal these qualities. They are vigorous, well-made, compassionate and full of surprises which delight the mind and inward ear. Kellaway's poetic world is one in which the senses are extended: we see the jacaranda's "violet ember" and the "wolf-grey shadowed bars/ of hairlight"; the orange of a pumpkin's flesh is "colour of wanton fruitfulness". The beach is "'ridged like a scrubbing-board". Breath blacks the glass "with an oxide like despair". We hear cars "with hissing python tyres." There are strange images which call up new physical sensations: "dust on a polished carapace of ice"; "sand stiffens the glove-fingers of the teats" of a drowned cow. Because Kellaway's poems are firmly linked to life as it is actually lived he is able to find the right tone for deeply felt experiences. Emotion and expression are balanced:

> When the trees creak and the bushes moan,
> when your bitter boy leaves you alone,
> then my ghost will creep from your own marrow bone

In this poem, "Remember", there are echoes of Donne, but that is because Kellaway is at home and at ease with the traditional poets and accepts past excellence without any affectation; he simply uses what he needs. "In Paris Cafes" affirms with pleasant formality the mortal kinship of poets. Apollinaire (misprinted), Jarry, Cocteau, Sartre

> sat, just as I, because their rooms were cold,
> a wintering crop of doubtful vegetables
> each growing old because he could not cry.

Kellaway's poems continually recall the limitations and boundaries of language, always reminding us at the same time of the games that "children and poets love" which reveal the true world of the imagination by "calling the graceful dance." This is the paradox of art:

> Consider now the provenance of flight;
> feather and sinew make it possible.
> It is a problem of materials
> and they are here, lying about the sand.
> ("Low-Flying Icarus")

It is the right combination of materials that makes flight possible, the right combination of words that makes language able to express what it cannot make explicit. When we have this happy conjunction we have a true poem. We have to find what can be said clearly (and find it again in every age — that is why good poetry keeps changing and bad stays pretty much the same) if the light of imagination is to shine on the ordinary world. "Low-Flying Icarus" examines the age-old problems of the artist, the maker:

> It takes a lot of time to be a genius,
> a lot of lying in the sun,

says Daedalus to the son who sees him as a craftsman "illustrious for silly skills". When the boy leaves the guidance of his father and begins to soar he is still "bounded by the horizon's dish" and "locked in the scale of man". This beautiful poem illuminates the old myth; the pentameters seem to uphold the long soaring metaphors of flight; it is an economical poem and yet a great deal has gone into its making. It will bear many readings.

Death is a favorite poetic subject nowadays, perhaps because some of our best poets are beginning to feel cooler airs in their middle age, perhaps because we are in the last quarter of a troubled century. Two of the best poems in this book, "Dead Cow" and "Foxie's Hangout", look at death in a natural context but could

truly be called metaphysical poems. We look at death in a new way because poetry has taught us to do so; and death, real death in the physical world, makes us look again at poetry.

> Terrors are real enough you may suppose:
> so a heifer stumbles to death,
> huddles on rocks moaning with splintered legs,
> blurred hump of pain.

The dead cow suffers a sea change, becomes "a sea-lice tent," sinks down to the alien submarine world of "skate black as stone" among the sea-ferns. The child, accepting death as from a story-book, thinks "a tiger must have killed this heifer". The poet, diving among the weed, knows the "tiger-grin" of his own deep fears. The word "terrors," used in every verse, acts as a pivot on which the mind turns from one idea to another. The sibilant language echoes the ceaseless washing of the sea as "the passing moons lift up what they consume."

In "Foxie's Hangout" short, tightly-controlled lines convey the tension and speed of "this schizoid age". The poem is about a real place on Mornington Peninsula (a friend of mine took me there without warning me; I found it quite unbearable to recall the bodies on the box-gum tree until I read Kellaway's poem, which made my own horror accessible to me). The poem is painful and witty at the same time:

> They hang from a great iron circle
> that rings the bole for all that's mortal
> and bells the toll that shooters take
> for every fox's fool mistake.

At this point the poem suddenly changes key, with tremendous effect:

> The Koryaks hunt the fox for fur:
> they lay their victims by the fire —
> their routine to diminish fear.
> "Let the guest warm himself," they say
> "Before we take his coat away."

The ceremony of the savages at home with nature is contrasted with the disorder of a world of speed, noise and hard textures; the observer becomes the victim and swings on the "grotesque trapeze" grinning rigidly at evils for which there is no consolation at all. In "Foxies Hangout" we have a truly Australian Dance of Death among the "wattles and tea-tree and blonde grass"; it is one of the most memorable poems in the book because of the forceful rhymes and controlled rhythmic energy.

Kellaway writes confidently in the fixed forms; it is far easier to see if a poet is writing well when he uses traditional metres. "Countryman," "Country," "Limits," and two very funny poems, "The Soup We're In" and "Young and Jackson's", particularly delighted my ear. One can often capture the rhythms of contemporary speech more firmly in the stricter forms than in rhapsodic weavings. Kellaways love of music, and his knowledge of that exacting art, can be recognized in the lyric *"Guter Geist":*

> Now that I have you in my mind
> you are the ghost
> and I am blessed
> since you return
> what I had lost,
> my body's home,
> where we can both lie safe and blind.

Indeed all the poems should be read aloud; they ask to be lifted off the page and on to the tongue. Even the long reflective "Letter to Barrie", a meditation on the themes of time, memory, friendship, poetry and past and present violence, gains its power as much from sound as from imagery; it would be difficult to read, but a good interpreter could find the right tones of voice and the right shades of compassion or irony. Kellaway has a great range of subjects and styles, from the harsh realism of

> That Brisbane, hot and full of brutal men . . .
> corruption grins from every glass of beer,
> violence bares teeth in every bar

to the dancing surrealism of

> The phoenix has lost
> his scales of fire,
> he wanders naked
> on the grass.

A mare's nest is a fancied find, but this *Mare's Nest* is a find of true fancies, or rather of true imagination. In "Glass" Kellaway speaks directly of the difficulty all poets have of keeping up "the pursuit of honesty." Language, the great mirror of the world, does cloud over, the clear vision we long for does sometimes seem "a hopeless dream." But if it were truly hopeless the poetry would never be written, and we have this book as witness to a gifted poet's response to the splendor and terror of the world.

OUTSIDER LOVES INSIDER

David Martin

Iris Milutinovic: *Talk English Carn't Ya* (Hyland House, $8.95).

"My name is Borislav Mihailovic and I am in this country since 1949. At first I think is too different and I cannot live here and my country where I am born much better but now I know this is not true. Australia is the best country in the world now, and I am Australian with an Australian wife and a fine brick home and some money in the bank."

The author of these lines, Iris Milutinovic, evidently is married to a Yugoslav. In this book she tells her husband's story — seemingly only very slightly disguised — in his own New Australian style. It's done very well. *Australian with an Australian wife and fine brick home* is nicely typical, but *Australia is best country in the world now,* while also typical in a certain sense, does not quite convey the true flavor of the story, which laughs at stereotypes. Possession of a wife and a brick home are desirable achievements everywhere . . . there is nothing ockerish about them.

The Boris of this creative piece of reportage (I wish he didn't have to be called Mihailovic, but let it pass) is one of those who find assimilation difficult. He never really masters the language. This compounds all his problems in his new country. Heavy as they are, they don't rob him of courage, especially not the courage to approach women. And that's where he wins the lottery, except that the Maggie who he conquers (she has "a fine fat chest" and works at a post office) has a will of her own and it does not always exactly match Boris's.

They make a strong team. He learns from her that a Scots carpenter's Nell is really a nail, and that bad landlords are bad landlords even to the native-born. Outsider has married insider, but among the narrow-minded and cranky most insiders, too, are outsiders, so the pair face together a world which is tough and sometimes cruel but not unforgiveably mean.

Boris wants land; he wants to stand on his own soil. If this were a novel I would criticize the choice of a peasant, or farmer, as the central character: too obvious in the culture clash. But this is not fiction. They get the money together, the land is bought, but Maggie is uneasy. Rightly, because the venture is badly thought out. A long time passes before they find what they need.

Other perplexities, other dilemmas, large and small. They run their car over their own cat. Boris is tempted by a younger woman, Maggie's close friend. Maggie falls ill — heart disease and later cancer. It's quite a *tour de force,* this cross-identification; a woman writing with simplicity, humor and compassion about her companion's fears for her, in her companion's tone of voice.

They live in West Australia. Boris' son by his first wife comes out for a visit from Yugoslavia. Slowly Boris' roots drill down — he is always amazed at how fertile this dry land is — but something in him remains divided. A journey to his wife's native Tasmania, meeting her people there, does not finally allay his uncertainty. Maggie persuades Boris to go back to Yugoslavia, to discover how it will make him feel.

He goes and he returns. He now knows that he has *two* countries, but that Australia is where he belongs. The Yugoslav chapter is short — but then "Maggie" never went there.

I like this book. There is subtlety in its simplicity. It is warm-hearted but not for one second mawkish. A man and a woman, a Yugoslav and a Tasmanian, facing life together and growing old . . . We can do with more such writing.

THEY DID IT THEMSELVES

Ted Greenwood

Murray Walker: *Pioneer Crafts of Early Australia* (Macmillan, $19.95).

Both the narrow-gauge trestle bridge at Selby and the log-dwelling of ornithologist Tom Tregellis in the Monbulk forest indelibly moved my childhood sensibilities. The first has been preserved, an honest piece of timber engineering, a graceful structure still evoking responses from countless snap-happy tourists wishing to record the progress of Puffing Billy across the deep gully it spans. Neglect hastened the disintegration of the second, the unprotected log rapidly rotting through and then collapsing, burying all the tools and utensils missed by vandals, and destroying the evidence of the ornithologist's domestic ingenuity.

This delightful book is a powerful reminder of the significance to us all of such examples of folk craftsmanship, the often thoughtful responses to practical problems made by predominantly anonymous individuals and groups of early settlers without the advantages of sophisticated traditions or technology.

Together with the mounting and cataloguing of a major exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria containing some 370 folkcraft items, the book is the result of two years of energetic research by the author, whose respect for such items grew from a childhood in which his holidays were often spent accompanying his father, a travelling draper, on some of his country rounds. No doubt he saw and was intrigued by discarded pieces of improvised farm machinery, the odd thatched log-barn standing saggingly empty in the paddock, and other home-made relics of a pioneer past.

Murray Walker's respect for his subject-matter is best expressed by a short statement in his introduction: "To the sympathetic and informed eyes, humble items oft neglected vividly state the material and spiritual aspirations of vanished generations. These objects are as much a part of our cultural heritage as are the works of artists and writers."

His is indeed a "sympathetic and informed eye" and, without flag-waving or emotional proselytizing, he quietly builds up a strong case for their further preservation and wider study for both historical and aesthetic reasons.

Although the title suggests an Australian-wide survey, the wealth of material Walker uncovered in his home state convinced him to confine the study largely to Victoria. The work suffers little by this limitation since, apart from the penal periods, the typical patterns of settlement and development are revealed in that state as much as in any other, although the timing and magnitude of events like the gold rushes are significant. The later mining booms involving less people and greater use of technology were not wholly comparable with those of the mid nineteenth century.

As Walker points out when describing their effects, "for the first and only time in our short European settled history, very large numbers of ordinary non-professional manual workers were involved in essential daily handcraft which encompassed shelter, with improvised furniture, utensils, tools, and primitive simple systems to extract gold from where it lay hidden from the eager eye."

Perhaps only the latter-day cave-dwellers of Coober Pedy would have an inkling of what that meant in terms of demands on a person's resourcefulness.

Through all the various situations Walker describes and uses as his chapter headings, whether in the bush, on the road, on the farm, at the end of the day's toll, or even when the sensitizing female was present, what emerges is a general picture of a materialistic and practical people bent on exploitation, who reveal their inventiveness and occasional sensitivity through their answers to functional problems besetting the colonist.

Historians before him have documented and interpreted the first part of that generalization, but to my knowledge his work is the first serious attempt to focus on the rarer and quite precious glimmerings of creative response from our forebears, aside from the more commonly accepted mediums such as painting and writing.

Walker's account of these products and their significance is presented in a cool, dispassionate manner with his only excursion into hot controversy being a discussion on the relative merits of the goldfields commentators, artist S. T. Gill and the model-maker Carl Nordström. He mounts a persuasive case for the reappraisal of Nordström as the superior artist, and he rates the model of "The Port Phillip and Clunes Mining Company", made on site at Clunes during 1858, as a masterpiece, a rating I suspect he would not grant lightly.

The prose is clear and descriptive, befitting the subject, but not without its poetic moments, as in this description of the fireplace being the important feature of a colonist's shelter: "Almost all primitive shelters had a large open fireplace at one end, and here the owner-builder lavished his attention and skill. The fireplace was to be the most important focal point, the source of heat and warmth, cooking, and to serve as a roseate centrepiece of romance and mystery. For the tired, the huge fire represented a merging of real and unreal; a warm soporific for disembodied, fatigued souls."

The book is freely illustrated with well-chosen black and white photographs, some from old engravings, and while a proportion of these set atmosphere rather than instruct, there are many, like the fine character study of two woodcutters posing with their tools of trade, which do both. Considering the transitory nature of the material, the collection is wide-ranging, particularly when combined with the catalogue of the exhibition. The catalogue should prove a valuable pictorial companion-piece to the book for schools and educational institutions.

My reservations are primarily concerned with the craftsmanship of the book itself. While the type-face and lay-out are clean and uncluttered, the printing of the text in my copy varied slightly in density, its case binding was of popular-book standard, and some punctuation omissions and

an editorial oversight made the odd sentence more difficult to comprehend. Lapses of even a minor nature like this are to be regretted in a publication as important as this one.

SYDNEY SINCE THE BRIDGE

Desmond O'Grady

Sumner Locke Elliott: *Water under the Bridge* (Macmillan, $10.95).

The epigraph to *Water Under the Bridge* is a comment by one of the novel's characters: "Everybody's a failure at four o'clock in the morning in the dark". It is a study of what time does to bright hopes, of promise tarnishing, of the generous finding the unworthy ("people like Maggie with a talent for sincere devotion never seemed to find the right outlet for it").

The novel, set in Sydney, opens with the inauguration of the Harbor Bridge in 1932 and concludes in 1973, but its span is even greater: for instance, it describes the influenza epidemic of 1918 in which the parents of one of the chief characters, Neil Atkins, both died. This long span enables Elliott to let time do its work: he can show what happens to characters without having to fit them into a tight plot. The structure is suitable for his failure-theme although it should be noted that there is a slightly upbeat ending.

The novel lacks the tautness of *Edens Lost,* which is a more unrelieved depiction of failure. *Water Under the Bridge* has a wider scope but also more weaknesses: the letter writer, who every now and again brings events up-to-date, is obviously a device; although conversation is one of Elliott's strengths and he is a dab hand at period details, some of the exchanges sound tinny; Archie Ewers is a caricature of a working-class character such as found only on the pre-war London stage or in Patrick White's novels (Nance Lightfoot in *The Vivisector*).

There may be a further reason that *Water Under the Bridge* has not quite the urgency of *Edens Lost*. It is that Elliott does not come to grips with another cause for the human failures in *Water Under the Bridge:* all the male characters are inadequate.

Neil, the male protagonist, acknowledges his passivity: "Then, after all, in the remarkable way that women always seemed to take victory away from him, he didn't have to make any difficult decision, Carrie did it. Carrie stole his thunder, stole his scene . . ."

Elliott is aware of Neil's inadequacy but he is only one of a series of ineffectual or offensive males. The reader feels Elliott is loading the dice against the possibility of anything other than failure.

Another way of putting it is that Elliott's female characters are more striking than his males. Several in *Water Under the Bridge* are memorable: Carrie, the dissatisfied rich girl with her vain desire to "be transformed by a man"; Shasta, given to savage harangues against Neil who she has raised; the Flagg sisters, Ila and Geraldine, a pathetic pair of Mosman spinsters until Ila marries a Presbyterian minister; Mollie McGhee, a gossip columnist with a "country-girl neighbourly soul" who, like Bea in "Edens Lost", attains Hogarthian plumpness when she misses out on love.

Although the novel is not tightly plotted it is skilfully organised with the strands of the characters' lives criss-crossing over the years. There is a murder early on whose implications are revealed only at the end. And the structure helps Elliott exercise one of his greatest virtues: the magnanimity which enables him to reveal new aspects of characters even when they seem closed in their limitations.

UNDERSTATEMENT, OVERSTATEMENT AND FULL STATEMENT

Graham Rowlands

Peter Murphy: *Glass Doors and other poems* (Angus & Robertson, $1); Viv Kitson: *Life Death and some Words about Them* (Makar Press, $1); Barbara Giles: *Eve Rejects Apple* (Angus & Robertson, $1); John-Peter Horsam: *Knife & Water* (Saturday Centre, $2.50).

It's pleasing for a reviewer who only reviews poetry that is worth reviewing to be able to say that Peter Murphy's poems no longer reveal promise but achievement. Most of this, his second collection, is excellent. Viv Kitson's first book reveals a talented poet of wide range — a poet, however, who still lacks confidence in expressing some of his experiences. Barbara Giles' first book contains some excellent feminist poems. Unfortunately many of her other pieces are marred by didacticism, rhetoric and overstatement.

1

Murphy has developed the strengths of his first book *Escape Victim and other poems* — tough-

minded, deceptively simple, well-made poems where vivid images alternate with flat statements so that human crises are juxtaposed with trivial details or events. Although the occasional uninterpreted image poem from his first book has been replaced by over-explanation at times, it's pleasing to see that he's eliminated the sentimental descriptions that weakened the Twilight section of *Escape Victim* — as well as excising some awkward words that he tended to use too often.

Murphy's typical poem is the commentary-on-dramatized-scene-portrait-or-relationship poem. His interpretation is overtly part of the poem. Readers who dislike authorial intrusion will dislike this art; readers who always want poems to "mean something" will be delighted. "Glass Doors" equates the physical inability of a badly lacerated man to see clearly with the insignificance of his prior life; "Friends" celebrates the value of banality in crises; "Can You Hear?" is a complex man-woman-identity piece using mirrors (which recur throughout the collection); "Accident Victim" and "Driving To Harrietville" are equally impressive. This kind of art is well exemplified by the splendid "Poor Ghost", ending:

> She cannot take much more of this but must
> and so like rabbits which anaesthetize themselves for death
> and meet the blow with a stunned look in their eyes
>
> she prepares herself for the rest of her
> life.

Five poems from *Escape Victim* are reprinted here without acknowledgement. Three fit the above category, "Departure" being one of his best poems. The other two—the superb "Coldness" and "Finding Out"—form another category: the-beads-of-images-on-a-string-of-idea-or-sensation poem. If "Good-Bye" and "I Didn't Mean That" are attempts to develop this kind of poem, however, they fail. Both read too much like miniature essays, the latter being gratuitously repetitive.

Although I usually dislike poetry about language, writers and creative processes, Murphy's book contains poems within this area of concern and they are well controlled. Despite one spectacular failure, there are three equally spectacular successes. "Borers" is embarrassing because it somehow manages to be both precious and bombastic. It's pseudo-gothic. By contrast, "Reader" comes up with the striking notion of a woman about to suicide because she has recognized her own life in a paperback's blurb. "Mirror Frame Game" affirms the proposition that human reality and experience are determined by the words that history imposes on things. Not original. But very well done. "Jane Eyre Extensions" is a variation on the theme of the permanence of art. It's both Peter Murphy's close reading of Charlotte Brontë and his imaginative recreation of the novel:

> No distinguishing the unborn from the dead
>
> while in Jane's quiet reproving eyes
> pianos explode in red soliloquies
> and doors smash out of being
>
> which always a virgin governess in white
> drifting endlessly in a rotting hall
> drawn by vile laughing from her sleep
>
> is forever about to open.

2

Kitson is determined to avoid rhetoric and didacticism, so determined, in fact, that he seems to fear saying anything at all. What the poet *can't* write, *can't* feel, *can't* fathom accounts for some major strengths and weaknesses. A few poems indicate that, at the core of his multiple layers, there's an intense lyricism screaming to get out.

The title poem is about how he can't express what he feels about a woman's car accidentally killing an owl. No poem at all would be the most logical course. Inflicted on the reader, however, are John Dryden and St Augustine on life and death, a "symbolic act of reparation" and the ending:

> No, those are glib, conceited analogies,
> for I clothe that event in a grab-bag
> of inadequate metaphors and myths: shielded
> by our culture, tradition, inadequacies
> from the raw rankness of that emotion,
> and

"Seven Mile Beach" is about playing on the beach, unable to "conjure" Kingsford Smith in 1933, the "scene's distant reality." In "Chant In 5/8" the poet simply enjoys driving a car, any more images constituting "romantic bullshit!" Our response is limited to Kitson's stated inadequacy or refusal to let fly.

This attitude, however, is responsible for some of his best work. "Coming Home" is a clear lyric statement of how he hasn't the faintest notion of what Burke and Wills suffered on the land he jets across. Possible clichés or intended clichés are insignificant in the overall sweep of this superb

page-long evocation of flight, even to the extent of the reader thinking of possible banalities as the best lines, e.g. "Oh! sweet silver arrow through the air!" "Poems Against Responsibility" present the poet as mystery: childhood, face, head, eyeballs, brain and finally the impossible-to-know placenta — all imaged in microscopic texture. In "There'll Always Be" Kitson rejects the country for the city after noting the industrial tractor, stone walls from *earlier* generations, imported rabbits and Hawthorn — a compact, argumentative piece.

There are poems, however, where his refusals mask banality and mediocrity with cleverness. You can almost hear the poet saying "*You* think it's banal but *I* intended it ironically." The plain opening poem is a rejection of cosmic speculation for the interests of lover, dog and garden. But the inclusion of "With Tongue In Cheek" in the title simply will not inflate the poem into a profundity it lacks. Kitson attempts sleight of hand but the hand shows. In "A Poem which must be about something" and "In Imitation of Catullus" the poet has covered himself so carefully with irony, footnotes and self-critical titles that he's sure to have the last laugh on critics. I loathe the poetry of parody, pastiche and potpourri, the in-jokes of listing Catullus, Lesbia, Leda, Vivian, Stephanie, Rae, Paul D., Dante, Ezra Pound (of course), Malcolm Fraser, Robert (there are so many Roberts, aren't there and some are indistinguishable from one another), Jesus, Muses, Horace, Andrew, Dorothy, Merv and Penelope. "Gall & spleen" against the recognisable Fraser is still only an expression of the poet's consciousness that he's letting go "gall & spleen." It's not a satire on our beloved Prime Minister. "About Something" was more available to me, being historical and political. The poet even sinks the boot into Pound and Eliot for being fascists. Again Kitson manages to control his quotations and put them to work in the deceptively funny and simple "Realism, Idealism" — although we meet Merv and Dorothy again in the dedication.

And then, scattered throughout the book — pure lyrics, pure description. "Grooving" expresses the poet listening to the blues, thinking of how he must look to others who can't hear:

> Feet tapping, hands gesticulating, I become
> some solitary, tribal child
> to any outsider's glance.

"Nerves" is a violently physical masturbation experience which allows for the bathos as well as the beauty of the body. "Another Spring" is a celebration of hard physical labor and even Michael Dransfield wouldn't have been ashamed to have written "Chopping Wood" — a poem in praise of living timber. It must have taken Viv Kitson some courage to publish poems so naked, so devoid of built-in, ironic, defence mechanisms. And yet, they seem to have been written with such ease. Perhaps there is a lesson here for the future direction of his art.

3

There's little doubt that Giles' strongest poems are strongly feminist: intellectual, intellectual and emotional, set in scenes or drawn to objects. The following are all excellent poems. Her "Joan of Arc" dies only because she has fought like a man — not because of vision or heresies. "Apparition" visualizes and dramatizes the poet's relation with her mirror image — a superb, concise piece. In the title poem, a rake uses an art gallery for attempted seduction while the poet uses a Dürer for avoidance. "Couple" delineates the progress of a marriage by the positions of the two in bed — stark, simple and succinct. "On A Noh Mask" is a deceptively simple triumph of art and feminism. A book full of poems like it and the other four would be a knockout:

> What loving observation first fashioned
> this woman's face made for a man's wearing
> white   bland   inert lying here till in play of
> light and small movement it changes to flesh
> moving and lovely   yet this tender likeness
> was carved by the hands that constrained her
> to subservience   silence   only the mask's
> discreet smile hints how weakness may rule
> the strong sometimes   and of necessities
> the stiff-necked suppliant defined and had
> without the loss of face
> of the accomplished   flattering   subtle Geisha

Giles' values, as well as being feminist, are humane and humanist. Unfortunately, however, they aren't enough. There are several different kinds of poems. If one kind were predominantly successful, it would be easy to endorse this direction of her work rather than the others. Such, however, isn't the case. Since no self-respecting reviewer should be contented with the obvious response that Giles is a hit-and-miss poet, her less successful poems must be considered carefully. They have, firstly, an over-concern with regular stanza form and rhyme; secondly, inapt voices for particular comments, and thirdly, a lack of liquid ease with imagery.

The appealing title poem is one line too long for a sonnet; the rhetorical and embarrassing "Night Sonnet" is just that — a sonnet. The excellent "Couple" consists of three line stanzas; the trite social observation "Détente" also consists of regular three line stanzas. This evidence, then, remains inconclusive. What isn't inconclusive, however, is the poet's inability to handle rhyme. The corny couplets of "O Oedipus" are suitable only for a pub late at night. The pub yarn "Hereditary Princes" would do better without its fancy-dress language. "Little Child" 's words are unbearably strained to fit the rhyme. And why? Why risk being compared with C. J. Dennis?

Without exception Giles' portraits and social criticism are successful when she allows victims to speak for themselves. "The Dying Bereaved" is moving; "Liberated Lady" 's argot is convincing. But "Endowment", "Fairy Tales", "Détente" and "Little Child" suffer from trite didacticism — particularly ironic given the poet's attack on schooling. I found "The Plane From Greece" intriguing in the context of the book, the poet's need to study Greek in order to understand Greek-Australian identity crises indicating her realization of the problem at the level of psychological insight if not at the level of her own poetic language.

It's doubtful if a person who doesn't think and feel in images can become a poet who automatically manufactures poetic imagery on demand, even her own demand. Any writer's development must be a *development*. It can't be forced. It has to be said, then, that "Getting Down", "Silence", "Moon", "Mysia" and "Better to Bury Than Burn" cry out for vivid, molten, moving, particular images. A magic touch is irretrievably missing. I, for one, am grateful that Barbara Giles' feminist poems have that magic.

4

To say only that Horsam has been influenced by the British kitchen sink school and by the Liverpool poets in particular would be a truism disguising the fact that he also responds to and reacts against the same kind of world with the same kind of attitudes. If he does not have the bitterness of the English working class boy who will remain a working class boy, he has the perky bravado of the working class boy who has been to university. Nearly half of these poems are clear, vivid, witty, lively and well-made. Most enjoyable.

In "Pavements" the cityscape becomes a commercial surrealism. "Why Not" starts with the poet's hope that he will have good luck and ends via an extended gambling metaphor with the poet speculating:

> To have your life at an arm's length
> radius, to revolve but not to move.

In "Agents of the Revolution" the Leftist poet pokes out his tongue at a proud lady, imagining that it is a sten gun removing the top of her ideals. This could be *Billy Liar*. The surreal "High Dancing" is grotesquely good; "From The Show" is splendid:

> today the bus
> is full of actors
> from a play
> i once starred in
> before i was
> where i am now
> (it later folded)
> and
> to make me
> feel at home
> they mouth old lines
> and dull phrases
> and repeat the ancient gestures
> that made the show
> a flop
> in the first place.

Roger McGough and Adrian Henri would be pleased to have written any of these five.

The Liverpudlians are, however, a mixed inheritance. There is often the problem of triviality and ephemerality. I doubt that Horsam will be writing these kinds of poems in middle age.

RESTLESS TRAVELLER

R. M. McConchie

Morris Lurie: *Flying Home* (Outback Press, $8.95).

This moving and largely autobiographical novel concerns an expatriate Australian artist, Leo Axelrod. The conflict between Leo's peregrinations in Europe in his attempts to find home and love, and the effects of an emotional crippling childhood are brought to a telling, if inconclusive climax. Lurie writes well, and without stylistic pretensions. The novel has a heartfelt conviction about it.

Leo travels restlessly, and the sense of dis-

orientation which this arouses is amply supported by the chronology of the story, which is not sequential, but broadly circular. We begin in Greece, go to London, which is back in time, then work back to Greece, and on to Israel, all the time glimpsing the people from Leo's childhood who keep hunting and haunting him. At times, the past is as real and urgent as the present for Leo. In London he falls in love with Marianne, and suggests that they go to Greece, precipitately, *now* — but the trip becomes an increasingly blind rush from the spectres of the past. It also becomes a headlong rush to confront and exorcise them in Israel, and ends in the loss of Marianne.

It is essentially a novel about dispossession. Not only is Leo dispossessed in being an expatriate, but it is gradually revealed that his parents and his grandfather were also dispossessed and that this has much to do with his own wandering. His mother's reminiscences about Bialystock in Poland, and his father's memories of breaking stone to build houses and roads are recalled in Jerusalem when his father's friend Horowitz shows him —

> 'These are the stones. You can still see the marks he made with his hammer. Come and look.'
> I knelt by his side in the street.
> 'Feel!' cried Horowitz.

In Melbourne, Leo's father's friend Popov reminisces endlessly about how good it was in Israel, and finally he returns. Leo's aunt explains succinctly what kind of person he was — " 'Popov! . . . He wanted something, who knows what he wanted? He didn't know himself . . .' " Horowitz's calm satisfaction in Jerusalem, and his ordered surroundings are in stark contrast to Leo's father's unspoken despair in Melbourne which finds odd forms of expression — "He was going to mow the front lawn . . . It was an old machine, a hand mower, rusty and stiff. The blades stuck. The wheels locked. The whole thing jammed up. My father kicked it cursing, breathing hard . . . He made scars, skids, deep welts in the lawn. He didn't care . . ." Dying of cancer, Leo's father shrieked his bitterness at his inlaws — "He called them hypocrites, dirty mouths. worse. He swore. His language was foul. His pain must have been insupportable, but he wouldn't stop. He told them what he thought of them, to their faces . . ." But through all this he did not once speak to his son.

Leo must come to terms with the wretchedness of his dispossessed parents, but the most terrible figure is that of *zaydeh*, his grandfather. While his father is indifferent to him, the hatred of *zaydeh* is open, and forms the most crushing burden of his childhood. His father belittles him and his interests, but *zaydeh* is an unremittingly baleful presence. "Everywhere I felt his cold, bony hand. The sound of his anger filled my head . . . His eyes were everywhere I turned. The dry clicking of his lips . . . There was no escape." Even more gruesome is the obligation imposed on him by his mother which prevents Leo's resentment from being expressed — "He loves you, my mother said." (p. 83) In fact, *zaydeh* does much for Leo that his mother might have done — takes him to and from school, is constantly criticising and correcting his behaviour, prepares food for him. All of it is done with a complete lack of human generosity.

His mother is also an exile, and is constantly reminding herself of Bialystock, her family's home in Poland, which has become for her an idealised fantasy. Her recollections are symbolised by the urn which her mother gave her — "My mother used to polish it every week. She made it shine. It was like gold. But she never used it. It wasn't even in the house . . ." Bialystock had become ". . . that paradise they were always talking about, that paradise they never wanted me to see." His parents had failed to come to grips with their present situation and were locked into a vicious and stunted circuit of emotional responses, which were largely vengeful and self-destructive.

It is also a novel about lovelessness, which is intimately related to the prevailing sense of dispossession. Love is impossible where emotions are so grotesquely crippled. Leo's own first love affair is like this. It is primarily sexual, and it is Gaby's girlishness and adventurousness that appeal to Leo. There is little mutual understanding. "Hey, let's do it the other way," she would say . . . for a second she was a little girl again, small-breasted, demure, and then she opened, she surrounded me, she was all cunt. She swallowed me whole. (p. 58)

In the course of his travels, Leo has other liaisons, but they are no more satisfactory. The crucial point comes when he meets Marianne. Finally he knows what he wants, and must now cope with the demands of a deeply felt personal relationship. It is this demand which comes into violent conflict with the lovelessness of his childhood.

When he and Marianne begin their journey to Greece, Leo finds that they are not alone. They are accompanied by the ghosts of the past, who are there in the car the whole way. They are a

deadening presence which must be exorcised, and it is this need that forces Leo to leave Marianne in Greece and go on to Israel. His own love for Marianne is twisted into unfeeling and egoistic forms; for instance, the abrupt way in which he leaves her at Lindos, or the way that, after a reconciliation, he virtually rapes her in Venice. He is too obsessed, and she cannot break into the area of his obsession.

When Leo arrives in Israel, he finds the same lovelessness. His relatives direct and instruct him, preach to him, lecture him. When he arrives in Jerusalem, on the day of *pesach*, he is greeted by his aunt Rivkeh as the image of his father. "It's a miracle. I can't believe it. Look how he smiles. It's Sam to the *inch*." A little later he makes a journey to see some relatives, David and Ada. They live barricaded in their flat, riven with fear. To the question why have you come? he suddenly realises he has no answer. At last, his aunt Rivkeh tells him about what is virtually his identity. He was named after *zaydeh's* dead son who had died of cholera at eighteen, and had thus been brought up in the presence of *zaydeh's* perpetual "mask of mourning". But an explanation for what he has suffered cannot ameliorate its effects. Going to Israel had revealed the roots of the hate and the lovelessness of his childhood, but its wounds are not to be healed. Marianne, who is the only person who held out hope and real love for Leo, has by this time left him. The ghosts have not been exorcised, merely explained. The novel ends with a brief vision of Marianne and a fleeting glimpse of the possibility of reconciliation. For the first time, Leo is travelling for a purpose which he fully understands.

THE BUSH TEACHER

Rowan Cahill

Cliff Green: *The Sun Is Up* (Primary Education Publishing, $7.95).

School exercises a powerful hold over the imaginative lives of Australians. Even though it may be recalled by the young or old adult with bitterness, hatred, or regret, memories of school are still invoked. Three of the major Australian box-office film successes of recent years have had school themes ("Picnic at Hanging Rock"; "The Devil's Playground"; "The Getting of Wisdom"). John Hindle has suggested one reason for this could be "that nothing much happens to Australians after they quit school".

Cliff Green's collection of sketches, *The Sun Is Up*, is part of this school phenomenon. Subtitled "Memories of Country Schooldays" it deals with aspects of rural life as experienced by a young country-based school teacher in the early 1960s.

Before resigning to write full-time and becoming one of Australia's leading television and film script writers, Cliff Green spent nine years teaching in Victorian rural schools in the Mallee and the Murray and, while the sketches are each only a few hundred words in length, they succeed in capturing richly a diverse range of human experiences and characters, providing insight into both rural Australia and the personality and techniques of a human and gentle teacher. Chords from Green invoke memories of Henry Lawson's "Bush School" sketches, while his approach to children and education in a rural setting are reminiscent of the early Dominie books of the famous progressive educationist A. S. Neill.

The rural world of Green is one of dust, mud, floods, and drought, peopled by easy-going folk and eccentrics who are tolerated provided they "are permanent residents and not nomads like tramps, showmen and school teachers".

Being a rural school teacher is no easy matter. It can have disastrous effects on the unprepared, a theme Kenneth Cook explored in *Wake in Fright*. But Green shows the other side of teaching in the country. He obviously immersed himself in country life, and was an outsider who made an effort to understand the rural people in whose midst he was, who came to terms with the fact that his pupils were just ordinary people, while the schools he taught in "could not boast any sons of fame". A man apart from, yet part of, the life of the area, weaving himself into its lore and gaining a sort of immortality. Realizing this, Green says, "The thought that you are living out a future legend is uncanny, to say the least."

The Sun Is Up deserves to be read for its sensitivity, for its skilful evocation of rural life, and for its non-doctrinaire exploration of what teaching can be.

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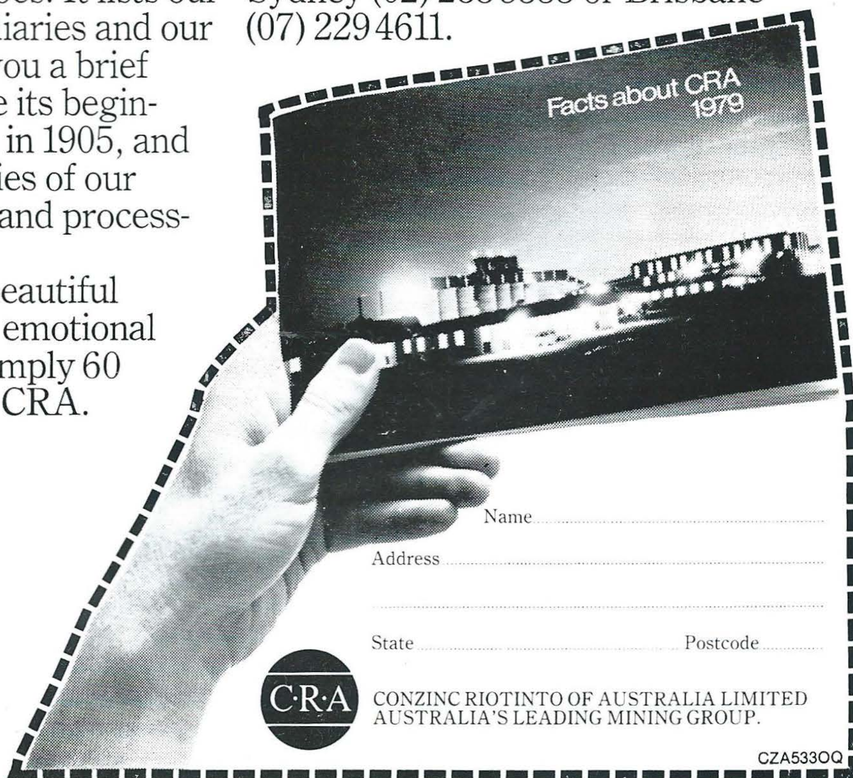

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