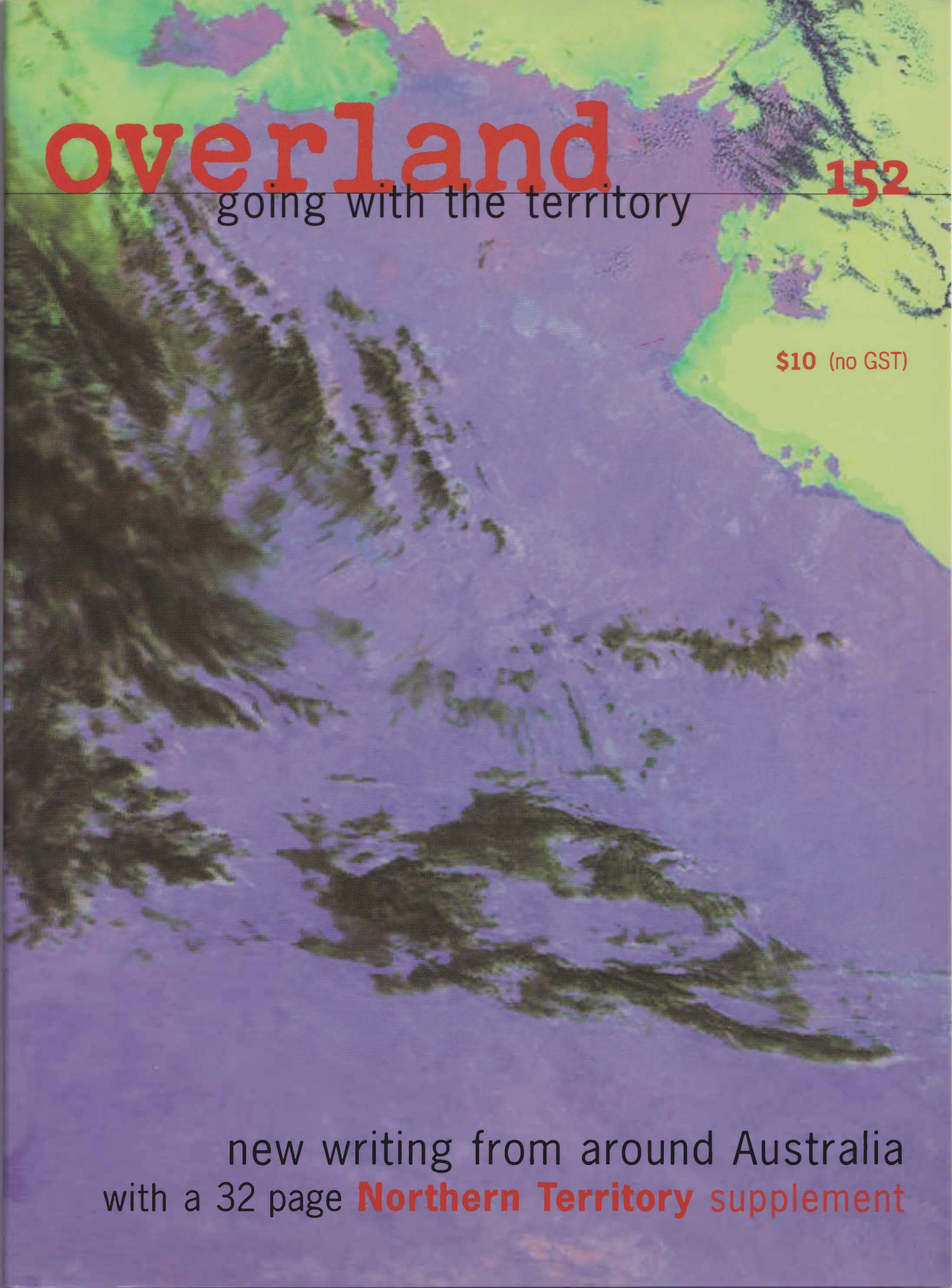

overland

going with the territory

152

$10 (no GST)

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with a 32 page **Northern Territory** supplement

contents

overland

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152
spring 1998
ISSN 0030 7416

overland is a quarterly literary magazine founded in 1954 by Stephen Murray-Smith.

Subscriptions: $34 a year posted to addresses within Australia; pensioners and students $26; life subscription $500; overseas $70. Payment may be made by Mastercard, Visa or Bankcard.

All correspondence: PO Box 14146 MCMC, Melbourne Vic 8001, Australia.
Phone 03 9687 9785
Fax 03 9687 5918
e-mail: overland@vut.edu.au
Home page: http://dingo.vut.edu.au/~arts/cals/overland/overland.html

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PUBLISHER: O L Society Limited, 361 Pigdon Street, North Carlton 3054, incorporated in Victoria, ACN 007 402 673

TYPESET BY SKUNK

PRINTING: Australian Print Group, Maryborough. ISSN 0030 7416

DISTRIBUTION: AWOL, Sydney.

overland has been assisted by the Federal Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. *overland* acknowledges the financial support of the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria – Department of Premier and Cabinet. *overland* gratefully acknowledges the facility support of Victoria University of Technology and the financial support of its Department of Communication, Language & Cultural Studies.

The *overland* index is published with the spring issue every year.
overland is indexed in APAIS, AUSLIT, *Australian Literary Studies* bibliography, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* bibliography.

overland is available in microfilm and microfiche from University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106, USA.

editorial

Going with the Territory

THIS ISSUE OF *OVERLAND* goes with the Territory. As part of our ongoing project of expanding *overland*'s range, content and readership we have collaborated with Marian Devitt and other staff at the Northern Territory Writers' Centre to present a supplement of some of the best new writing emerging in the Northern Territory. Aside from the wonderful quality of the work, it is also pleasing to hear a gathering of non-metropolitan voices which promotes and celebrates Australia's cultural diversity and suggests the centrality of Aboriginal cultural strength to Australia's future. It is a reminder to us all that racism, intolerance and right-wing mantras do not automatically go with any given territory.

Regionalism is emerging as a significant political issue in contemporary Australian politics. In the public pronouncements of some of the more prominent right-wing groups and individuals, the necessary economic, industrial and cultural differences between the city and the bush, the metropolitan and the rural, are being turned into bases of political antagonism and division along regional lines. For the far right, Aboriginal cultural expression and Australia's cultural diversity are taken to be causes of economic hardship rather than as things we can value in coming to terms with the real sources of economic and political exploitation.

We hope *overland* will continue to be an important forum for new, diverse and dissenting regional voices. We also hope, in the future, to give other groups of regional writers the chance to celebrate their literary achievements collectively. For now, we present the work of Northern Territory writers and wish them good luck in the literary tracks they travel.

Ian Syson

John McLaren

Fear and Loathing in the South China Seas

The challenge of nationalism in Australia and Southeast Asia

As I write, the smoke of forest fires is blanketing great parts of Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. These fires, scarcely reported in our press and even less internationally, have already been responsible for the crash of an airliner and the deaths of its passengers, and for uncounted cases of discomfort, illness and death among the citizens of the affected areas. They have also added measurably to the atmospheric greenhouse effects that our present, and hopefully temporary, federal government prefers to ignore. They symbolize the twentieth century as aptly as the Holocaust, the atom bomb or the Berlin Wall. They are the direct product of the greed and corruption that characterize the new world order that has arisen from the shards of colonialism. The nation states that have arisen in this order either remain clients of imperial governments and transnational companies, or have descended into anarchy. In both cases, their ruling elites hold power by appealing to national traditions while serving personal ambitions. In Asia, the ideology devised to protect their power is misrepresented as traditional Asian values. In Australia, similar rapacity and disregard for the land and its people is cloaked in the rhetoric of a divisive and exclusive nationalism that uses an appeal to a falsified past as a means of generating fear in the present.

In Australia, white settlement has been characterized not so much by drama as by harshness and disappointment. When seen through the eyes of the settlers, it is also a tale of remarkable endurance and achievement, although these are shaded by the price paid. The settlement of the land has been accompanied by the degradation and destruction of the environment. The degree of tolerance and collective identity we have reached depends on an ironic secularism that when threatened can easily give way to prejudice and bitter racism. Generations of immigrants and visitors from Asia, beginning with the Chinese in the 1830s, have been victims of this intolerance, which has also extended to later waves of immigrants from Europe. The greatest victims have, however, been the Aborigines, whose treatment we are only now beginning to recognize. From their point of view, the history of white settlement has been one of dispossession, betrayal and brutality.

Allan Patience had discerned in Australia's history a "hard culture", characterized by masculinity and secularism, and a consequent brutality towards the land and to any people perceived as different. This culture, hostile to things of the mind and spirit, has made difficult the work of writers who have sought to take imaginative possession of the land through their words. Marcus Clarke portrayed the beginnings of a new society closed by the physical and mental barbarity of the convict system; Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton wrote of people driven into exile or madness by the harshness of the land; Henry Handel Richardson dissected the repressions of a society that, caught in a cycle of boom and bust produced by its own destructive energies, paid no heed to the gentler virtues of home and nurture. John Docker has described this view of Australian literary history as "the gloom thesis", which may be related to what the present Prime Minister has called "black armband" history. Harry Heseltine more analytically suggests that the Australian writer has been trapped by "the tyranny of an uncertain self" that arises from the historical predicament of being thrust "as it were into a cultural vacuum, without the support of a sanctioned tradition, [so that] his central task became one of authenticating his own uncertain self in an unfamiliar world". Heseltine argues that recent Australian writers, particularly Patrick White, have been able to escape this tyranny and "make of the divided self the subject and support of a complex, sophisticated and

penetrating art."[1] However this may be in relation to their art, it is my contention that the work of our writers continues to show a society divided from its own past and so incapable of relating either to its neighbours or to its own inner being. I would describe this not so much as a hard culture as a fearful culture, frightened of itself and of others.

The novels of Henry Handel Richardson, Xavier Herbert and Brian Penton, in particular, portray a culture that, by denying the possibilities of gentleness and harmony, is perpetually exiled from its own land. More recent illustrations of this denial can be found in the work of such writers as Tim Winton, James McQueen and David Ireland – not to mention the current generation of grunge realists. In all of their writings, the masculine drive to dominate destroys the possibility of belonging, which requires the feminine capacity for making a home. McQueen, in *Hook's Mountain*, takes as his hero the outsider, the loner who eventually can defend the mountain he loves only by taking to the bush with the weapons of the people who would destroy it. Winton writes of heroes who eventually learn to surrender their violence to women, children or religion, represented frequently by the element of the ocean waters which dissolves their individuality. Ireland most memorably and unforgivingly describes the culture of brutality in *The Glass Canoe*, where life revolves around the Southern Cross, the pub that provides refuge for the urban tribes that live around it. In the chapter 'My People', the narrator draws an explicit parallel between these lives and the story of humankind:

> First they were boys, primitive hunters of fruit and adventure . . .
>
> Teenaged, they became apprenticed to learn the pastoral world of snorting, grunting, purring machines, . . . and grew among the flocks . . . of workers whose labour and lives were farmed by the powerful . . . The horizon had shrunk.
>
> A few years more and a job displaced them, now part of the adult herd, to the refinement of the factory-city . . . amongst the unattainable riches of civilisation . . . The horizon was work, pub, races.

In Australia, white settlement has been characterized not so much by drama as by harshness and disappointment.

But the mateship of the bar uneasily contains the violence suppressed by the exigencies of work. The schooner of beer, the 'glass canoe' of the title, does not take its passengers away from the frustrations of their lives. Pub disputes are customarily settled by fists, boots or weapons, the chronicler of pub life is disposed of in a barrel, and the pub itself is eventually destroyed in a fight with the tribe from a neighbouring pub. As an image of Australia, the illusory freedom of the pub proves to be a prison that suppresses the instincts it promises to nurture. Its confines breed distrust of outsiders and of any insiders perceived as different. As an image of modernism, the novel shows the tribes still dispossessed of their lands by the forces that promised liberation.

Australian writing does however have gentler images of settlement and its promises fulfilled. Alan Marshall's autobiography, *I Can Jump Puddles*, stands as a celebration not only of a boy's triumph over polio but as a realization of the companionate possibilities of a country town. In the later stories, collected in *Hammers over the Anvil*, Marshall returns to the time and place of his youth to reveal the underside of rural life, the violence and bigotry that ruptures the dream of harmony. Yet he still shows these elements of life through the eyes of the childhood narrator and his friend, who bring to the events an understanding and tolerance that is shown by few of the adults. This childhood perspective – so different from the egotistic anarchy of Norman Lindsay's juveniles – suggests that the boys, not the adults, hold a truth about Australian society that cannot be suppressed by the shortcomings of individuals. Yet, unwittingly, this also suggests that Australian culture remains in a state of immaturity, rejecting evil as something external and individual, able to contaminate others but not ourselves. This applies also to the work of Marshall's friend and contemporary, John Morrison, whose stories of work on the waterfront and in the suburbs show evil in the form of both class and family oppression, and portray the terror as well as the comfort of solidarity. Morrison finds strength in compassion, whether for a child, a fellow worker or a domestic partner. Lack of compassion distorts the personality, driving the individual, male or female, outside the bounds of society. Yet although Morrison

shows how these distortions reflect and produce a society divided by class and domestic power, he does not portray the inwardly divided individual. Evil remains external, a product of an oppressive system and malignant individuals, not a collective responsibility, at once collective and individual.

Although Australian poets have similarly tempered the story of a harsh country with visions of harmony and fulfilment. David Campbell's poetry embodies the relaxed sprawl of a man completely at home in the countryside. Judith Wright achieves a deeply spiritual relationship to land and nature. Les Murray finds in the bush a quality that heals the divisions of settlement and the alienation of the cities. Yet these visions are, in each case, shadowed by irresolution, by a failure at the heart of the intimacy. Campbell tends to dissolve suffering, by both blacks and whites, in a cycle of love and death that stretches back to classical mythology. Murray, despite his celebration of a bond with the land that is shared by both settlers and blacks, linked by what he calls "the human-hair thread", betrays in his most ambitious work an uneasiness about the strength of this bond. His verse-novel, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, starts in the relaxed style of folklore, but finishes with the white boys having to undergo weird blood-rites at the hands of a gothic Aboriginal spirit before they can claim their share in the land. But it is above all Wright who, from her early 'Bora Ring', has been aware of the Aboriginal absence from the white story.

Judith Wright performs for us the role of the mariner, keeping us from celebrations by reminding us of a guilt in which she acknowledges her own complicity.

This recognition deepens in Wright's later work to the realization that the absence is not only from the landscape, but from the settlers themselves. Like Campbell, Wright is descended from the pioneering generations whose lives provide the source for Franklin's and Penton's fiction. The change in her understanding is dramatized in the distinction between the two prose works that deal with these forebears. The first, *Generations of Men*, is an affectionate story of their coming to this land, and of the struggle, particularly by the women, it took to make it their own. The second, *The Cry for the Dead*, published twenty-two years later, puts the Aborigines in the story, so changing it from an heroic epic of endurance to a tragic tale of dispossession, brutality and bloodshed. The land hunger of the new settlers led them, with a few notable exceptions, to exclude Aborigines from their newly seized runs. Driven by fear, they forced the government to recruit a force of Native Police, who in turn joined with the squatters in both retaliatory and pre-emptive killings of the Aborigines. The Aborigines, forbidden to gather for ceremonial or social purposes, excluded from their lands and often deprived of the weapons they needed to hunt for game in the scrubs that remained to them, fought back, adding to the squatters' fears. The story is both common and sadly familiar, but Wright identifies its central element as the refusal of the whites to recognize the Aborigines as humans who would respond in the same way as any others to being deprived of all they had known and cherished. As one of the persecutors, the Crown Commissioner William Wiseman, wrote, "not even the savage of Australia was 'so utterly devoid of courage and pride as to yield without a struggle that country . . . on which he is used to obtain his food, and to which he is undoubtedly attached'." (p. 85) These words were not, however, intended to arouse compassion, but as a warning to settlers who did not accept that to treat the Aborigines with kindness was to be the first to suffer from pillage.

For Wright, the refusal to acknowledge the humanity of the Aborigines is one with the settlers' ignorance of the land they exploited. Both have led to destruction, and consequently to an alienation of the settlers from the land, an inability to put down roots. Yet in her later poetry she has found a way forward based on an acceptance of the past and a yielding to the landscape, rather than on an attempt to impose our desires on either. In her 1985 sequence, 'For a Pastoral Family', she sees both the persistence and the failure of her family's endeavours. It is written with love, as she writes of:

Blue early mist in the valley. Apricots
bowing the orchard-trees, flushed red with
summer,
loading bronze-plaqued branches;
our teeth in those sweet buttock-curves . . .

it was well, being young and simple,
letting the horses canter home together.

This affection is complicated by her awareness of the ironies of a history that builds contentment on violence and then dispossesses the dispossessors. The opening to this sequence compounds the pleasures of the present with the blindness to the circumstances of their foundation and the bewilderment of the successors of the pioneers to their own dispossession:

Well, there are luxuries still,
including pastoral silence, miles of slope and hill,
the cautious politeness of bankers. These are owed
to the forerunners, men and women
who took over as by right a century and a half
in an ancient difficult bush. And after all,
the previous owners put up little fight,
did not believe in ownership, and so were scarcely
human.

(*Selected Poems*)

The century and a half of occupation would be little enough against the timeless stretch of the "ancient" bush, were it not for that further adjective, "difficult". Something, the poem suggests, is due to those who endured such difficulty to make the land serve their purpose. Yet the final lines of the stanza, written at the same period that the author was chronicling the terrible record of the resistance and dispossession of the Aborigines, serve also as a judgement on a nation that, by refusing to acknowledge the cost of its achievements, fails to recognize the humanity of those on whose blood these achievements were built. Instead of legitimate possession of the land, we are left with a polite avoidance of the truth of both history and human nature. As Wright comments on her family at prayer:

That God approved was obvious,
Most of our ventures were prosperous.
As for Dies Irae
we would deal with that when we came to it.

A complacent decency blinds us to both the inner and the external forces of destruction. Wright herself finds comfort in the oppositions of a landscape that heals and language that connects.

This place's quality is not its former nature
but a struggle to heal itself after many wounds.
... In a burned out summer, I try to see without
words
as they do. But I live through a web of language.

('The Shadow of Fire')

Through language, which for Wright includes science and history as well as poetry, we can comprehend the truth and mystery of the world we inhabit, and so become fully human. A trust in language can lead us to the realization expressed in the closing line of this sequence, that we "are all of us born of fire, possessed by darkness". As a corollary, a failure to trust language, the attempt to avoid the discomfiting facts of our lives, can only lead to the kind of nightmare apparition we find in Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', where the figure of Life-in-Death comes to possess the mariner's soul.

Although Bernard Smith has shown us how Coleridge's poem was derived in part from accounts of Cook's second voyage to the Pacific, there is no reason to believe that this image has any direct factual counterpart.[2] It is however significant that it arises in the course of Coleridge's imaginative reconstruction of an incursion by Europeans into a world entirely new to them. The core of the poem is the slaying of the albatross, and the guilt, punishment and expiation of the killer. In its aspect as an episode in the imperial exploitation of new worlds, this can be taken as a metaphor for the process of white settlement in Australia. Judith Wright performs for us the role of the mariner, keeping us from celebrations by reminding us of a guilt in which she acknowledges her own complicity. Until we do likewise, we remain enmired in our guilty past.

Wright closes *The Cry for the Dead* with an elegy to the people her family displaced, and above whose descendants, still subject to punitive white laws, "the cliffs and ravines of Expedition Ranges perhaps still shelter, in caves and overhangs, the crumbling bones of those who were pursued there more than a century ago, and a few fading and eroding scratches and stains of old stencilled hands and figures may remain as the last memorials of the Wadja and their northern neighbours."(p. 280) This image of ancient signs now deprived of the watchers that gave them meaning also haunts fiction of settlement by Randolph Stow and David Malouf.

In *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, the boy, Rob, grows up in a quiet country surrounded by war. The signs of this violence that threatens his family security are, in the present of the novel, the Japanese and, from the past, the reminders of the convict labourers who built the house and the Aborigines who were displaced to allow its building. In Malouf's *Harland's Half Acre*, the children play around a place made haunted by their father's stories, a platform of rock where Aboriginal carvings lie "stranded by time and sun in spare outline". There:

> Stepping back into the lives of those first creators, they would crawl about, retracing the lines with a forefinger, clearing out leaf-grist, pollen, fragments of bark, the husks of dead insects; or would themselves take a knife and scrape, so that figures only vaguely discernible would . . . climb back to the surface and surprise them.

But between their play and the past they retrace lies the violent breach that had marked their family's irruption, like that of the Wrights, into this new land. "First, the overland trek from somewhere beyond Tamworth into an unsettled area that was immediately, to the three brothers, so much like home." And, as Malouf comments, "so much like a place they had never laid eyes on but whose lakes and greenness were original in their minds." Then, possession "was easy. One bloody brief encounter made official with white man's law."(p. 30) The settlers can see only an imagined homeland, in which the Aborigines have no place. The culture derived from Europe can see natives only as noble savages or decadent remnants, who in neither case can play a part in history. Their destruction is therefore as acceptable and lawful as it is inevitable. They must be removed to allow the grand narrative of social progress and individual fulfilment to continue.

But, as Malouf shows, physical occupation of the land does not of itself convey either permanency or imaginative possession. In seven lines of his narrative, and one generation of their history, the Harlands lose their property and are reduced to day-labourers. The remainder of the narrative tells of how Frank Harland travels through time and space until he is able to paint the canvases that make a tiny part of the land truly his own. To possess this land he has also, however, to understand the world from which the Europeans came, but from which their descendants have cut themselves off in a denial that parallels their denial of their violence towards the Aborigines. Europe is symbolized in the figure of Knack, the dealer whose music, in which Harland recognizes "something compelling . . . which led to strength and sunlight", also brings the violence of war and suicide. Centrally, however, the repressed violence is symbolized by the dark space beneath the Queensland house,

> where under-the-house was another and always present dimension, a layer of air between lighted rooms and the damp earth: a place of early fears, secrets, childhood experiments, whispers . . . It was darkness domesticated, a part of local reality, the downside of things . . . that underworld was full of threats.

It is in this place of fear that Harland's nephew Gerald hangs himself, so destroying the possibility that there will be any heir to the family's dreams, but at the same time freeing Harland for his final burst of creativity. To accommodate this urge he has to leave the house, living almost without shelter near the ocean, allowing no barriers to come between him and his painting of the land and his people. He has taken into himself history and place, the knowledge of others in himself, and is able finally to face the truth without despair.

Although this representative family of Australian writing provides evidence of our hard culture, it does not suggest that this is a satisfactory way to characterize the whole of our culture. Nor is the so-called gloom thesis sufficient. There are too many contradictions. Despite the harshness, cheerfulness keeps breaking through. Yet I think it is fair to say that it is a culture of avoidance, a culture that is reluctant to acknowledge evil while still affirming the positive values of human existence. The writers I have discussed, like all artists, face these truths, but their works are peopled with characters who are unable to do so. Like the narrator's Aunt Roo, in *Harland's Half Acre*, they don't want to know what is wrong, let alone do anything about changing it. "I've told you years ago, pet, those people are no good . . . concerned with nothing but pulling the world down, they're never satisfied. And in a country like this, where we have *everything*!" In some ways, this is the precise attitude of Judith Wright's relatives, who insist that

the "really deplorable deeds / had happened out of our sight, allowing us innocence". But, as Jessica Anderson has pointed out, innocence is itself dangerous, destroying what it cannot understand. In a society characterized by the contradictions of "its rawness and weak gentility, its innocence and deep deceptions", the domestic tyrants, heirs of a hard culture of dominance, are excused, while their victims are condemned for the "crime of being different". (*Tirra Lirra by the River*, p. 83) This condemnation, while exalting the kind of family values espoused by John Howard, leads to the assumption that anything important happens elsewhere, and thus perpetuates the notion of Australia as a second-class, derivative society, incapable of managing its own destiny. This leads to the cultural cringe that makes us seek powerful foreign sponsors while refusing to take a stand against our neighbours on any basic human values. Rather than recognizing difference within a common set of values, we follow an imperialist tradition in assigning them to a category of difference that is not subject to the values we wish to see applied to ourselves. Thus the standards we applied to the Aborigines in order to seize their lands become a means both of separating us from our neighbourhood and of excluding anyone within our own community who dares to be different.

The culture derived from Europe can see natives only as noble savages or decadent remnants, who in neither case can play a part in history.

The emphasis on ethnic and cultural differences enables us to ignore the real divisions in the Australian community brought about by class power. The displacement of the Aborigines from the land turned them into a rural proletariat which produced the wealth of the pastoral aristocrats who have now dispensed with their services and are employing the myth of the farmer as battler to justify their grab for the last of the lands they have not succeeded in fully alienating to their own purposes. Similarly, migrants have built the capital works that sustain our cities and our inland farmers, and continue to supply much of the labour for our factories and service industries. By identifying the poverty and social disruption of Aboriginal and migrant groups as the cause rather than the consequence of our current economic problems, reactionary polemicists are able to divert attention from the real source of these problems in a global economy that is redistributing wealth from the poor to the rich at an unprecedented rate, and in the retreat of the Australian polity from its earlier egalitarian ideals.

The dual process of social separation and exclusion will be overcome by recognizing the causes. By repressing our own past, the racial and class history of Australian settlement and of the countries from which the settlers came, and replacing it with stories of triumphal nationalism, we repress our own human potential. Gillian Bouras, in her accounts of her reverse migration, her courageous but doomed struggle to become a part of the peasant culture of her husband's Peloponesian village, shows the gap that we can never cross to a past that was lost when we became literate. But her books also succeed in acknowledging that past that we share even if we can no longer live it. She may never have been able to gain acceptance from her mother-in-law, or even to gain respect for her attempts to understand and enter into the village life, but she did succeed in translating that oral tradition into words on the page, so that it can become a part of our lives as we can never become a part of it. Fotini Epanomitis brings the same culture alive from the inside, returning imaginatively to the myths and legendary history of her ancestral Greek village and so making it a part of our world. Beth Yahp does the same for the Malaysian Chinese, bringing their uprooted traditions into direct conflict with the urbanizing and modernizing present. These writers, by taking us into specific European and Asian cultures, enlarge the meaning of our own culture, both strengthening our understanding of its sources and undermining its imposed unity. As we discover these mythological elements in our own community, these traces of different pasts that continue living in the present, we enhance our capacity to recognize the cultural understandings that underpin the distinctive Aboriginal relationship to the land that we occupy.

But if we are to understand ourselves and our place in this land we need also to learn from the efforts of our neighbours to construct nations within the boundaries that they, like us, have inherited from the regimes of imperialism. These boundaries encompass people different in religion, language, culture and his-

tory, united only by a common experience of colonialism. In the Philippines, this colonialism has successively embraced Spanish rule, characterized by a clerical rule that imposed Catholicism on most of the population and established a client class who simultaneously suppressed the native peoples and sought their own independence from Spain, and an American rule that imposed the forms of democracy without shifting the power of the former ruling families. The current struggle for liberation is therefore both against the power of the *ilustrados* and between the central government and those who have retained an ancestral loyalty to Islam. In Malaysia and Singapore, formerly part of the British Empire but not single colonies, the effort of nation building has to contend with both ethnic and religious differences between the native peoples and immigrant communities, and with the class distinctions produced by groups who came originally to provide labour for the cities and plantations, and who under colonial rule came to occupy distinct niches in the economy. Nation building in Malaysia, as a consequence, has concentrated on restoring the power of the native Malay people, and has promoted a form of monoculturalism which, although intended to abolish ethnic differences, is more likely to exacerbate them because it ignores the class boundaries that operate through them. In Singapore, by contrast, an official policy of multiculturalism endeavours to accommodate difference, but again at the cost of ignoring the divisions of class. Whereas in the Philippines, an ideology of liberty allows powerful individuals to ignore any advance towards equality, in Malaysia and Singapore ideologies of equality ignore class and inhibit freedom.

F. Sionil José's novels, which place the Philippines at the centre of world history as its people struggle to build a nation, encompass the victims of modernism: the peasants who continue to produce the wealth that sustains the globe-trotting elite, the dispossessed who fill the slums of Manila, and the emigrants who constitute a global diaspora of labour. In Malaysia, K.S. Maniam shows the deracination and exclusion of the members of the Indian community which was originally brought to Malaya to work the plantations, and Catherine Suchen Lim and Shirley Geoklin Lim explore the parallel circumstances of the Malaysian Chinese, both at home and abroad. Gopal Baratham shows the dark underside of cruelty and persecution that underpins the antiseptic commercialism of Singapore. All these writers are engaged in questioning their national ideologies, of revealing the human costs of modernization and globalization, and of making room within their nations for those who are excluded by the sometimes genteel, often barbaric practices of government and industry.

The emphasis on ethnic and cultural differences enables us to ignore the real divisions in the Australian community brought about by class power.

The people these novelists write about are those recently being choked by the smoke of burning forests, and now condemned to further years of poverty by the collapse of speculation on stocks and land. Theirs is the world we share, and their search for freedom, for a place where they can be at home with themselves, is one that can teach us much about our own struggle to find security in a threatening world. We have at least as much to learn from the writings of these countries as we do from the metropolitan writers of Europe or the United States. Their efforts to find a place for the suppressed, the different and the dispossessed within their nation states point the way to an open nationalism built on a recognition of differences and a sharing of economic and cultural resources rather than on separation and exclusion. Their work, while demonstrating that there are different Asian cultures, shows how these cultures do not produce distinct Asian values, but rather give distinctive form to universal needs to belong, to be recognized, to find individual and communal independence. Although we cannot speak for their people, by listening to their writers we can enlarge our own understanding of human potential and of our responsibilities to others. Along with the writers from our own country, they can help us to come to terms with our colonial past, to make ourselves at home in our land and its present, and to overcome our fears for the future. In the words of the late Stephen Murray-Smith, we have a particular responsibility for this country. It happens also that we live at a time when this responsibility is particularly urgent, and extends to a responsibility for our actions in the world we share with our immediate neighbours. An honest and unsentimental ap-

praisal of our cultural traditions and the cultures of our neighbours can give us the understanding and courage we need to meet this responsibility.

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John McLaren is a consultant editor of overland. *This is a transcript of his valedictory lecture at Victoria University.*

Wes Placek

Teri Merlyn

Eric Lambert 1918–1966: A Retrieval

THOUGH WE NEVER MET, he looms large in my childhood memories of what was wonderful in the world. Whatever it was that went between Eric and my mother has now gone to the grave with them both. Yet I cannot help but wonder why it was that she never spoke of him in the present tense. I have since discovered that he was alive well into my seventeenth year. She sparked my imagination with tales of his war deeds and literary accomplishments and, it seemed, loved him dearly, though her manner indicated a distance that I had equated with death. Was it because he was a Communist and she, with her maternally inherited snobbery, an anglophile and blue-blood fan of Menzies? Being a Communist wasn't terribly popular with ardent royalists like my mother in those days.

Yet for all that, she loved him and, if given the chance, I would have loved him too. He is the one relative with whom I might have felt a sense of true belonging. I share his passionate, idealistic and headstrong nature, the love and concern for animals, the powerful sense of justice, and the at times overwhelming outrage at its denial, the love of natural environments, particularly the sea, the great enjoyment of good company and conversation, frequently fuelled by alcohol, and the intense desire to make the world a better place. My mother and I used to play a game: "Let's write a book, just like your uncle Eric, and maybe one day you will be a famous author, just like him." And now, at forty-eight (the age at which he died), I am researching his contribution to Australian radical literature. I also plan to write a play focusing on the relationship with Frank Hardy and an historical novel for adolescents. Here, I wish to tell what I have learned so far of Eric Lambert's life.

He was born in England to Marion and Frank Lambert, becoming an Australian citizen at one year old when the Lamberts migrated, along with thousands of others, from a cramped and clouded England to the colony 'down-under' for a life in the sun. The little family soon found a cosy, modest home at the idyllic seaside Sydney suburb of Manly. Sister Betty followed as Frank settled into his job as salesman in a city shoe store. Marion grew increasingly neurotic, facing the fact that Frank's occupation meant she would not see the gilt-edged invitation cards to society events she felt her due privilege as a questionably claimed relation to English aristocracy. Eric's mother was one of 'those' mothers. My mother, who became one of 'those' mothers too, often spoke, with some understandable pique, of how adored Eric was and how ignored she felt; though she never begrudged but shared in Marion's idolization of him. Brother Ron, being a boy, had some of the limelight but for Betty, the youngest and female to boot, her role was that of service in the shadow of the high hopes held for Eric. In Eric Marion saw her entree to society restored. Her bright, beautiful boy would return to her the yearned-for status. How tricky that legacy for an impressionable child born into a financially vulnerable family. An inculcated sense of obligation and entitlement to achieve great things combined with uncertain means. No wonder then in later life, despite his avowed egalitarianism, toes were sometimes trodden upon when his sense of self worth overrode theirs or he seemed to feel that their generosity was his due reward.

While Marion's increasingly neurotic snobbery may have been irksome at times, he had what could be seen as an idyllic childhood. An active member of Manly Junior Life Saving Club, a passion for cricket, a small yacht co-owned and sailed with brother Ron on the ever-beautiful Sydney Harbour, and long rambles with Ron and Frank in the surrounding bushland where he developed a particular love of the wild orchids growing there. In all, happy times, though I

think poor Betty at home at the mercy of Marion's whims got the worst of it, as many girls of that generation did. And Eric looked likely to fulfil Marion's dreams. A 'golden child', at the end of primary school he was granted the much-coveted access to the prestigious Sydney Boys' High (SBH). But these were also the early days of the Depression and Frank, already having lost his job some time before, like so many others had taken to 'the wallaby' with Ron in search of work, sending home what little they could earn. On Marion's insistence, and with his obvious scholastic aptitude, Eric had stayed on at school. Despite the family's parlous financial state Marion had proceeded with the enrolment to SBH. Frank and Ron returned to find their hard-earned pennies going to fund the expensive uniform and travel that SBH attendance required. Much to Marion's chagrin, and his deep and lasting regret, Eric was sent instead to Manly High where he reputedly achieved Dux status. Well, there is some uncertainty in my research here, as one report has him gaining the leaving certificate as Dux while Zoe O'Leary's biography has him not successful in getting into the air force for the lack of the intermediate certificate. Either way, the outbreak of the Second World War finds Eric working in a garage.

The war saw young men go off with noble adventure clamouring in their ears and come back shocked to the core of their being. Eric's war diaries (the ones I have seen) show only a first stumbling step towards the litterateur he became. I don't know what has become of some that Zoe O'Leary cites in her biography, *The Desolate Market* (1974), as being in the possession of Eric's first wife Joyce. Those in the La Trobe files give only glimpses of his later occupation: a few verbal sketches which later appear fleshed out in the first novel *Twenty Thousand Thieves* (1951), some poetry, trying to make aesthetic sense of the nightmare being experienced, but very patchy in form and content. O'Leary suggests that Eric had some idea of a novel and was writing more prolifically at this time but I fear that the missing diaries are gone for good. In those remaining Eric refers to "this thing" a number of times, as if in a private war of considerable angst. But men weren't allowed to confess to such weaknesses then, and perhaps these diaries were the only place he could express such an emotion; even then he was guarded. This might explain that distance felt from the other men, a common phenomenon of the sensitive male in the emotionally truncated masculine world of war. Perhaps he was not as alone as he thought. It was a time for great shows of bravado at which others may have just been more convincing.

Unfortunately time is running out for those comrades and my own limited resources mean that the gaps in my knowledge of this period may have to remain. I do know that the main theatre of war for Eric was the Middle East (27 December 1940–27 February 1943) and later New Guinea (28 July 1943–19 March 1944) in active service for most of that time with the 2nd/2 Machine Gun, Infantry Battalion 2/15 as a radio signaller. I can imagine that there was little joy to be had and what came his way was to be savoured. The moments of heroism, the irony and the humour, the loyalty and companionship, all are thrown into high relief in such circumstances. No wonder the returned servicemen treasured these war memories. We callow 'baby boomers' didn't understand this as we condemned them for thronging to the Anzac bar with mates to relive those high points. We thought they were glorifying war when what they were glorifying was the human spirit triumphing over evil.

Eric's war novels, *Twenty Thousand Thieves* (*TTT*) set in the Middle East (now into its eleventh print with Penguin Australia), *The Veterans* (1954) of the war in New Guinea, *The Dark Backward* (1956) in Malaya and *And Glory Thrown In* tell of a profound personal sensibility and a sensitivity to his comrades' experiences in these living hells; with, I might add, some perceptive compassion for the natives of those lands. I have read archival letters from returned soldiers that swear to the veracity of Eric's portrayal of 'their war'. If there was any legacy of Marion's class pretensions, it fast came up against the reality of the class system endemic in the army, whereby commissioned officers generally came from privileged backgrounds with ability a poor second in their qualifications; and the non-coms suffered the results. Any aspirations Eric might have had took a nosedive with these observations and he threw his lot in with his peers. If the protagonist Dick, in *TTT*, is autobiographical, which I am inclined to think he is, Eric preferred the honesty and more readily acknowledged flaws of his comrades, resisting the temptations of promotion beyond corporal until enlistment in the post-war mopping-up operations when, on 21 September 1945, he was promoted to sergeant.

It is doubtful that Eric truly wished for anonymity. His abilities and already extensive reading must

have made him stand out. The end of the war finds Eric with some experience in adult education, gained from delivering lectures on "world affairs, literature and art"[1] during service, and then attached to the Army Education team sent to Malaya and Singapore. I have as yet found no record of any time spent in Malaya, though it is possible there was a visit of some duration since there is a clear understanding of the situation of Malaysian culture and politics and some rather prophetic reflections on their possible outcome in *The Dark Backward*. He did go to Singapore in the 2nd Aust. Recpt. Group, AIF Singapore sent to release and begin the rehabilitation of POWs there. Despite his own terrible experience of war, the condition of the Singapore POWs obviously deeply moved him and in an undated letter from Singapore to Frank and Connie (his second wife) Eric says:

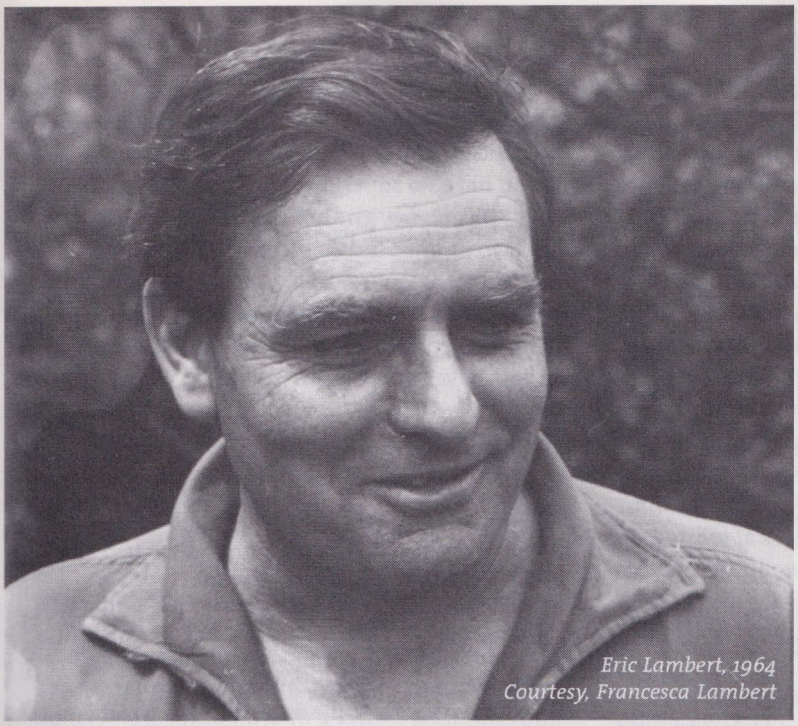
> when men have suffered this much perhaps they do not believe in luck any more but through all the beatings and the humiliations the spirit is bright and sharp as a new needle and somehow there is hope as well.

If Eric was not particularly 'political' before, the war experience had brought his awareness of class conflict and the omnipresent dangers of fascism to a new level. He was already well on the socialist path and easy pickings when he met Frank Hardy at a 1947 'cottage lecture'. Hardy subsequently signed him up in the Communist Party. By then Eric was assistant secretary of the Automotive Chamber of Commerce but beginning to identify more as a writer. Big, handsome men with powerful personalities and an equal capacity for drink and talk, Eric and Frank made an indomitable duo in pubs, parties (generic and political) and the burgeoning post-war Australian literary scene. A whole generation of young men and women had grown up in the social upheavals of depression and war and many were ready to dedicate their lives and talents to the fight against the twin evils they saw as the cause: capitalism and fascism. It was an exciting time to be young, idealistic and talented. There was a feeling in the air that real changes could and would be made in the way society was organized. History had a fresh page to be written upon and in bold, unequivocal spirit Eric and his peers took up pens and wrote of the new world to come. Eric and Hardy had embarked upon their first novels, both groundbreakers which, they were convinced, would stir the sediment and expose the cancer of lies in the belly of society. The heady atmosphere of post-war Australia, already with a small pantheon of working-class heroes, a history of battles for equity and workers' rights, was a natural arena for a new breed of warriors of words.

Eric, it seems, was the more natural writer of the two. While *TTT* was definitely a one-man operation, Hardy's *Power Without Glory* (*PWG*) was more of a group effort. Hardy acknowledges this and, I'm told,[2] the "author not to be mentioned" in *The Hard Way* (1961) is Eric. O'Leary cites Hardy himself speaking of his awe at Eric's prolific, spontaneous writing style in contrast to his own, more laboured approach; Eric wrote in bursts, needing few corrections. O'Leary explains:

> there were basic differences. Frank possessed a measure of expediency. Eric did not. Even in their roles of story-tellers they were dissimilar. Eric was at his hilarious best at small intimate gatherings, providing he was the centre of attraction. If the talk turned to a subject he was disinterested in or not fully familiar with, he was capable of retreating to a corner of the room – silent, sulky and completely unapproachable. Frank excelled at big noisy meetings; hostility never found him at a loss, he could cope with it neatly and humorously.
>
> In a past age both men would have made excellent troubadours: Hardy adroitly nudging his patron into a relaxed mood to gain support for a project or personal favour, Lambert joyously reading poetry and clowning for the sheer hell of it. But the poetry would have been of *his* choosing; the clowning would have been around subjects *he* found amusing; and his mimicry (at which he was an expert) would have been levelled against anyone he chose, whether of high or low estate.
>
> Hardy would have enjoyed long-standing success as a troubadour, providing he found no unpopular political group to champion – Lambert would have eventually lost his head.

Eric's friendship with Hardy was a tumult of idealistic political high jinks and high drama, fuelled by vast quantities of alcohol and prolific writing. He threw himself into the clandestine, fragmented publication of *PWG* and then the Defend Hardy campaign with all the passion and vigour of an idealist doing some-



Eric Lambert, 1964
Courtesy, Francesca Lambert

thing of great worth and profundity. An early member of the Realist Writers' Group, Hardy soon had Eric an active member as well and he threw himself into its activities with his customary gusto. Later Eric was to find great frustration with the niggling criticisms of his literary inferiors, taking even greater umbrage at the Party's interference and the Zhdanov line on socialist-realist literature. Eric was certainly not a follower, but neither was he a leader. From letters to O'Leary and articles on the art of writing it seemed Eric was very much about inspiring people to do their own work, to find their own voices. As long as Eric and Hardy had seemed as equals, if highly competitive, everything was wonderful with their friendship, and they would do anything for each other, including an extended stay of Eric's at the Hardys' escaping Marion's maternal attentions.

Eric was though, from all accounts, a hard taskmaster with his friends, demanding absolute love, loyalty and honesty, at the same time not bearing criticism terribly well. These traits did not augur well for a long-term relationship with a man whose middle name was 'expediency' and the friendship was at an acrimonious end by the mid-fifties. O'Leary cites Hardy's opinion that Eric's affection began to cool when *PWG* achieved the notoriety that he had wished for *TTT*, which had instead gone on to literary acclaim and commercial success while Hardy became 'the main man' of the political scene. Hardy reckoned that Eric was jealous of his work's political controversy.[3] I suppose that it's possible, we never truly leave 'the playground' behind us, but somehow I think that philosophical differences were starting to emerge and Hardy's ability to use people may have also been wearing a bit thin by then.

Eric was well known for taking to the typewriter in a state of high dudgeon over real or imagined slights and was deeply, irredeemably hurt when misunderstood; though I think that he was not always easy to understand. Talented, idealistic and hypersensitive people are often complex, contradictory characters. O'Leary comments on Eric's paradoxical nature, pointing out that he could find equal ease in shirt-sleeves at the workers' pubs with Hardy and trade union leaders as in a business suit with Brian Fitzpatrick at the Mitre Tavern, a hangout for university intellectuals and bohemians. Eric had been denied natural passage to this latter milieu and, though an advocate of egalitarianism, he also craved the stimulus of art and culture and there wasn't much 'high culture' to be had at the workers' bars (perhaps another thorn in the friendship with Hardy). It must have been with some sense of irony that Eric later found himself sub-editing a poem of Hardy's, 'Scabs Are a Thing He Hates', submitted to the *Realist Writer*, which shows a considerable number of corrections by Eric with a comment to Stephen Murray-Smith: "needs to be worked over, doesn't always seem worth more trouble". This piece, found in the La Trobe archives, is undated, but was probably written at a time when the friendship with Hardy was starting to sour. In the same capacity Eric was much kinder to a story of David Martin's, *The Runner of Glarus* which he says "will use three foolscap pages, but worth them".

Eric's friendship with Hardy was not the only thing going on in his life. In 1948, still suffering the after-effects of external war wounds, courtesy of a grenade, and an ulcer "the size of a poached egg", Eric spent five months in Melbourne's Caulfield Military Hospi-

tal. There he met Jeff Burton, who was to become one of many lasting friends. Others were Dymphna Cusack, Lili Williams, Dame Mary Gilmore, Brian Fitzpatrick and Zoe O'Leary. In 1950 Eric, the "emotional torrent", married the cool blonde[4] Joyce with Hardy as best man and Walter Kauffman as bridal photographer. During this period Eric was an active member of The Realist Film Unit, the CPA and the Soviet Friendship Society, a roving ambassador for the Australasian Book Society,[5] co-editor with Hardy on a trotting paper *The Beam*, contributor of numerous short stories, book reviews and many, many letters-to-the-editor in diverse publications including the national dailies, the *Realist Writer*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, *The Guardian*, *Tribune* and *The Meat Workers Journal* (edited by Hardy). By 1952 he was in Sydney volunteering his services at the Youth Carnival for Peace and Friendship where he first met friend and future biographer, Zoe O'Leary. In full flight as a writer but with fingers in so many pies, at times Eric's writing suffered from other enthusiasms. In a note dated 11 May 1953 from Murray-Smith regarding an incomplete story, he chides Eric for sending him "slip-shod stuff" and says:

> I don't want to sound like a bloody school master. But even in a scrappy note like this I want to repeat that I feel that you have the makings of a first-rate writer. There is a good deal of poetry in the best of your prose writing. This is the vein you should follow up now, with all the strength you possess.

By 1954 Eric was a well-known voice in the left-wing media, his novels translated into a number of eastern block languages. Abroad he was being referred to as Australia's Hemingway. London publisher Frederick Muller said, "My personal view is that as a war novelist you have no superior". In 1955 as a delegate of the Realist Writers, with the two successful war novels, *The Five Bright Stars* (a historical novella on the Eureka Stockade), numerous other publications under his belt and a couple more novels on the boil, Eric and Joyce headed off to the Peace Congress at Helsinki. He was never to return to Australia.

ENDNOTES

1. From a letter of recommendation by W.C. Groves, inspector in charge of Re-Establishment Services, formerly Major in charge of Army Education Services for Victoria, dated 29 January 1946.
2. An old mate of Eric's, Jeffrey Walmsley-Burton who knew him well at this time (the only close friend of his I've met so far) assured me that while Eric and Hardy were guarding the Eureka Youth Camp Eric wrote, at the least, the dialogue between John West and the Archbishop in *PWG*, perhaps considerably more.
3. Jeff Burton agreed. O'Leary cites him saying that Eric was almost insanely jealous of *PWG*'s political controversy.
4. O'Leary has Joyce as an olde-worlde, gentle female who suffered Eric's tantrums with bewilderment but I have read Joyce's letters. She was quite steely in her ways and not above presenting herself as more of a victim of Eric than was actual. Perhaps somewhat of a 'street angel', our Joyce?
5. Letter, maybe 1954, from Eric in Adelaide "on ABS business" to O'Leary.

This is the first in a two-part biographical essay to be concluded in 1999.

Chris Lee

Pomp and Ceremony

The Political Funeral of Henry Lawson

For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain: he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them.

Psalm 39, Anglican Burial Service

When Lawson died in a small room in Mrs Byers' Cottage in Abbotsford on the morning of 2 September 1922, he presented the political establishment with a public relations problem. How does the State deal with the death of an infamously semi-vagrant alcoholic whose name and reputation is emerging as a privileged source for a nascent national mythology? How does one choose among the different narrative accounts of Lawson and the precariously ambiguous forms, ideologies and social relations that they support? Given the paradox of Lawson's life and reputation, his funeral was always destined to be equivocal. Tensions were inevitable when the occasion became a struggle to turn the capital invested in his name to political advantage.[1] Henry Lawson's funeral is a touchstone for the political conflict of the period, a conflict which ultimately provided the momentum for the public valorization of his name and reputation of the following decade and beyond.

Lawson's death came less than five months after James Dooley's NSW Labor Government was defeated by an Opposition campaigning against Catholicism, Communism, and Corruption. Sir George Fuller's National Party governed with the support of the Progressives because they successfully represented their Labor opponents as marginal, untrustworthy and extreme. In the early spring of 1922 the New South Wales ALP was still struggling to re-establish itself and its policies as the true representatives of mainstream popular sentiment. The upgrading of Henry Lawson's funeral into a state occasion provided an opportunity for them to publicly revel in their authentic associations with a popular hero of the nation.

The Labor Party was a little slow to see its opportunity, however, and the initial push for a state funeral for Lawson came from the writer's literary and journalistic friends. On hearing of Lawson's death George Robertson, ever the generous and thoughtful patron, immediately sent a tenner to Mrs Byers and undertook on behalf of the firm of Angus and Robertson to pay all funeral expenses. Having ensured that Lawson would not be buried a pauper he then moved to exploit that possibility in an attempt to shame the NSW Government into funding a state funeral. After unsuccessfully trying to contact W.H. Ifould, the state librarian who later chaired the committee to raise funds for Lawson's monument in the Domain, Robertson telephoned Hugh Wright of the Mitchell Library and lobbied him to take the argument for a state funeral to a member of cabinet. "The government," he told Wright, "cannot afford to have it said that for all they cared he might have been buried like a pauper."[2]

The arrangement of state funerals is the responsibility of the protocol section within the Premier's Department.[3] While each State has written guidelines for the granting and conduct of state funerals, they remain under the sole discretion of the Premier who can alter them as s/he sees fit. It is customary automatically to honour individuals who were serving, or had served in the past, in certain specified state and judicial offices,[4] although the Premier could approve a state funeral for any "person of eminence in the community".[5]

Phillip Harris, the editor of *Aussie* and a close friend of Lawson's, telephoned Mr Hay of the Premier's Department to argue the case for a state funeral, but he was told that a state funeral "was a very big thing" and that Sir George Fuller was unlikely to support the request. Protocol would have told Hay that a state funeral was "a funeral arranged and funded by the Government to recognize service to the State by the various public officials". The Premier could approve a state funeral for Lawson if he deemed his eminence in the community deserved it, although up to that time no-one in the State of New South Wales had been awarded such a funeral on the basis of distinguished citizenship.[6] Fuller's alternatives were to agree to pay 'reasonable expenses' or refuse the request outright.[7] Hay could have informed the Premier that criminal conviction, enforced resignation, or some form of public disgrace might render void any claim to entitlement. In the light of Lawson's very public poverty, alcoholism, and history of imprisonment for desertion, the Premier's decision to pay 'reasonable expenses' must have seemed to him 'reasonable' indeed.[8]

Sir George Fuller
Courtesy, Mitchell Library

Later the same day Hay's secretary, Mr Tremlett, informed Harris that the Government would not provide a state funeral, but that the undertakers Wood Coffil had been instructed that the Government of NSW would pay expenses. On contacting the undertakers Harris found that the State's instructions were that the funeral "not be an expensive one – just a cheap coffin and two mourning coaches".[9] He immediately bumped the business up to three coaches and a good coffin and set about applying some political heat to Fuller. Together with Mary Gilmore, Harris decided to put the case for a state funeral to Billy Hughes, the then Prime Minister, who was due to arrive in Sydney by train the following day. He also took his indignation to the president of the NSW Institute of Journalists, Adam McCay, who agreed to involve Harold Burston, the president of the Press Club, and Howard C. Knapp, the president of the Australian Journalists' Association, in a representation to Hughes. The Prime Minister met the delegation when he stepped off his train, and the result was an eulogy for Lawson that was reported in most of the major daily newspapers across the country:

Prime Minister's Tribute
'Australia's Greatest Minstrel'

The Prime Minister on Sunday stated that towards the close of a busy day he had heard of the death of Henry Lawson, the poet whose genius all acknowledged, and who was the most typical of all Australian poets. He had gone, but his memory was enshrined in their hearts.

Mr Hughes said it was his privilege to know Lawson, and to range himself with that great host of Australians who admired and loved him. His death left a gap that would not soon be filled. He knew intimately the real Australia, and was its greatest minstrel. He sang of its wide spaces and its dense bush. He loved Australia, and his verse set out its charms, its vicissitudes, the burning heat of the northerly, and the bitter cold of the westerly wind; the storm, the calm, drought and flood, the endless plain shimmering beneath the summer sun, the dust of the travelling stock, the cracking of the stockwhips, the roar of the floodwaters, the matchless beauty of the tall, waving, sweet scented gums, splashed with the yellow of the wattle; the melting blue of the distant mountains, the evening camp fire, the boiling billy, the damper and mutton of stockman and swagman, the humour, the pathos, the joys and sorrows, and, above all, the dauntless spirit of the Australian. These were the things he loved, and loving, set them down in glorious verse. None were his masters. He was the poet of Australia – the minstrel of the people. The men of the Never Never knew him and loved him, as he knew and loved them. To them as to all Australians, the death of Henry Lawson would come as a shock. He was a genius, and his name would live. Australia's greatest writer had passed away, and Australia would sincerely mourn him. He was part of the national life of the people, and it was but meet that he should be fitly honoured. The

Commonwealth deemed him a public figure, and in the name of Australia he invited all to pay to him their last respects.[10]

In his memoirs, Lawson's brother-in-law Jack Lang attributed the Prime Minister's enthusiastic praise to the man's penchant for celebrating his own working-class origins.[11] Hughes' reading of Lawson's work as an index of the native landscape and a repository of the national attitude is a form of self-congratulation for his Prime Ministerial rapport with the ordinary people. The emphasis on Lawson's personal knowledge of the men of the Never Never affirms his own knowledge of Lawson and the bushmen – a knowledge which, like Lawson's, was the putative product of immediate personal experience. This is the knowledge which makes one an Australian. It takes its form in approved social relations ("... his privilege to know Lawson ... men of the Never Never knew him and loved him, as he knew and loved them") and is expressed as a set of qualities and experiences ("the humour, the pathos, the joys and sorrows, and, above all, the dauntless spirit ...") which sustains them. For those who lack the relations and experiences of Lawson and Hughes, national authenticity may be claimed second-hand through the adoption of the appropriate (Hughes') reading of (Lawson's) Australia. Hughes' eulogy is an attempt to fashion himself, his party, and the electorate as the subjects of a politically useful form of the Australian nation.

The Prime Minister's speech had a particular value in the political context of the time. Hughes' political power after 1917 rested on an unstable alliance of anti-Labor and ex-Labor conscriptionists dominated by conservatives who would have preferred to do without the services of the former waterside workers' union president if it had been at all possible. His hold on the leadership during a period of sustained and often militant national division was due to the National Party Government's need for his idiosyncratic energy and widespread public popularity. It was under these conditions that he developed his infamous talent for fanning a sense of an impending national emergency that demanded his tenacious personal attention.

Hughes was a master at making himself politically indispensable. After the War he adopted a marketing strategy which used his affinity with the 'ordinary' Australian digger to re-fashion the myths of the radical nationalists into an imperially loyalist account of national development.[12] The 'Anzac hero' joined the 'independent bushman' as the favoured images of the young nation and this helped Hughes and his conservative allies to represent the Catholic and socialist sections of the Labor Party as un-Australian extremists who were enthralled by Sinn Fein and the Bolsheviks and bent upon social division and political turmoil. The mobilization of the returned soldiers as an interest group with a privileged access to the loyalty and gratitude of the nation also rendered the working classes and their unions as greedy, impatient, and lacking in patriotic deference.[13] Hughes helped to transform the working-class myth into a pioneering narrative of genetic and commercial evolution that connected economic development, national prosperity, and imperial patriotism in a new 'conservative populism'.

When the press met the Prime Minister in Sydney and told him that the Premier was reluctant to grant Lawson the state funeral, Hughes seized an opportunity to draft the national poet into the service of his own political mythology and at the same time publicly fashion himself as *the* authentic Australian Leader. In party political terms, the Prime Minister was on the same side of the fence as Fuller. Indeed Fuller's state Nationalist Party had won government in NSW only four months earlier by using a similar campaign strategy to that practiced by Hughes. Hughes' authentic working class roots, however, enabled him to revel in the bushman-digger myths that were such useful political tools for *his* Party. Lawson's death provided the Prime Minister with an opportunity to shore up his rather precarious personal position among the antagonistic conservatives who made up his Federal National Party by allowing him an opportunity to demonstrate his popular Australian identity. 'The Little Digger' image comprised Hughes' chief value to a National Party that lacked leadership aspirants with a popular and authentic national genealogy, which the Prime Minister was determined to make his own.[14]

Hughes' speech was reprinted in newspaper obituaries around the country and helped to spark a nationwide celebration of Lawson's importance to the Australian imagination. Public opinion had been stirred and Fuller, the NSW Premier, now had no option but to go ahead with a state funeral. Thus it was that on 4 September 1922, Henry Lawson came to be buried with pomp and ceremony from Saint Andrew's

Lawson's Funeral Procession
Courtesy, Mitchell Library

Cathedral. The Lieutenant-Governor, the Prime Minister, Ministers from the State and Federal Governments, celebrated members of the judiciary and the public service and a massive crowd of the ordinary people were in attendance. As the funeral procession passed up George Street on its way to Waverley cemetery the people were lined many rows deep to pay their last respects.

In the wake of the funeral and the chorus of tribute and self-congratulation that it had inspired, Sir George Fuller was rather unfairly found out for failing to sing along. During question time in parliament the day after the state occasion, the parliamentary wing of the Labor Party, speaking with all the authority of ownership, did not miss its chance to embarrass the Premier for his reluctant patriotism. Fuller was asked "if it is a fact that he, in the first instance, refused a state funeral to the remains of the late Henry Lawson?" The Premier explained that when he was informed that "unless the Government made provision [Lawson] would be buried a pauper", he "immediately gave instructions to see that he should receive proper burial at the hands of the State". The Commonwealth subsequently took the matter over.[15] The Labor member for North Shore then put it to Mr Fuller that Lawson's funeral expenses had been guaranteed by friends and family of the deceased and invited him to "inform the House that his information was incorrect". Fuller then explained that his understanding of the matter was based upon communications from an officer of his department and agreed to make inquiries to ascertain the truth of the matter.

The following day, in the afterglow of the patriotic excesses of the state occasion, Phillip Harris revealed in the *Evening News* the full details of the Government's 'cheap' response to the death of the national poet. *The Daily Mail* took up the story the next morning:

> **Had the Premier Heard of Our Poet?**
> Henry Lawson to have had a cheap Coffin – Buried not in State, But on the State
>
> And this is Australia?
> "The funeral is not to be an expensive one – just a cheap coffin and two mourning coaches" – Last Tribute from the Premier's Department, under the impression that the Australian nation required it to give Henry Lawson an enforced pauper's burial.[16]

The article takes issue with Fuller's handling of the funeral on two grounds. It rebukes the Premier for his reluctance to grant the state funeral in the first instance and it repudiates his suggestion that Lawson would not have been decently buried by his relatives and friends. Gertrude Lawson is quoted thanking Mr Harris and the "people of Australia", but complaining of the "one discordant note . . . from our own Parliament" which "jarred horribly when our grief is so fresh".

The ALP quickly condemned the "callousness and indifference of the Fuller government" and the *Australian Worker* rammed the point home.[17] "What can't be lost sight of," it protested, "is Fuller's miserable attitude . . . an attitude characteristic and worthy of him and of the Government which he leads".[18] The full extent of Fuller's unpatriotic disregard for the ceremony due to the national culture was fully revealed by Harris' observation that even the undertakers were prepared to foot the bill. Everyone, it seems, was united upon the Henry Lawson bandwagon as a true blue Australian except poor old Sir George and his miserable National Party Government.

The public political imbroglio now took an interesting twist behind the scenes. Lawson's brother Peter wrote to Fuller on 5 September repudiating any "implication of neglect" on the part of his family.[19] Bertha Lawson, the estranged wife of the poet, also complained personally to the Premier: "If politicians have

Lawson's Funeral Procession
Courtesy, Mitchell Library

no sense of decency I will kindly ask you to refrain from adding any further pain and suffering to my children".[20] Bertha's complaint put a stop to Fuller's intention to respond publicly to the adverse press and he had to be content with a private explanation to the poet's widow. Neither he nor his Government had ever implied that the family could or would not bury her husband respectably, he told her. Further, "the decision of the Government not to so honour your late husband does not in any way detract from the admiration and esteem in which each member of the Cabinet held him. To decide otherwise would have been to create a precedent whereby it would have been difficult to resist similar claims on behalf of any man of letters, scientist, or – in fact – any distinguished member of the learned professions, and the question of discrimination in degree would lead to endless controversy and heartburning".[21]

Fuller's recognition of the difficulty of ascertaining the state value of any citizen outside the constitutionally ranked institutional structures of the body politic has interesting repercussions for any understanding of the political rationale of these state occasions. Fuller's difficulty stemmed from the way in which Lawson's name and reputation transgressed a number of incommensurable regimes of value. Lawson's reputation was now multiple in form because of the different institutional interests concerned with its proclamation. The uncertain copyright on Lawson's many cultural roles was a volatile demonstration of the instability of the popular, private, and official values which unequally contest the distribution of power that structures cultural space.

The Premier's letter to Bertha was also sent to Peter Lawson in response to his complaint. Both Lawsons replied, indicating their satisfaction with the Premier's actions. Bertha gave the Premier leave to publish his defence and her support if the public attacks upon his Government continued. However, Peter communicated a quite different, and ultimately more significant suggestion. Insisting upon the political necessity of being seen to be onside with his brother's national reputation he declared his support for the Government and suggested that Fuller might recover his position if he would initiate a citizens' movement to erect a memorial to the dead poet:

> Henry Lawson's death has interwoven the people's affection for their poet into their Governmental affairs and, heed it or not, there it stands, a factor for your political well being or otherwise accordingly as it is used, – an epoch as rare as the comets . . . I *must* emphasise that Australia is strong and pregnant with this feeling today, attuned to such a tension that she is ready to rise in indignation at the first imagined slight on her adored poet . . . Your enemies . . . realised it and exploited the sentiment as a fresh gun pivot on which to attack you.
>
> I have been trying to rid the factions of their initiative and have approached Mr Reeve of the *Herald* and he suggests to ask the Lord Mayor to convene a citizens meeting for a memorial movement. Every days delay leaves it open for the requisition to come from other sources. He was a New South Welshman and the credit of your actions is being filtched from you and imported to the Commonwealth Government.[22]

Henry Lawson's state funeral was a political struggle for the national capital vested in his reputation at the time of his death. The malleability of this resource saw it used with differing degrees of success by an array of political figures and the organizations that they represented. Lawson's reputation was publicly rendered multiple in form by the occasion of his funeral. The elusive voices of the writer's many representations displayed the instability of a range of values involved in contesting the many different spaces contrived by a culture. One of the outcomes of all this was inevitably a movement of containment. The gothic church, the Anglican ceremony, and the state institution failed to put Lawson away. By cast-

ing him in bronze and placing him on a pedestal, the national figure might perhaps be safely rendered above or beyond politics for all posterity. If the left were to be denied their national poet then Lawson had to become a monument of the state establishment. The legacy of the political struggle over the poet's funeral was a memorial movement which became the site of the next round in what was to be an ongoing struggle for the substantial political capital now clearly vested in his name and reputation.

ENDNOTES

1. My discussion of the circumstances surrounding Lawson's funeral is indebted to Colin Roderick's account in *Henry Lawson: A Life*, Angus & Roberston, Sydney, 1991, pp. 395–401.
2. Quoted in Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, p.396. This was not the first time Lawson became the responsibility of the government. For a detailed discussion of manoeuvring over Lawson's pension see Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, pp. 380–94.
3. I would like to thank Mr Barry Muche, Acting Director of the Protocol Branch of the Queensland Government's Department of the Premier and Cabinet and The Hon. John Murray, MP, Speaker for the Parliament of NSW for their assistance on the official protocols for state funerals.
4. The entitlement list for Queensland includes the Governor, former Governor, Premier, former Premier, Administrator of the Government, former Administrator of the Government, Chief Justice, President of the Court of Appeal, Members of the Executive Council and former Members (must have served a minimum three years in office and have been out of office no longer than ten years), and the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly and former Speaker (must have served a minimum three years in office and have been out of office no longer than ten years). Criminal conviction, enforced resignation, or some form of public disgrace renders void automatic entitlement. NSW follows a similar protocol.
5. Asher Joel, *Australian Protocol and Procedures*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1982), p. 263.
6. In the twenty years preceding Lawson's death six state funerals took place in NSW. Four were for Ministers of the Crown who died in office. The other two were for Sir Edmund Barton, the first Prime Minister of Australia, and Sir Francis Sutton, who died while President of the Legislative Council. The distinguished citizens who have received state funerals in NSW are Lawson 1922, Professor Sir Edgeworth David 1934, Sir Alfred Parker 1935, Wallace Worth 1960, Dame Mary Gilmore 1962, Dr Victor Chang 1992, and Mr John Newman, MP 1994.
7. 'Reasonable expenses' included "all expenses of the funeral director . . . cemetery fees, and appropriate casket and service expenses", but did not include "the cost of family press notices, floral wreaths from the family, stonemasonry, monument or headstone expenses". 'State Funerals', Protocols Branch, Government and Executive Services Division, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Queensland Government.
8. Lawson was imprisoned on seven occasions for a total of 159 days between April 1905 and October 1909.
9. 'The Reward: Henry Lawson's Funeral', *Evening News*, 6 September 1922.
10. 'Prime Minister's Tribute', *Age*, 2 September 1922, p. 9.
11. J.T. Lang, *I Remember*, Invincible Press, Sydney, 1956, p. 193.
12. Stuart MacIntyre, *The Oxford History of Australia: The Succeeding Age 1901–1942*, OUP, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 168–97.
13. Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688–1980*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1981, pp. 138–9.
14. Hughes was deposed as leader of the National Party after the federal election later that year when the leader of the Country Party, Earle Page, nominated his resignation as a condition for a ruling coalition of the parties. His successor as Prime Minister, Stanley Melbourne Bruce, who in 1918 had summed up his own political identity as "a plain businessman and a plain soldier", sat beside Hughes at Lawson's funeral. MacIntyre, *The Oxford History of Australia*, p. 222.
15. Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, pp. 396–97; Hansard: NSW Parliamentary Debates Second Session 1922, John Spence, Sydney, 1923, pp. 1582–83.
16. 'Had the Premier Heard of our Poet?' *The Daily Mail*, 7 September 1922.
17. 'The Funeral: Callous Indifference', *Evening News*, 9 September 1922.
18. 'Fuller and Lawson's Funeral', *The Australian Worker*, 13 September 1922.
19. Letter from P.J. Lawson to Sir George Fuller, 5 September 1922, Mutch Papers, ML MSS 426, Mitchell Library, Sydney. See also Letter from Phillip Harris to Sir George Fuller, 6 September 1922. "The friends of the late Henry Lawson are highly indignant . . ."
20. Letter from Bertha Lawson to Sir George Fuller, 6 September 1922, Mutch Papers, ML MSS 426, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
21. Letter from Sir George Fuller to Mrs Bertha Lawson, 8 September 1922, Mutch Papers, ML MSS 426, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
22. Letter from P.J. Lawson to Sir George Fuller, 12 September 1922, Mutch Papers, ML MSS 426, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

Chris Lee is a lecturer in Australian Studies at USQ and is currently working on 'Literary Celebrity in Australia: A Study of the Reputation of Henry Lawson'.

Bachelor Machine-Girl

Kim Hunt

I COVETED MY BROTHER'S Matchbox toys from the age of five. If Mummy and Daddy were stripping a heavy duty diesel engine in the bedroom when I went through the Oedipal stage, it sure set some things in concrete for me. Ah, Siggy Freud, you weren't that literal were ya mate. I don gloves for domestic dirt but I'm happy to bathe my skin in a petrochemical mire from the bowels of my heavy metal baby. I do the domestic frenzy because anything that disrupts my sense of zen must be eradicated and order restored within the one realm under my deluded sense of control – the home.

I sneak out the back for a fiddle.
I bear traces of my guilty pleasure
black crescents at my fingertips
black valleys in my skin
There is no in between for me
I am clean and white
or I am black and dirty
The other defies and defines me
Coated in oil, a second, viscous skin
Black and shiny,
Filling the fissures of my cracked up self.
I become another

In adolescence it was the motor-mower of my better-off friends. I am old, these things were once markers of prosperity. I'd offer to mow their lawns just so I could smell the two-stroke and dismantle the noisy status symbol. Understanding is possessing.

What can I tell ya
I get a tool in my hand and I'm transported.

I saw *Easy Rider* at an impressionable age and I've never gotten free. The late sixties soundtrack of peace love dove Hare Krishna and love beads was gorgeous enough but I couldn't wait for Dennis Hopper to get out of that middle-class hippie commune and back on the road. Dennis succumbing to the highway's allure while Peter Fonda was more interested in burying his Twinkie in some hippie chick. Of course he was; what more could you expect from a character called Captain America riding a Harley with a Stars and Stripes paint job. I thought, I'm with you Dennis. The road is my racetrack I shall not want.

I won't put synthetic oil in my baby's belly. It's fifty weight mineral based or nothing.

I could throw a rock, make a fist and build my own racing trolley when I was nine. I could safely be tagged Tomboy. I played with boys 'cos that's who was there and it was fun. In pre-adolescence it was tolerated. Who am I? The cut-off point in the moulding of sexed bodies. Who am I? Give it up. Leso. Sometimes I got told. Ten years old. I wore words I'd never heard

before. I knew they must be bad from the bile. Middle-class kids with extensive vocabularies. Who am I? I couldn't see myself anywhere.

Every bloke is a roadside expert when I ride my Harley. It takes a few seconds, first they have to realise I'm a girl.

"Oi." Eyes straight ahead, I pretend I can't hear through the helmet and the loud exhaust.

"Oi!" Mr Australia in the homogenous buzz-box has something very important to say. He toots his horn from right beside me. I turn with my best sneer but subtlety is wasted.

" 's running a bit rough isn't it?" nodding his head towards the engine. The same engine I've sat above and twiddled with for thousands of kilometres, but apparently know nothing about. Where to begin? Harleys are supposed to have a lumpy tickover you fucking moron. There is no beginning and no end, so I talk to myself. Wouldn't've said that if I was a six-foot bloke would ya mate. I let the Harley's rough run speak for itself as I leave him sucking my exhaust.

Fuck boys
But don't play with them.
The world is happy
I'm not.
I looked hard for myself.

When I was eleven I worked in a fruit shop after school. I saw strange couples, Pacific Islanders, the 'boy' ones in suits with short back and sides. Amongst the taro and green banana, I was filing information. I was selecting my cultural models from odd and widely divergent sources – at least I found some. It's hard to maintain yourself when you don't know who you are. If you can't bolt together an identity, you tend to disintegrate. I imagine it's easier if everything around you lines up comfortably with your insides. I sourced South Pacific female fafafine doing fifties butch-femme and West Coast U.S. drug-fucked biker freaks for starters. My dolly mixture self began.

I push the bike hard into a corner, I throw my body sideways and pull on the throttle. I dare the back wheel rubber to let go and spit me onto the road. I hold on with my thighs as the bike bucks and twists on the badly cambered surface. The front end shakes in my arms as I try to keep the bike on line. I'm heading for the concrete crash wall. My eyes are streaming from the speed, I know there's a barrier on my right there somewhere, I lean harder to the left, throwing my shoulder towards the ground. I pull harder on the throttle, willing the back end to bite into the road and straighten my line up. I'm so close to the wall I could flick my knee out and touch it. The grey and black world is streaked with red. Tail-lights through tears. I am bulletproof.

I gave up riding for six years when a friend was killed on her bike.

I heard Steppenwolf's 'The Pusher' when my friends were suiciding or overdosing. The opening of *Easy Rider*, when Captain America and Billy stash the drug proceeds in their petrol tanks and head off across the Southern States. They rode radically altered bikes, choppers. Chopped up technology. Bastardized, bikes for bastards. Of course they had to die, marginality as destiny in Hollywood. My cultural models were falling into extremes; living death or early death.

I was wearing the choices of my available models like a hair shirt and the future stretched long and bleak. I didn't recognize myself anywhere except in death.

The customized bikes were my fragmented Sybil-self. The fact that they were loud and moved towards an ineffable horizon was the second selling point. They were boys riding them, so what. At age ten or eleven I'd already been reading against the grain for years. Actually, I don't know that I read them that way. Maybe that's an arrogance of hindsight. Perhaps I read

Captain America and Billy exactly as they were. They were men, they were American, it didn't matter. I slid into some romantic otherness, somewhere not in this place so inescapably concrete. This place of few reference points.

Bachelor
machine
girl.
Girl-machine
bachelor-girl
Machine-girl.

Nobody's ever called me that but I like the sound of it. A hyphen joins a girl and technology. Remove the bar and our junction is complete, we are no longer a metaphor.

I don't see my surroundings once I'm moving fast enough, the world blurs. I leave the present, even though my sense of danger and death put me more in the now than anywhere else. Is now a time or a place? I leave a world as I immerse myself in a moment, for a moment. Here and now, I'm now but I'm not here.

The engine pulses are so strong they sometimes knock the breath from my throat. A thick pulse, like a punch from my stomach, into my chest. Sometimes my teeth rattle. My technological drug of choice still gives me an altered state. My drug of choice is speed in a deceptive, slow rumbling form.

I ride my life through the seat of my pants and it's not simulated.

Harley Davidson. Buy tradition, buy nostalgia buy Marlon Brando *The Wild One* – only he was riding a Triumph Speed Twin from the other side of the Atlantic. Was that part of the American capitalist dream? Did ya hear that America? The wild one wasn't riding a Harley. Harleys fulfil notions of individualism whilst providing a recognizable membership to an elite. I hate people assuming I'm a yuppie. I learnt to ride at twelve, had my own bike and worked in a bike shop at fifteen. I can understand gang bikers' horror at the pseudo-colours 'respectable' bike club members wear. They're instant rough-trade credibility without having to earn it. Kinda like the unearned status that comes with a dick or money or white skin.

The sound from the exhaust pipes bounces off the crash wall as I go round a right-hander. I go closer and closer to the wall. The closer I get the faster I go the harder I lean the bike. The exhaust roars out of three-inch drag pipes. The noise hits the concrete crash wall and bounces back at me. I am reassured. I can almost feel the pulses as the sound waves hit me. I have to be close. The pulses bear their bodily origins in the four-stroke engine cycle; intake-compression-combustion-exhaust. It breathes.

Often when men describe their response to a bike, they talk about power and getting hard. When some people talk about women on bikes (and they're mostly assuming she's on the back) they talk about stuff like,

"How does it feel to have a 1300cc vibrator between your legs?" I mean, do they ask blokes on Harleys the same question?

Riding the phallus doesn't make you immune.

I love the smell of sump oil in the morning,
It's my metal-bellied baby lying near.
My black knight wears shining armour
and a film of multi-grade
And I always ride on top 'cos I know my place.

Her machinic body's breathing slowly and I guess we should be moving much the same. Not so, 'cos Mr Plod's waving me down, a hundred and forty k's in a sixty zone. My loping speed-blur isn't married to a high-zing rev. count. It's unnatural (and why I love her so).

Many parts, moving fast, high-tech, moving past screaming metal, shearing chain conrod legs plough molten pain.

If it ain't broke.

If it ain't broke they don't make money.

She'll be pumping eighty kilowatts when her high-tech Tupperware siblings are dying in sophisticated stasis. That's no way to make a fortune Mr Harley.

We gotta break down sometime.

Durability, the capitalists' nightmare. Don't you worry about a thing. We've commodified the do-it-yourself chopper ethic: bolt-on accessories in endless permutations.

To market.

To market.

To market.

Uh-uh. I still get on the tools and carve it up myself. Just call me the real thing.

How am I positioned that the guts of my bike is a no-go zone for me? I relate to the machine as matrix, the introjected or enveloping phallic-maternal-other. I treat the insides of the soft alloy casings like the dark continent. I will dilly dally at the liminal skin, touch and rub and shine the borders 'til they shine back at me who I am. I may worship at the surface and tinker with the externals, but beyond is sacred. Not that I wouldn't like to go there, I love breaking taboos. I can dismantle the appendages of many an engine, but splitting the cases and entering the mysterious, internal workings, I hand that job over. I succumb to the expert, the Father, the surgeon-technician. The spannerhead bloke. You may penetrate and dismantle her metal sides, I cannot break that border, lift that veil, I don't have the knowledge. I don't possess what I possess. Or perhaps I can excuse my lack of courage with limited expertise and the real fear of fucking up a six thousand dollar engine.

Anatomy is destiny.

Freud said girls replace the missing phallus with a baby. Siggy, mate, whaddaya know, I'm a spanner in the hands of my paedophilic baby and we call each other Harley in our dreams.

Nimbin '97

The rumour of you has grown –
fed by your strange crops,
watched over
by those daunting rock sentinels –
beyond your value.
Footfalls echo in your valley.
Orange Kombis still nose towards you
along the Lismore road,
or down the Northern River passes,
their earnest seekers still 19,
wanting to touch your myth,
to catch at the original ecstasy
glimpsed in their parents' eyes
after too much scotch or chardonnay.
It's there too, in your perfect green,
your barefoot insistence on One Nature,
benign and succouring.
But like a faded den
deserted by the furies,
Main street Museum's psychedelia
promises nothing,
its calculated combo of Joni and Bob
a sing-along prompt for tourists
trailing bored kids already retro,
who can't believe
this dusty propaganda offered free:
'Make love . . .' yeah, yeah.
'The Nuclear family kills.' Is that us, Mum?
'Solidarity with Mabo' posing another tribal merger.
Nimbin, you're not a place for growing old in.
Undercover idealists feel it most,
embarrassed by their incongruent pasts
balanced precariously
in the well-heeled now.
Or maybe it's your locals,
leather-skinned, wild-eyes
expecting nothing, living on
the scraps we'd feed,
surreptitiously, to the dogs
beneath our groaning tables.

Lyn McCredden

The Visionary

Not his crazed landscapes of dusk
and twilight shadow nor cloudless
skies an ochre only seen in storms.

Not the delicate foreground fires,
the distant woods dark enough
to hold the ghost of reason still,
nor golden whirlwinds within dried
grasses of a bluff. Nothing done

with a brush has landed him in this
cell far above the silent river
where two elms jut above blossoms
of razor wire, yet his therapy
prohibits him from painting.

His hands claw the canvas of air
between bars and window, feeling
moonrays thick as both his thumbs.
It has been another ashen day,
grey from the outset and leaching
toward ivory as sundown snagged
one last corner of concrete wall.

Every surface is cracked here,
the glazes ruined. But colour runs
wild and time is running out
because all the land, every inch,
is already turning black.

Floyd Skloot

Sestina at the time of el niño

It is the most beautiful day of the century
though all forecasts warn of drought and heat
but outside there is a breeze, a dappled light
and I have a cup of coffee in my hand, thinking
of other days that I once called beautiful
and how we can never get enough, though we are full.

Beautiful, though, is relative. The newspapers are full
of headlines which, at this end of the century,
are more cynical than filled with even the heat
of the moment – a landslide, a murder, a brief spotlight
on endangered mammals, a spontaneous and unthinking
media Princess whose death makes her beautiful.

We all know the story. What is not so beautiful
though is the packaging and presentation, full
of cellophane or gladwrap shine – apt for our century
of camera surfaces where only the heat
of arclamps ripens the gourmet fruit! "Shift the light
this way, Marcel. No, don't interrupt, I'm thinking!"

Just a few streets from my old home I keep thinking
of the fish-shop princess, now gladwrap beautiful
at a cost that must keep her consultant's coffers full.
She is the poor man's Diana, she is the End Of The Century
writ in red hair as honest as that arc-lamp's heat.
And she has a cause: bring bigotry into the light.

Television cameras whirr, she strides with clear delight
into the centre and, smiling at first, is already thinking
of how to dig up hate and make it beautiful,
of how to harness malice and make it full
of triumph, how to spend the lessons of this century
of manipulation so that flesh will blister in the heat

without losing the spotlight. It's alright. Heat
is what sells products, and if you smile at the light
right in your eyes no one will be thinking
of the consequences. Hate will seem beautiful,
petulance a charm (remember Diana?). Her smile stays full.
It is the most beautiful day of the century.

In this most beautiful day of the century
we stay indoors, glued to the gladwrap light,
held by the media princess whose poison cup is full.

Thomas Shapcott

It is an Idiot Wind

even you yesterday, had to ask me where it was at,
I couldn't believe after all these years, you didn't
know me
any better than that, sweet Lady
– Bob Dylan

It is an idiot
wind that blows
through the first
button-holed word
in these lines
to the last.

Oh
absurdity
you come to
visit me again.
Can I sit you
on my knee
like beauty
will I
go down
quietly
as a lamb
will I know
I'm going
quietly
will I ride
the tiger
of my cancer
will I rage
and hate
will I hate
my rage
will I learn
to love you
to call you
sweet and
lovely
where
no wind
blows
as I go
down?

Mal Morgan

rome

since the departure of anita eckberg
the dolce vita has become sour

politicians no longer dare
to make promises from the balcony of the palazzo venetia

because the people have seen mussolini and his mistress
hanging with their heads down

the pocket thieves hide their prey behind the evening papers
the daily bread has for many become as hard as the stones
on the via appia

and roma eterna has little peace
since the suicide of cesare pavese
at the height of his fame

Rudi Krausmann

fiction

Refined Ladies and Limited Means

Hamish Kaden

He had come to visit his friend. It was ritual, the smells, the clean shirt, the bicycle ride, the long leafy drive.

Mrs Cameron was her name. She had once been his father's nurse, held his hand, wiped his face, sung alongside him in the wooden rows of church. Even now, fifty years on, she hadn't forgotten the man, nor his skinny son who, just like today, kept on returning. Every Christmas she sent him a hankie with the letter A for his name and a nativity card on which she wrote something like: 'Spring is here, the roses are starting to bloom. I hope you are warm and happy dear.' Everything finished with dear.

Past the gardener and his wheelbarrow and black peaty soil, around the pansies, he pulled up at the handrail and dismounted from the bike. He tugged his trousers from his socks, removed his scarf, and cupped his fingers and blew.

Inside the smell of meat and gravy came out to greet him. From up at the kitchen he could hear the lunch plates being stacked. It was stiflingly warm and the carpet bloomed carnations in profusion.

On his left, the reception room door was open as if waiting for the queen. It had a walnut desk, mahogany sideboards, easy chairs, and a portrait of the benefactor, Mr Lea himself. With his kilt and sporran, it was possible to imagine his Presbyterian intentions. "No more must we huv' the depravity and degradation. 'Ere in this antipodean town, with the grace o' god, and this fine mansion, 'ere is a place of rest for refined ladies of limitud means."

The dining room was a dark forest of tables and chairs. Tonight, in her pressed uniform, matron would say grace and food would appear from behind the long sweep of concertina doors. As a guest, he'd been part of it, the shuffling glances, the chit chat about Sunday morning service, the easily masticated food. He'd watched matchstick arms thumping and squeezing the last life out of the barbecue sauce, the pinching of flowers from the vases, and the desultory looks as they accepted the medicines in their brown paper bags. If only to rattle with plastic lids, finger the pills, or swallow the sweet red syrup; if only to be old and frail, he wanted one too.

He descended the ramp and moved into the hall. Soaked with the afternoon light, it was brimming with ladies who followed the sun like lizards in the creaky pillowed chairs. Coming towards him was one in a blue bedjacket, with callipers and curlers. Her thick winter stockings were twisted, but her words were crystal clear. "Good afternoon young man!" Two women beneath a crochet rug looked up. Another peered out from behind a glossy magazine. They all wore lipstick and radiated polite and mannered smiles. "Good afternoon," he replied.

At a wooden desk holding a phone with large touch-pad numbers he turned right, strode up Brae wing and knocked at her door. Her hair was thin and patchy grey. As she hugged him, her ribs bent like chicken bones and her arms felt like wire. "Come in! Come in!" She sounded thin like the wind and closed the door behind. She wore malt coloured stockings, a long sleeved dress and a pink woollen cardie with yellow plastic buttons. "Are you hungry dear? I've got some lovely fresh shortbread. Would you like a biscuit and cheese?"

He took off his coat and sat in the small red chair at the end of her bed. "I'm fine thanks Vera. How are you?" She shook her head. "Oh wow wow wow! Not good dear. All the pills Doctor has given me. They're making me dizzy." She rattled a teapot off the dial of the heater and jiggled at the lid. Her small pinched feet, the blue leather lace-up shoes and the inward stoop of her hunched-up frame gave her the look of being lifted at the neck.

He'd seen the spoon in the cream, the knife in the butter, the way she made short work of the fatty lamb chops and he knew she wasn't the discriminating type. "Why don't you tell him to lower the dose?"

She looked out at the bare branches, the clover lawn, then up to the sky. "I told him that. I said 'All these pills. I can't remember if I'm meant to take the blue ones at night and the red ones in the day, or the other way around'." She moved to the bed and slowly knelt on the floor. "He said we'd give this dose a try."

As she plugged in the jug, the photo of her late husband Dan looked down upon her. His white shirt, neat hair and barn-door ears, belied the emphysemic years he and Vera suffered before his body fell away. Behind her pillow, a small cotton heart bore the black stitched words: "The seeds of God's kingdom lie in your heart."

He felt big and sweaty, too large for this small room. He wished he had cleaned his shoes, brought a hankie, combed down his hair. He placed his hands and fingers over the caps of his knees as if to give them form and charted the room. It was full of people and places he never knew, the Scottish Isles calendar, its windswept coast, the oil painting of the stone cottage on the shoulder of a mountain, and wedding photos of flower girls, upstanding husbands and tall shady trees.

He sank into the chair as she popped the tin of shortbread, rattled the cups, poured some milk and finally sat down. Then it began, the conversation that ebbed and flowed, the blue cup with the picture of windmills she always gave him, hot milky tea.

Ten years before, he sat beside her in hospital and tried not to cry. She didn't belong. The tubes up her nose, the name tag, her details clipboarded on the end of the bed. They were renovating, there was plastic on the floor, tools against the walls and the entire building smelt of concrete and antiseptic.

Perhaps she would die.

"Vera," he asked, surprising himself, "can you tell me about my father?"

She spoke with an easy breath and held his hand as if it were him that were old. "He was a beautiful child your father dear. He would stand on tippie toes, reach up into the air and say 'I'll always love you Bera; even when I'm this tall'."

She recalled the day his father's family collected her from the station, how it was the depression time and she felt like everybody stared as they drove along in the black fancy car. She spoke of the large house, the garden, and the event that transpired.

"It changed him dear. He was never the same."

She explained the day, the hot wind from the west, the way the ashes blew back in their faces. She told of how the mother turned to God, the father stopped talking, and his father, the young teenage boy, could never rub his dying brother out of his dreams.

"It hurt your father dear," she said. "It hurt him to the bone."

She told him this and for some time he struggled. His father was the philanderer, the idiot, the hopeless bastard, the pitiful used-car salesman. He was the Elvis fan, teardrop glasses, the silly dope with wife number three. He remembered when the grandmother died, the last time he saw him. He was seventeen years old with dyed hair, studded boots and a dog-collared throat. His father had dyed hair too, white shoes and absurdly tight pants. There was a wall of mutual disgust between them.

More often though, he recalled his father in pieces; the horny toes, the brown shoulders, his buttocks and the shape of his penis. It was his father as a whole he couldn't fathom; the smell of his breath, the sound of his voice, the look in his eyes, the lay of his teeth, all working together. But with each subsequent conversation between them, his father filled out and stitched up into a sad rag doll. He took on a face and a

voice, a walk and a talk, even a slightly hopeless smile.

Then one day, there wasn't much more to say. Like the route they'd taken so often now, they knew how to get there without him. Vera told him everything she could, and now there were more importantthings to share; like colours in autumn, hoar frosts in winter, her life as a girl.

She was raised in the dry plains of central Otago. Men in kilts curled on the frozen lakes in winter, and summers bore apricots and peaches. They were Cornish and proud. Her father panned for gold and her mother's name was Blue. She arrived from England with leather case and a gilded set of plates, none of which was broken.

Today Vera had told him this, the distance it was, the time it took to get there, and how thick it would snow.

"Once Blue and I had been at the next door neighbours. We were coming home, the sun had just gone down, and the sky was blue and covered in stars. Everything was white and the only noise was the squeak as we walked through the snow. Do you know that sound?"

"Yes I do."

"We were half way up the hill when Blue called out 'Look! Look!' " She laughed like a rasp. "I can see it now, Blue pointing into the distance, and there over the mountains, was a big yellow moon." She turned. "I remember that evening dear, because you know what?"

"What?"

She tapped her chest. "We weren't cold. We were warm inside."

She rubbed her knuckles and tugged her dress like a girl. Her eyes were red and he knew she was tired. "Vera, what will you find in heaven when you get there?"

Quick, jerky strides moved down the hall. "There will be my mother Blue, my sister and my father and Dan. There will be your uncle and your gran. There will be Cannon Bob Brown and little baby Sarah. And I'll not have this old body." She shook her head. "No sir. I'll be strong. We will all be in good health. And best of all," she said, raising her arms and smiling, "they'll all be there to meet me."

Two sunken muscles extended from her shoulders and connected with her head. Between them were the vertebrae of her spine, whitish, just beneath the surface. It was then he knew that beneath her winter clothes, the stockings, the peeling scalp and sunken skin, what little of her remained was on the point of leaving.

She closed the door and they moved along the corridor together. He pulled her in towards him and her head bobbed like a bird. "I'd love you to stay for dinner dear. But it's just mutton tonight. And I don't like mutton. No fear."

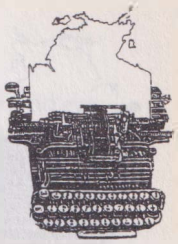
The entire place felt empty. One or two lights were on. Somewhere a toilet was flushing, and the trees silhouetted frosty outside. As they rounded the dining room, and passed the side of the stairs, she remarked that he was too skinny and that he ought to eat more. Yes, he confessed, he was too skinny. As they passed the pendulum clock, she asked him whether there was anyone special. No, he replied, there wasn't. Then at the worn patch of carpet, just inside the door, she asked him when he would return.

"I don't know Vera. A year and a half. Two years."

She burrowed her head into his side like feathers and a nest. "Well it's goodbye then. Isn't it!"

Outside it was cold, his fingers burnt and he took his scarf and wrapped it around. She rubbed her knuckles, told him she loved him and said she would pray.

Pushing off, he could feel her behind him. Just before the line of trees, before he slipped back into the seamless tide of people and places he turned around. She was tinged red in the late evening light. Her toes were pointing in, her shoulders hunched, and one hand waved goodbye. She was smiling and her quick brown eyes may as well have been the moon in the sky. It wasn't cold. He was warm inside.



Going with the Territory

Publication in the Northern Territory for creative writers and poets is a vexed issue. There have been and continue to be, attempts to do something about the lack of a local publishing industry. Small publishing companies come and go and enthusiastic groups of writers come together for a time to publish anthologies of short stories until the realities of self-publishing without a distribution network defeat them. A few individuals go it alone but even then they usually have to deal with self-publishing companies interstate. The remnants of these efforts are to be found in dusty boxes of unsold books that clutter the homes of those who swear never to enter into such a venture again.

These days, Territory writers who embark on anthologies have learnt to print just enough to sell to friends, a small percentage through the newsagents or local bookshops. They harbour no illusions about distributing any further than a few regional centres and relatives interstate. The consequence is that the development of a wide readership with opportunities for some kind of critical response is extremely difficult. With the lack of an identifiable publishing industry to support local writers there is also a limit to the professional feedback that writers can expect through trained editors and literary agents or reviews, let alone a response from a critical readership. Admittedly, this is not an unusual syndrome for writers and I imagine that many regional groups of writers around the country are currently dealing with this very situation.

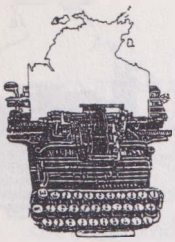
For a writer, the lack of a local publishing outlet is like an artist not having a gallery or an actor not having a stage. In the NT institutional arena, overworked committees struggle to keep alive regular publications and literary awards now homeless after the abolition of the English Department at the NT University. There seems to be a cycle of decay and regeneration in the literary scene and among committees devoted to distinctly tropical writers.

While these problems are not unique to the Northern Territory they certainly represent major hurdles for those committed to developing their writing and achieving publication of their work. The persistence and commitment that characterize the writers represented here in this issue of *overland* are features of being a Territory writer. These individuals write despite the limited opportunities. They share their work and achievements how and where they can and keep on with the task of developing their craft in isolation from mainstream literary scenes.

The stories and poetry of these writers capture what it is to be engaged in the very complex and dynamic society of the Northern Territory. The Territory can be a challenging place to live in; but, inevitably, the sense of being an immigrant gives way to a deep bonding with the place and the people. What is reflected in the work of these writers is a perspective that is regional but has at its core a sense of what it is to be Australian in all the complexity and diversity of our contemporary society.

This offer of publication in a major literary journal has given Northern Territory writers the opportunity of being heard beyond our artificial borders. The unconditional faith that *overland* has placed in Territory writers is acknowledged here as giving possibly the first national publication opportunity to be offered to Northern Territory writers. Ian Syson, in particular, has shown great openness and enthusiasm towards writing beyond the literary circles of the major cities. I would like to thank Ian and the staff of *overland* for presenting this opportunity and for the interaction and support that has been part of the process and hope you enjoy these Territory perspectives.

Marian Devitt, NT Writers' Centre



Jennifer Moore

reconciliation

n. **the process of making compatible, capable of existing together in harmony**

I WAS BORN IN A LAND which does not belong to me. And yet it is a land to which I belong, for it is the place of my birth which contains the memories of my past and the essence of my soul.

Growing up in Sydney in the 1960s, I never questioned the concept of whether I belonged to the place in which I found myself. I played in the scrubland surrounding our house, climbing the sandstone rock castles and inventing expeditions to places filled with fearsome animals; I splashed in the sea on our visits to the beach, relishing the frills of salty water tickling at my ankles. I loved the landscape of my childhood – its colours and light, the sounds of the birds, the view from our back verandah of a gallery of gumtrees which allowed me to forget the suburban setting of our home. There was no doubt in my mind that I belonged in the places in which I played and foraged in my imagination.

Throughout my childhood I was reminded that the threads of my family connected me to landscapes far beyond the scope of my experience and which I had never seen. My mother had grown up in another State and, despite the fact that her life was now based in Sydney, it seemed that the foundations of her being remained in the land of her childhood. She carried with her a longing, sometimes of cloying intensity, for sunsets over the sea and intense summer heat and places with unpronounceable names that I was never sure really existed. In particular, she felt an affinity for the great north-west of this continent, where she had been conceived and spent the early years of her life, and where her father and grandfather had been early surveyors.

Of course, as a child, the philosophical and political aspects of land and its ownership were of little interest to me. The bushland park behind us, although not technically ours, belonged to us children as territory to be explored and enjoyed in every free moment. Whether I belonged to the piece of country was never a question I asked myself; indeed I doubt it was something I would even have understood.

Nor did I really comprehend it until I left the city environment to live in the space and light and colours of the Central Australian desert. Only here have I begun to unravel some of the fabric of our collective past and to confront on a personal and fundamental level some of the unquestioned assumptions of my childhood.

The beginning of my understanding began with a journey, one of those events in which your view of the world shifts fractionally, setting you on a course different from the one you have lived to that point.

I drove with a friend to the Kimberley, to finally visit the country which held a piece of my mother's soul. It was in a sense a pilgrimage for my mother, who had died. As well, my grandparents had in 1922 been two of the first people to drive in a motorcar from Wyndham to Derby via Halls Creek. My grandmother was twenty, and the only woman on that journey, which must have been a remarkable experience – travelling across country, sometimes with no roads or even horse tracks to follow. The landscape imprinted itself on her and inspired her to begin a successful career as a writer. In turn, it became a part of my mother's heritage and thus also mine.

As we drove, in one of hundreds of four-wheel drives traversing the magnificent landscape on well-formed, although corrugated roads, I tried to imagine what my grandparents' experience must have been. "After battling hard for three days, we had jour-

neyed nearly seventy miles!"[1] They were explorers, testing the land to determine what was needed in order to make it more accessible. I read my grandfather's autobiography as we travelled and his recollections of the journey create a vivid picture of the experience of white people coming to terms with a remote and rugged country, which is beautiful yet formidable and unknown.

However, his references to Aboriginal people, "the natives", disquiet me. I understand, of course, that my grandparents' social and political milieux were vastly different from mine, and the relationship between white people and the traditional owners of this country was in 1922 other than it is today, or as it was in 1960 when his autobiography was published – at a time when Aboriginal people were not even included in the census. But I was brought up to believe in principles of social justice, and it is hard to accept the patronizing tone of his language and the underlying assumption that their role was to serve – as guides who can push the cars through the rivers or cook and clean at the homesteads.

Worse still is his tacit acceptance of their oppression:

> I noticed (the son of a station manager) playing prisoners with the native boys; it amused me to watch him manipulate his gangs, chained leg to leg with dog-chains, exactly as he had seen the troopers bring in cattle thieves and such, to the Hall's Creek gaol.[2]

I struggle with his words, his apparent lack of humanity. This man whom I loved and who loved me, and whose child was my mother.

> Native ways and customs are very different to ours.[3]

AS PART OF OUR JOURNEY we visit an Aboriginal community where my friend had lived and worked for several years, thus forming close relationships with the women there. In the entire community of several hundred people there is only a handful of white people, and the predominant language is not English. When we arrive we go to the shop and I sit outside in the car, waiting for my friend. School is just out, and the area is filled with kids running around and playing and their mothers talking with each other; there are perhaps thirty people there. And everyone is speaking Kukatja, the local language, and everyone is black. I look at the West Australian numberplate on a car parked next to ours and find it hard to comprehend that I am in Australia, because I feel as if I am in a foreign country. For the very first time in my life I experience (on other than an intellectual level) the fact that I am an interloper in this land.

We spend three days with a few of the women, who are happy to share with me some of their wealth of knowledge about the land. We drive cross country, stopping to dig for karnti (bush potato) or look for goanna or to build a fire and boil a billy of tea. There is no rush, we hunt and walk and visit places where only women can go. These women know and cherish the landscape, the stories of its creation and the ways it can provide for you if you care for it. As I listen I become aware of the enormity of my ignorance about the culture and knowledge of the traditional owners of this land.

And one of the women recollects from her own childhood:

> Kartiya look for Tjampitjin, my uncle. Kartiya bin say my uncle steal bullock . . . That Kartiya gettem chain and handcuff. Puttem chain on neck. Draggem all the way. They bin beltem all the way . . . Whipem, whip . . . whip . . .[4]

And I feel the pain of her words.

I WAS BORN IN A LAND which does not belong to me. And yet it is a land to which I belong, for it is the place of my birth and my heritage. And some of this heritage is distasteful to me, but it is mine. I love this land, for it is my home, yet I understand that since long before my mother told me stories of her childhood, or my grandmother wrote her books, or my grandfather carved out roads upon which I have driven, or his father walked across mountain ranges to mark them out on maps, long before this and even longer ago, this land, my home, has been the home of its owners who know it and respect it in a manner beyond my comprehension. And I understand the bond my mother felt to this land, and I see the connection of these women to their country and I realize that reconciliation is a journey through time and place, and it is a journey for all of us.

ENDNOTES

1. G. Drake-Brockman, *The Turning Wheel*, Paterson Brokensha, Perth, 1960, p. 184.
2. ibid, p. 192.
3. ibid, p. 193.
4. T.F. Napanangka et al, *Yarrtji: Six Women's Stories from the Great Sandy Desert*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1997, p. 95.

BACKGROUND NOTES

In 1885–6 my great-grandfather, Frederick Slade Brockman, surveyed the telegraph line between Wyndham and Halls Creek, and a few years later the country east of the King Leopold Ranges. His son Geoffrey Drake-Brockman, my grandfather, was in 1921 appointed the first Commissioner of the North-West, a position he held for five years, and which entailed "travelling through the country and generally living the life of the country, so as to understand the conditions and particular difficulties surrounding life in the north." My grandmother was Henrietta Drake-Brockman, a well-known West Australian author. Their daughter Julia was my mother, a woman of passion who never lost her love for the west. On my journey to the north-west I travelled with Sonja Peter, who had worked in Balgo for several years, including recording the stories of several of the women there. Some of these stories have recently been published. Tjama Freda Napanangka was one of the women who shared with us some of her knowledge of her country. 'Kartiya' means 'white person' in Kukatja.

No Instructions

Each day I cast an eagle eye
past curls, wizardry of flesh,
in search of some hint.
This nameless madness.

Willing it not to be,
but finding embryos
terrifyingly close.

I sow seeds in the search.
A strangling crop
that coexists in me.

A museum of genes.
I am Turnkey.
Dust and enigma.

She has bought the whole box
in the jumble-sale of birth
and I have not left instructions.

Val O'Neill

Like Celeste

A woman with a name
like Celeste (made for art)
in an elegant suit
with a smart little dog
crosses the footbridge.

Was it long ago she wheeled
her dying husband
strapped in his chair
above the flood
the doctor waiting
on the far bank
the children's tears
washed by rain?

She loves him still.
For thirty years canvas
receives her caress
dialogues on the children
the children's children
translates her moments:

desert grass tree family
the tallest to one side, dead
corkwood chorus
in head dress clusters
of winged seed
thread of faith
blood red, hanging
in celestial blue.

She holds this thread
steps out each day
walks in the sunny mall
or in the hills
she and the little dog
for the joy of the return.

It's spring.
The Albizzia he planted
wraps yard and street
in yellow fluff,
from his richly scented roses
(sixteen varieties)
she cuts one for her tea tray.

Kieran Finnane

Rubbish Kids

Violet's fourteen and hanging out in the riverbed.
Drinking, scratching a feed,
Selling her body for a beer, an ice cream,
a place to sleep.
Sometimes at night she goes up on the hill
and chucks rocks at cars with the other kids.
Trying to smash the windscreens.
You can imagine the people in Alice don't like that.
You see, she's a rubbish kid.

At five she was really feral, a wild young thing.
Dumped at Yuendumu,
Came from Docker River way.
She was really wrong skin.
And she'd wander from camp to camp,
Sometimes get a feed,
Sleep where she could.
No one wanted her
She was a rubbish kid.

By the time she was eight she'd been raped
More times than you'd want to think about.
By nine she was sniffing petrol,
Then pregnant before she was twelve.
Still sniffing.

A thin little thing, wandering around
With a huge belly,
Still looking for a feed,
A place to sleep.
Welfare took her kid away.
She wanted to care for it
But nobody listened,
She was just a rubbish kid.

Chucking rocks at cars is the latest game,
I've heard a few fellows say how they'll take the law
Into their own hands.
"It better not be my car they hit,
If those useless black bastards keep it up then . . ."

Violet's been living in town for two years now,
It's tough down there in the riverbed,
Especially when you're a rubbish kid.

Michael Watts

Night walker

Among hot cars and
night shadows
deep flesh of a woman
in her middle age

all her flesh, naked.

Grace of her long spine
riveting skin, brown
muscled buttocks
sacks of breasts
and belly
a dangerous theatre

slows the circling cars
draws men together
women too
calls laughter
silence

dew of her sweat
feathered skull
palpating footfalls

cut their swathe
through traffic
until sirens signal
the heavy end
of her bid for lightness.

Kieran Finnane

Travelling Many a Mile . . .

He hailed us down
And we lent him some pliers
To let down his jack.
"What about your flat tyre?"
"She'll be right mate, she'll be right."
"You sure?"
"Yeah, I'm alright. I'll pump her up."

An hour later
This same bloke
In his beat up Ford
Passed us.

We were sitting on the top of a small hill,
Drinking a beer
And watching the sunset.

He was heading west
In first or second gear
With two good wheels on the bitumen
And his flat tyre in the dirt.

We could hear the rubber
Peeling off the rim.

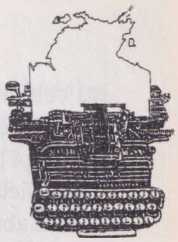
The road was long.
In the distance there were mountains,
And far behind them more mountains
Aching with colour.

His car was getting smaller and smaller.
Yet Tania and I
Could still hear the faint forlorn flapping of rubber
As we drank our beer
And watched
The tiny cloud of dust
Fading into the crimson mountains.

"That's beautiful," Tania said.
"That's real travelling," I replied.

The beer tasted good.
He had a long way to go.

Michael Watts



Bryan Clark

The Camel Man's Last Journey

IN THE DAYS WHEN he strolled around the country with his camels, Sand, Sin and Sorrow, he was known to the media all over Australia as 'The Camel Man'.

Lank and under-fed, his dusty feet in thongs, the Centralian camel man, Peter Holmes, faced thousands of kilometres of outback tracks and by-ways without flinching.

Many observers marvelled at his endurance and even his survival. He was quite obviously not a practical man. More a dreamer.

He carried no tucker bag or cooking gear; he wore no hat to shield himself from the blazing sun, yet he somehow managed to plod with his camels across the harsh Australian landscape, like an innocent protected by unseen gods.

"I'm no good now," Peter Holmes grimaced as he hunched disconsolately in his cluttered little flat on the outskirts of Alice Springs.

"I've become too soft and comfortable. Just to walk down to the pub and back wears me out."

He freely admits to drinking too much grog. Sometimes, too, a nervousness grips his voice and he stutters uncontrollably.

When Peter first decided on his round-Australia trek, he bought three camels, each costing $300, plus a rickety old cart, and he trained the animals in the sandy bed of the Todd River.

"At first we were enemies," he reflected. "They were always trying to run away. I had to keep them tied up on a nose line. One time the bloody things ran between two gum trees. There was just enough room for the camels, but no room for the cart. They just about wrecked it before we even got started."

One of his original camels was a temperamental feral bull with a mind of its own, he recalled. "It started bucking one time and it fell down, its jaw hitting the ground, and the next thing I knew its tongue was half bitten off and hanging out of its mouth. Before I knew what happened, a dog ran in, grabbed the tongue and ate it."

Later, during his marathon trek, while out on the wastes of the Simpson Desert, the camel man felt a deep sympathy for the disabled bull and cut him free to return to the wild.

"He followed us across the desert for a while, but one morning I saw him standing alone on top of a sand dune. He turned away and disappeared beyond the horizon, and he was gone."

Always a wanderer, Peter remembered when, as a five-year-old, he toddled away from home, fully intent on leaving for ever. "But a policeman brought me back to my mother," he smiled.

With crude pack-saddles fashioned from bits and pieces gleaned from the Alice Springs rubbish dump, Peter Holmes ushered his camels through Heavitree Gap and started walking south. From Port Augusta, he decided to follow in the footsteps of the old-time explorer, Eyre, and he led his camels across the Nullarbor Plain, blissfully careless about his lack of a waterbag and little in the way of tucker.

Isolated in Australia's lonely heart, sometimes Peter saw his camels gazing longingly out across the desert towards magnificent sunsets, gurgling deeply in their throats, seeming to be aching for their freedom.

"I used to think of poor old Lasseter, too, who died in country like that. He wrote in his diary, 'I have a reef worth 400,000 million pounds, but I would still sell it for a loaf of bread.' I wanted to follow in his footsteps to prove he wasn't a liar or a madman."

While walking across the Nullarbor, the unchanging landscape was boring. To counteract the weariness, Peter used to tuck the camel's noseline under

his belt and nonchalantly stroll along engrossed in a book. One time a motorist slowed down and excitedly kept pointing back down the highway. "The rope had pulled out from under my belt and I could see the camels about a mile back, quietly feeding on the roadside grass. I've often wondered what that motorist thought, seeing a bloke walking by himself out in the middle of the Nullarbor, reading a book," he smiled.

"Everywhere I met people. I gave rides for fifty cents," he said. "That's how I survived."

Sometimes tourist buses crammed with local and overseas visitors stopped along the road to photograph the dishevelled adventurer and ask their list of predictable questions. "Most of them seemed to think camels were dangerous," he said. "I always told them they were wrong, that camels were marvellous animals, with interesting personalities, just like children: trying me out all the time to see how much they could get away with. Only the bulls can be dangerous in the mating season, that's all."

In a bush town somewhere along the way Peter saw two young nurses carry a frail old man from the hospital, bringing him to the spot where Peter's camels peacefully grazed. The nurses held up the old bushman so his hand could reach the camel's heads, with tears streaming down his weathered cheeks. "I sensed he wanted to talk to me about his own camels in the old days," Peter said. "But he couldn't speak. The nurses were crying, too."

In WA the much-publicized camel man started to walk from the south of the state up to the far north west. En route, he received a message that a certain twenty-seven-year-old American psychologist, then touring Australia, was interested in joining him, if he cared for the company of a female.

"She was welcome," he recalled. "I was feeling lonely, and I was getting tired of talking to the camels and getting no replies. I wanted to relate to another human being."

The unlikely partnership was not a happy one, it seems. The American girl was "very bombastic" while Peter was reflective. "We used to fight a lot," he said, "and sometimes when I upset her over something she wouldn't talk to me all day. She was trained in a big Yankee university, but I used to tell her she was ignorant about life in general and people in particular."

South of Port Hedland, near Whim Creek, the traveller attempted to jump his camels across a cattle grid. "It was a stupid thing to do," he admitted, ruefully. "At first I tried to undo the wire on the fence either side of the grid, but it couldn't be done, so I took a chance going over the grid and I've regretted it ever since." One of his camels, Sin, had a hind leg trapped between the steel rails. Unable to release itself, the camel laid down. As Peter fondled its head, trying to decide a course of action, Sin suddenly lurched; a snap was heard as the leg bone broke, and soon the animal was free with a hind leg hanging uselessly. "I was very upset," Peter remembered. "The publican from the Whim Creek pub brought a rifle and he shot poor Sin. It took six bullets."

Somewhere in the bush south of Port Hedland the camel man's remaining animals ate leaves from the lethal ironwood tree. "I didn't know anything was wrong until I noticed the camels were splattered with vomit," he said. "They were walking around distressed and were in agony. I watched them die, one after the other; they were covered in their own vomit and groaning." His American companion, deeply upset, wept uncontrollably for hours then, recovering her composure, she hurriedly packed her knapsack and brusquely announced: "I'm gone, out of here."

"She left me there," Peter sighed, still bewildered. "She just left me there by the road with my dead camels, hopped in a car and drove away – just like that!"

In his lonely camp that night, the grieving man scribbled into his diary: "I have been thinking of all the thousands of miles we have walked together, through heat, rain, across deserts, making friends with hundreds of children – tireless, uncomplaining, all to end in agony and death in this incredibly beautiful place. When my camels died, part of me died, too. All my family are dead. Everything I loved and wanted and held important in my life has gone. Last night I cried bitterly as I said goodbye to them."

Peter Holmes eventually returned to Alice Springs about ten years ago, his initial ambition being to find himself some new camels in order to continue his grand trek around the Australian coastline. Now aged sixty-three, he settled into a small flat, acquired possessions, and succumbed to the material comforts of modernity. Happiness and contentment have eluded him. He says: "All this is a millstone around my neck. I'm on a pension and sitting around waiting to die." Peter, an articulate man, is writing a book about his experiences in the outback with his beloved Sand, Sin

and Sorrow. He also composes sentimental verses about his profound love of the bush, the earth and its animals.

He reflects: "Most people these days don't know what it's like to go out into the desert with camels. It's a deeply spiritual thing. Out there, when the sun was setting, and the birds were twittering in the trees around my camp, I had a very real feeling that someone was looking after me.

"It must have been my imagination, but it was a beautiful feeling as I sat there in the heat and cold and rain and loneliness."

These days in Alice Springs, the weary bushman walks each day to the nearest pub for a bottle and strolls back again. His life style is abnormal, he believes, and it is slowly killing him. When he has the money to spare, and nostalgia claims his thoughts, he buys small bunches of flowers to place on the graves of the pioneering Afghan camel men who lie in the old Alice Springs cemetery.

"I have a great respect for those old fellows," he confesses. "No-one cares about them these days, but I do."

In the future, he hopes, he will sell off his material possessions, locate some more camels, turn his back to the world and strike out once more into the scorching western deserts in search of Lasseter's reef of gold.

"I don't want to die in a flat," he says. "I want to go out again into the outback country with my camels. I want to walk till I drop down dead and, if I'm not dead enough, I'd like to get up and keep walking until I am."

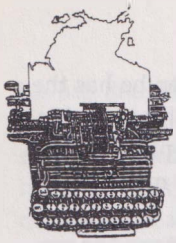
Continuum:

a cheremis[1]

The blue pool is open
It is open to the swimmers
The red ranges are watching
They are watching all the swimmers
The swimmers leave hard edge for wet centre
The wet centre, echo of an ancient sea
An ancient sea, rippling red and blue

Mardijah Simpson

1. Poetry form from the Mari people in Russia written after participating in the Secret Lives of Language Workshop. The public pool re-opened today (14 September 1996).



Rose Coppock

Wilbeah, 1946

WILBEAH, OUR LONG-HELD DREAM, was a place where low, stony hills gave way to flat grassland. The Basedow Range lay like a slumbering giant to one side, although different editions of the Northern Territory pastoral map did not agree about its exact location. Far away, flat topped Mt Connor guarded the horizon in the opposite direction, a study of changing colours as each day progressed.

We set up camp under a mulga tree on high ground overlooking flat land cleft by a gutter towards the west. There was a deep salty well where the road to Curtin Springs and Mt Connor crossed the gutter. The shallow, freshwater well my father had dug lay between it and our camp.

I helped Dad cart wagon loads of sweet scented turpentine bush to cover the roof and sides of our new bough shed. We threaded brush between pairs of uprights to make walls. Our roofing iron was slung on mulga rails beneath bushes in a temporary fashion. A dresser and wardrobe divided the sleeping quarters from the living area. A stone and mud chimney was built around the wood-burning stove. Dad laid flagstones for the floor. The mulga tree around which the hut was built rose through our new roof. The lower branches provided hanging space beside the dining table, a clear reminder that nothing was impossible.

I REMEMBER MY FATHER timbering the well. He spent days chopping down trees and carting logs – stout, long-lasting mulga. He set up a saw-horse of crossed rails to hold each log while he sawed off the roughly cut ends and made deep joggles – one near each end – to fit those of the opposite pair. Each set of timber consisted of four pieces that fitted neatly together and sat snugly between its neighbours.

Sets were assembled in a stack on the ground. The one that would be topmost was made last, and when it was done the order of the stack was reversed. The horn set, which would go in the well first, or deepest down, was made first, but later it would be topmost in the reassembled stack. The horn set had longer ends that must be dug into the walls where the strata was solid enough to support the weight of all the timber that would rest above it.

Dad lowered each piece by windlass and bucket. A strap held the windlass handle when the bucket reached the required depth. He then climbed partway down and stood across the well with one foot in a toehold on either side. There was little space to manoeuvre: that was the reason the timber was fitted so carefully above ground, with little additional chipping away of walls or wood necessary.

The work demanded care. My father was constantly climbing up and down on a dangling hemp rope, lifting each log from the bucket and setting it at the side of the well, halfway down. Lost footing would have sent him straight to the bottom. There was no safety helmet or harness, and no-one capable of rescuing him if he had been hurt. Accidents were unthinkable for that very reason, and it was everyone's job to ensure that they didn't happen.

BIDDY GAVE BIRTH TO A LITTER of nine puppies on my parents' bed when we were all too busy to notice. One was kept for me and I named him Boozer. He lost an eye chasing wild camels, which added to his bold reputation and daredevil appearance.

We discovered that our camels were lonely. When travellers hooshed their animals down near the house

Roger and Dodger always came to sit nearby. One day we found Aboriginal children sliding down the hump of Dodger, a camel that had never been ridden. They sprawled over his outstretched neck and rubbed his ears, while Dodger's head and neck lay submissively along the ground, a fatuous expression on his overgrown teddy bear face.

A greater supply of water was necessary before our cattle could be brought from Mt Connor. Deepening the well had not added to its supply, and Dad was afraid of striking a salt stream and ruining what drinking water we had. He rode Roger to Mt Connor to explain this to Paddy, and agreed to look after Mt Connor while the DeConlays went on holiday.

Dad returned with all he would ever find of our thirty or so horses – Socks and Conkerberry, Redwings, Vanish and two or three others. The rest had taken off in that unfenced land and could have been anywhere. Six years later a drover would pick up one horse, for which Bob Buck would collect ten pounds (twenty dollars) and post it to my father.

My mother asked worriedly about our cattle, but Dad assured her that they were safe. Paddy would have looked after them because he wanted a share of their calves, the agreed agistment price, he said.

ONCE A WEEK, riding Socks and leading Conkerberry packed with a water canteen, swag and food, Dad followed animal pads in a short cut across Lake Amadeus to Mt Connor. After track riding and checking waters he returned home, borrowing dusky hours of extreme early morning and late evening, lighting spinifex to blaze a trail that would be easier to follow the next time.

At Wilbeah we could chart his progress by a line of smoke columns, and at night by the twinkling glow of a dozen distant fires snaking along the horizon like the lit windows of a train. Several times that winter Dad glimpsed the faint flare of Aurora Australis low in the southern sky. Telling us about it, he made each trip sound like a glorious adventure, although he lost three precious days each week when time was all too short.

MY PARENTS BOUGHT GOATS to provide us with milk and meat. Mum helped me milk them each morning. They needed constant attention. They might be left dozing in the sun, or chewing cud, and be out of sight when you looked, moments later.

My mother yarded them while she cooked bread: I was supposed to be doing Correspondence School, though often I was sent in a mad dash to halt the fleeing herd. My parents were scared of me getting lost, so Mother and I mostly shepherded together. Our shoes wore out on the stony ground and Dad made us new ones. Because my mother's pair hurt her feet, I inherited those as well.

Our sanity was saved when an Aboriginal family arrived to help us out. The woman and child took care of the goats: the man assisted Dad whenever he wasn't hunting kangaroo to feed his family. One day the man offered Mum a billy-can from which faint cheeping sounds came. Inside were four small fledgling mulga parrots. My mother looked deeper into the proffered billy, and then wished she hadn't. It was packed with dead, partly feathered, baby budgerigars.

"What for?" my mother asked wonderingly.

The man rolled his eyes at such ignorance. "Eat'm! Good tucker!" He smiled broadly.

Mum accepted the gift of mulga parrots and we reared them on moistened biscuit.

DAD BEGAN SINKING a new well a mile or so from the house. The DeConlays, returned from holiday, divined the area and were not favourably impressed. I cut a divining stick in imitation of the others, and found the fork dipped every time I walked over a certain place between the house and goatyard. My father, unimpressed with any of the proclaimed findings, continued to work at his chosen site.

As the well deepened he had to use dynamite. Mum was nervous about that, but Dad assured her he lit each shot from a burning rag dangled at the end of a long stick from the top of the well. One morning I arrived with a billy of tea and Dad sent me and his helper off in opposite directions while he climbed down, lit the fuses, climbed up, then ran a safe distance before three explosions rattled the nearby hills.

Now that the well was deeper the stick had become too short, he explained when I asked about it. There was no need to tell my mother and make her worry for no good reason, he added. I don't think I ever did.

ONE MIDWINTER DAY Mum and I accompanied Dad by wagon to Angas Downs to meet Connellan's

mail plane. It had not come the previous fortnight because of rain. The sky was again dull and overcast with a biting south-east wind. We were soon chilled to the bone. As Dad lit a fire at the edge of the 'drome fine misty rain began to fall.

I shivered, my eyes watering from smoke. We had almost given up hope of the plane's arrival when the faraway drone of its engine became audible.

Two plump bags of mail caused my mother's face to brighten. That changed when, instead of the usual fat letters from Nan, a couple of urgent telegrams fell from the first bag, their message weeks old, stark and unexpected. Nan had died and been buried three weeks before. My mother, her only daughter, had not known that she was sick.

"I'm sorry, old girl! So sorry!" As Dad put his arms around my mother she burst into tears. I had never seen a grown-up cry before.

"Misfortunes come in threes." Dad spoke softly as if to himself. My mother gasped. I cried then, partly for my grandmother, Mum, myself – cold, miserable and sad – and for whatever future tragedies there might be. Losing most of our horses had been bad, Nan's death was worse ... Isolated by grief, I had never felt more alone. My mother cried, silently and without hope, for weeks – months.

Next morning Dad was puzzled to find that a fine, white substance like spun sugar had formed on the sides of his new well. Tasting it, he discovered that it was salt.

The Box

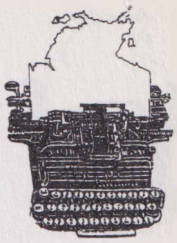
Accumulated a man,
mortgage, relationship,
kilometres apart
to be employed
and pave the way
for early settlement
inert on the doorstep,
four by two,
the sum of it all.

Maureen Gibson

The Rumour

Did you know ...
she ...
he ...
really ...
These words manifest
beyond the realms
of assuming,
we know
the person.

Maureen Gibson



the inside shell

her ears
        like the smooth
inside of a shell
        soft and strong
hear me
        hear me
though   it's not always words
spoken
songs
sung
some things
                are too sweet
                for the tongue
instead
she listens from the inside
slowly
        carefully
                knowing
you always hear
the sea
        when you listen
like a shell

Karyn Sassella

in the waterless land

i lost my breeziness
                in the waterless land
i lost
        the softness
                of the sea

i lost
        my ability to
                dinner party/garden party
                street scene/act mean

i lost the map
                i always do that

i got lost   in between

Karyn Sassella

Dilly Bag Of Bones

I nearly missed
the splash of yellow
flitting past my window,
two lovers secretly
weaving behind the leaves
stopping only to pluck
more twisted threads
from distant neighbours' gardens.

Tiny perfectly woven
dilly bag
hanging outside
my kitchen window
rocking in the wind
resisting rain and sun
and prying hands,
eggshells quivering within.

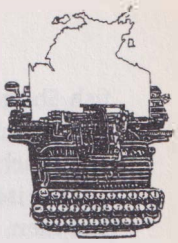
Bald head breaking out
seeking its mother's warm belly
wings stretching
anticipating freedom.
Watching, waiting
for that first meeting
of my son
and the baby.

All morning
prodding and pecking
trying to wake the baby,
pretending it hasn't happened.
At a distance others spying
gossiping about the unborn,
no comfort there
numbness with the closing shadows.

Too many ants and flies
prying and gnawing,
little dilly bag of bones
rocking in the wind.
Climbing up, already knowing
wishing it wasn't so
faultless feathered body
still now, life stolen.

Returning only once
seeking answers,
was it the storm
too much food, not enough
blaming herself, him
God's desire,
finding only questions
and relentless silence.

Janice Barr



Alexis Wright

The Chinky Apple Tree

MOMENTS BEFORE HER DEATH the old woman had difficulty in pinpointing the exact image of what happened first, or placing into a precise order a series of events that had triggered her dying. Around and around the unsorted pictures flew in her mind to the rhythm of her hair caught in the dust of a wild wind. Jumbled with an image seen time and again in dreams over a lifetime which was now clouded by a tangled web of events. She always saw the same tree. The sea of pale green leaves known to her from almost every conceivable angle. Round. Like the bellies of small fish. In those dreams she does not see herself but she is always present, almost as if she is inside the person in the dream, but she knows it is not her. Why she knows it is neither herself nor her body remains her mystery. She has often tried to capture their life without success. To identify the body she invades in these dreams to see the tree through their eyes. Neither was she able to locate the tree, although she had seen enough Chinky Apple trees to know it could have been any, but not the one from her memory of her grandmother's backyard.

In the mind of herself as a small child laying on her back on the cool ground, the wind sent the small silvery fish streaming down, one behind the other, from the pale understorey. A touch so slight that hits her on the forehead before falling onto the ground. Afterwards, only her outline remained on the ground uncovered from the fallen leaves.

At the point of dying at her Grandmother's age, she is still trying to piece together the same images into a sequence of events. Where she once stood on the dirt floor at the door of her Grandmother's house made decades ago from rusted tin, she had smelt the dust storm in summer hitting the top of the tree and bending it. Swish! Swoosh! The tree waved to and fro, as though waving goodbye. One day she left during a storm and never came back. Whenever she has returned (many times over the years) to the childhood memory, she becomes the swarm of grasshoppers that emerge after rain like a green cloud from the fresh grass outside the yard. A swarm that turns as sharply as a guitar is plucked when played with precision, as if returning a memory to the tree while devouring every leaf.

FROM THE WOODEN BRIDGE the two men fish over its side by moonlight tonight. Nearby, where the old woman is standing she relies on the familiarity of habit to comfort herself. She feels relaxed in the expectation of being together every night with the two men. A habit that binds them together. She is long blind to understanding the reality of her presence on the bridge by her fading eyesight. While she looks over the rail, she sees by remembering the waters shine in a million ripples from the light of stars while passing under the bridge. It was like a bridge of the woman's world of long ago that stretched out over a spinifex landscape where on nights such as these only stray cats prowled around snarling at each other in that dry stony creek bed. Long ago when she was a child she might have wished for these running waters where the men fish.

In her mind her eyes are alongside the men who can see upstream the cod sitting, suspended, almost motionless in the shallow water. The water with stripes of purple and blue and silver fish. It is the way it has always been since they were boys. They sat with damp trousers on a mossy bridge. Slippery from fish guts and the stench of decades of yesterday's dead

fish. She got lost in the hours of stooped, bristly faces that sternly scaled fish on the wooden planks. And the stench of fish. A sign of wellbeing and relaxing in all that is familiar and as strong as a bond between two men.

WHERE WAS THE WOMAN? Were they really waiting and waiting for fish? Waiting for the fish to move? She knew it was up to her to make it happen. Yet when the heavy clouds set off a drizzle that felt cold on her face, she still waited before deciding to take the slow walk home. She sold grasshoppers for bait. Before, when the two men were boys, she decided to only sell them one grasshopper every day. And the boys grew into men. And the grasshoppers came and went with the years. Sometimes in hues of green, or grey, or white or a mixture of all. Today, the green one with its grey tints stood on the twigs of couch with dry roots. She thought its eyes were like glass, staring out through glass, and from inside the glass jar at her. This morning when the dew lay on the dead grasses outside, she thought it should have flown when it wriggled to set itself free under her foot. It had the chance. What bigger handicap was there than old age? What would it have seen as it jumped towards the glare of the sun, the blue sky glistening through transparent wings as its flight whispered past the mulberry tree? The men took it with a scowl. They paid her reluctantly. She smiled. They always had to pay. Ever since they were small boys neither knew how to catch his bait so they had to pay.

She had watched the creature struggling for hours with its stick legs, trying to stay afloat, impaled on a hook at the end of the line. A struggle that is so close to her now. She had seen the men smoke and exhale. The men talked and laughed and reckoned it was a narrow escape and smoked and exhaled. They could not remember all of the times that they had tricked her. There had been so many times in a lifetime.

"Remember . . . must have been when we were seven? . . . was it seven? Yes! That's right. When I stole money that time and got into trouble."

"We were getting ripped off even then."

"Extortion I reckon, making kids pay for grasshoppers."

They talked about other times when she had refused to sell one more even though it might have made the difference in landing in that big cod that was just waiting to be caught. That fish must have been the subject of talk between the two boys for years. It lived its life many times over in their minds. They grew into men on the same story. In their minds it was always the one that got away. Like the good times in life that were always there for the picking for anyone else but always just out of reach for them. If only there could have been one more chance.

It happened so many years ago and she still did not know why. She had one more at the time and she could have just given it to them. After all, they had seen it all wrapped up in a hanky when she had dropped their money into her purse. She had watched sweat of frustration on their little boy faces as if to say 'go on'. But she walked away. She had thought them wasteful. They were always wasteful. From that day on she only sold them one live grasshopper each day for five cents. It was the price that paid for and ensured the constancy of their companionship on the bridge continuing for over thirty years.

She heard all of their conversations and was implicated through her silence. They watched while she stood at the end of the bridge, watching them, sipping from a port bottle, the cheapest in a brown paper bag, laughing at the little boys growing into men. Waiting for someone to come by and take her home. And someone always came. Someone she called "Angel", or "Love". Someone to replace the love that had broken her heart over thirty years ago and whom she still called "Love". Now "Love" became anyone. And over the years she worked hard to look nice, smell nice to the "nice" men who came by and dragged her over the bridge. They jeered "Yer just a Black Mole" and "Gin" when she insisted on being treated like a lady as they knocked her small frame onto the ground. Most times finally dumping her amongst the prickly bushes along the way.

"Keep going," the boys had whispered in earlier days, bowing their heads and nudging each other forward. Pretending they didn't see or smell stale alcohol on the downwind as they hurried past with their fish.

By the time they were men they could walk past without a glance or a single acknowledgment if they saw her there. By moonlight, the landscape served no interest past the fish under the bridge. The path was simply a corridor through the dead prickles and grass killed on either side by a poison spray owned by the

Council men of the municipality. Neither man indicated any reference to the job done by day over every footpath in town. Money in the shirt pocket paid for that.

Either man might have wanted to make his individual comment from time to time whenever they saw her passed out indecently in the dead bindies, but thought it was not worth it. In any case, each knew what the other thought so that their conversations could take place in the head without either wasting his breath.

"It's hot," one might say finally.

Then after awhile,

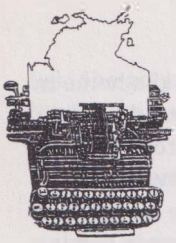
"Too right by Jove," might have been the reply.

She did not see the door being flung open while she fumbled with the key in the lock in the dark. She depended only on familiarity and touch. Sight a blurred vision made clear with a distorted memory of pictures that formed slowly from the past to match familiar sounds. She knew they had never come this far before. Her ears strained while listening for the next and the next sound of gravel crushing behind her. She had given them the one grasshopper in a glass jar. She did not understand their sounds coming from behind. Sounds not being made by her. Sounds she recognized from the passage of time to belong to two sons of a woman who once had love. Stopped whenever she stopped. Then extended the sound of her sound when she started walking again. When they had shoved her aside and begun to forcefully open the door she had not realized what was happening to stop it.

The thirty-year growth of insects which she had hoarded inside her house grew restless. Over the years the few grasshoppers that originally had a home in "Love's" shoe box were allowed to spread as their numbers increased until every lonely room in that house was full again. Together they had watched her leave through the glass windows in the morning. In the dark house they had heard the sounds coming from a distance. Known she had not come alone and grew more fearful with each hesitation of fear in her step. Panic spread like an electric current moving down a cable that connected them as one unified force. In an instant they formed a cloud ready for flight. The moment the moonlight shone through the narrow crack of the opening door the insects swarmed. Their cloud of strength pierced itself through the narrow opening, forcing the door to slam back against the wall. The spikes on a thousand outstretched legs lacerating the faces and arms of the men while at the same time knocking them to the ground.

The old woman did not realize that the speed of life lifted from a memory of her childhood had overtaken her. She tried to piece together jumbled images of life from the images of dreams and place them together into a logical sequence of events. The sound of the drone grew louder until she could not piece anything together. The noise did not stop, lifting her away into the swarm that lifted higher into the air, while turning to and fro as sharply and with such precision as a musician strumming his guitar.

The swarm flew away over the bridge of a world stretched out over a spinifex landscape and from the sky came down to land on a Chinky Apple tree where the understorey looked like the bellies of small fish. The leaves fell on the old woman lying on the ground. And the tree was left bare.



Jennifer Moore

my mother's chair is empty

My mother's favourite armchair of fine blue velvet stands in the corner, catching the warmth of the afternoon sun, and she sits upon it, her legs stretched out, head tilted eyes closed, her smile falling crookedly towards her chin where the scar the shape of a cross shines like Calvary. It has been with her since childhood, when she told her mother a spider had bitten her and her mother took her father's shaving blade and deftly sliced her skin, sucking the blood from the wound and praying to God the venom was gone, because she had heard tales of poisonous creatures in this land which could strike the life from a child in the blink of an eye. She had never wanted to travel across the sea to live in this wilderness, but her husband had a dream which could not be contained under the grey clouds of the northern hemisphere, which pressed down on his soul until he could no longer breathe. He counted the steps from their small flat along the dank streets carved from the city by the tread of thousands, its prisoners, to the place where he worked stacking shelves in the warehouse, one, then the next then the next then the next. Endless counting, his breath, his pulse, his life. Until he could endure it no longer and they packed their bag and closed the door, the remnants of damp steeped in their skin. My mother nestled in her mother's arms, eyes closed already forgetting the smell of coal fires, and the steep winding stairs which led to an attic from which you could see the masts of ships bristling with promise.

He counted the waves, each roll of the ship, the planks on the deck, the prickles of stars in the sky. In the light of the moon, as it slid on the crests, he counted the fish that swam in the brine and the grains of sand on the ocean floor, marking his journey with a metronomic rhythm, an abundance of numbers which incessantly flowed through his brain. His wife was silent, her eyes transfixed on the horizon which had hidden her past and concealed the future, providing few clues for the present. She found no solace in the blue of the sea which had swallowed her place of birth, the buildings slowly shrinking and sinking until only a smudge of smoke from the factory stacks was visible in the sky and then that, too, was lost to the setting sun, which pierced the sky with shards of red like a conquered battlefield.

Her child, my mother, clung to her breasts, her lips softly sucking the milk of her life, its thin sweet taste like elixir in her mouth. Her hair was the colour of dusk, which wrapped itself in hazy wisps around her mother's arm. She lay cocooned in cotton lace, with the sound of the waves and her father's voice swelling in her ears, and her mother's breath warm on her cheeks.

When on dry land, my mother's father counted the steps they walked for five full days, until they arrived at a narrow creek littered with pebbles which wound its way through a wide grassy plain, the edge of which was defined by an escarpment of yellow-grey rock. This, he said, was the place where they should begin, and he felled some trees and sowed some seed and crafted a farm of sorts, although the house was crooked so that when it rained he could count the drops as they spilled through the roof, splashing onto the stony floor until over the years a smooth, shiny trough was formed.

My mother's mother bore five daughters who, like most siblings, had many things in common and many

not. Sometimes visitors would confuse them, calling one by the other's name without realizing the mistake, and the sisters out of politeness or a sense of play would not tell the visitors of their error, but would giggle later when lying in bed watching the stars creep across the night sky. They slept in bunk beds in a long room, which had been a verandah so that the roof sloped steeply, and the top louvre of the window was at ceiling height. From the top bunk it was possible to slide the louvre free and climb out onto a little ledge which jutted out from the roof over the back porch, and on hot nights they would perch there like starlings, watching the fat-bodied moths circle the bulb which defended their home from the dark.

One day a traveller arrived at their home. He was tall and thin and walked with a swooping gait, his grey cotton trousers flapping against his legs, creating the effect of an eagle searching for prey. He knocked at the door with a rat-a-tat-tat, as though beating a drum, and requested a cup of tea. He said "I have been to India, where elephants roam the streets and the air is pungent with spices which burn your nostrils and stain your fingers the colour of gold" and he waved his leathery hand in front of their eyes, so that they could see he was telling the truth.

My mother was ten and she watched the traveller wind himself like a coil of rope into the old brown armchair which had a musty smell like hay after a shower of rain. The traveller said "I have learned the secret of life. Each one of us has a certain number of breaths allotted to us, and when they are all used up, we die." He spoke haltingly, drawing long breaths at well spaced intervals, which had the effect of rupturing his speech, so that it fell out in little clots which slid from his mouth and embedded themselves in his long thick beard, now crusted with the residue of language and travel.

Her father shifted in his seat, his fingers tapping the seconds on his knee, feeling the movement of air in his lungs. He looked into the traveller's eyes and understood the purpose of his visit. For many years my mother's father had recorded in notebooks the number of breaths he consumed each day until the small garden shed was filled, each pencil stroke a piece of his life. Sometimes he would stand in the doorway and look at the archives of his existence, and wonder at the way the complexities of his lifetime could be reduced to neatly stacked piles of paper.

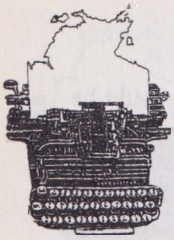
Not long after the traveller passed, lightning struck the garden shed and it burned to the ground, and my mother's father rose from his bed to watch the flames, and when it was reduced to a smoulder of embers he shook his head and died.

My mother's mother stoically remained in this land, yet never learned to embrace the heat of its summer nor the breadth of its sky. It resonated with a mysteriousness that defied translation. Yet her daughters were of this land, having at birth assumed a foreignness which perplexed their mother. She would watch them playing in the sprawling yard, chasing the red feathered chooks, their skin like ripe peaches, full and soft and plump with a golden glow. Even my mother, who had been born across the sea, was transformed by the sun and the dust. Sometimes my mother glimpsed the memory of another place in her mother's eyes, tinged with sorrow like a sepia print from long ago. My mother struggled to remember, and sometimes she could hear the slap of water against a boat, but there was no image to be seen. Only a vast emptiness. So she girded herself from her mother's pain with the belief that nothing exists which you cannot see.

When my mother was twenty she had a dream. She rode an elephant through a narrow street which wound its way down a long, steep hill to the ocean, which was filled with silver fish shining like stars, then her father's voice began to count and a ship sailed by and she saw that she was standing on its deck. The next day she said to her mother "There is only the sky to lead me from here, nothing else" and she folded her clothes in her worn leather satchel, the clasp of which was broken, and she kissed each of her sisters and mother goodbye and walked down the path past the chooks and the dust and her father's grave to the gate, where she turned and said "We each have a journey to make, and this is mine."

MY MOTHER'S FAVOURITE armchair of fine blue velvet stands in the corner, like an empty sky catching the warmth of the afternoon sun. And I count the drops of brine that fall from my eyes.

Grief is distilled from the past.



The town of Alice Springs lies at the foot of the McDonnell Ranges in Central Australia, site of the Yeperrenye caterpillar dreaming of the Arrernte traditional owners. The health problems of the Arrernte and other Aboriginal peoples, such as chronic diabetes and heart disease, have been well documented. In late 1996 Alice Springs was blessed with its very own 'Hamburger Restaurant', courtesy of you know who . . .

McPoem

Take away, take away,
taken away,
gone!
Take away our health;
take away the wealth of the land.
The desert sands will bloom
beneath this Coca Cola rain,
bringing forth a painful blossom
of bright red paper cups
from the soggy mulch of
burger cartons,
french fries
and the empty lies of
yesterday's
discarded junk mail.

The pale faced clown
presides above it all,
laughing at the jokes
the profit margins tell
in prosperous whispers
none is meant to hear.
Come nearer.
If we buy,
he will sell us
all we think we need.
His advertisements stoke
our well conditioned greed.

Golden arches frame the night –
a white fella sacred site
calling those who own the land –
diabetic bodies already branded
by the white man's food.
And they will come
in the morning light,
to see a sight reflected in
plate glass windows
once familiar,
now strange –
the sunstruck mountains
of the caterpillar dreaming.
Yeperrenye now renamed –
McDonalds Range . . .

David Kirkby

Japanangka's Dog

Reversing out from
the Lajamanu store
there came a bump
a single strangled yelp
and the certain knowledge
that at last
I had hit a dog.
Old Japanangka
in the seat beside me
simply shrugged.

That was my dawg
he said
conversationally,
glancing out the window,
and deftly changed the subject –
harassing me about
housing, a new water tank,
a school for his outstation –
issues less dead
than the dog outside the store.

I felt there was more
that I should do.
Take me to Parnta
was all he said
when I asked, staring straight ahead,
so I did,
driving out across the desert
beneath the tattered blue
tarpaulin of the sky
past scattered gums
like tent pegs
hammered in the sand.

We pulled up by the windmill
and the old tin shed,
unloaded flour drums,
corned beef,
5 packets of tea,
a dusty swag
and a plastic bag of onions.
Japanangka sat
on a box beneath a tree
as I prepared to go,
not knowing if I should,
still not knowing what to say.
I climbed behind the wheel,
glanced his way.
A bland smile crossed his face –
Proper good one, that dawg,
'e was . . . proper good.

David Kirkby

The Debriding

I have a wound.
Upward and inward
deep and fatal,
and never quite finished.

You saw a faint scar,
guessed it unhealed.
Stuck in a probe –
saw on it decay.

I let you –
casual, cut me open.
You think I am
a thunder egg.

You think it is a wound
debride it, excise it.
Bring the purulence
into the light.

As one is cleaned,
another appears.
You see I have a scalpel too
and I am still cutting.

You ask me –
smell it,
taste it, speak
until you are heard.

This evil, viscous
black tar
will not wash off with
soap and water and civil words.

This is me, my blood!
All that has pumped
through these walls,
now I am bleeding.

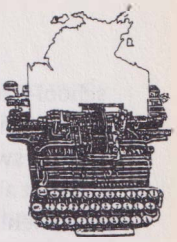
You want it out –
wiped alcoholic clean.
You press me
to cliffs and trenches.

My eyes are never shut.
I see yours closed.
Blocked ears,
gagging on every mouthful.

I am splayed out
like a welcome mat,
waiting for you
to wipe your feet.

Val O'Neill

Stephen Gray



Terry W. Tatham, Solicitor

I THINK SOMETIMES ABOUT my interview with Tatham in Melbourne. Tatham was combining the interview with a national Labor Party conference. He held it on the thirty-fifth floor of the Rialto Building in Collins Street, in an office belonging to one of the other 'Labor lawyers' at the conference. When I arrived he was already waiting for me at his borrowed desk. Angular, restless, with hawk-like eyes and eyebrows that were blacker and bushier even than mine, he filled the office with an impatient energy which I quite wrongly took to be somehow ironic, an appreciation of the fact that here we were both outsiders, revolutionaries even, in the corporate citadel of the enemy.

For he barely talked to me about law. He spent practically the entire interview telling me stories about Darwin. Whether they were rich or poor, Tatham told me, in Darwin everybody grew up rough in those days. He used to hang around with the Aboriginal kids from the Retta Dixon Home, had wandered around in the bush, trapped fish and kangaroo and swum swollen rivers. The whole Territory thing. Only when he was fourteen did he go down to boarding-school in Adelaide (Tatham said "going down" to Adelaide, as Oxford University students used to speak of "going down" to London), and then on to university.

"Darwin hasn't changed much," he said. "We've got air-conditioned offices now. Some of the old discomforts are gone. But scratch the surface, and you'll find it's still the same place. Rough and ready" – he glanced around, as if to underline the contrast between the surroundings he was describing and our present ones – "and lawless, at times. It's a funny thing, being a lawman in a lawless town. If you can stand it six months, you might never want to leave."

Terry Tatham wasn't showily or expansively reminiscent. On the contrary, each story was told in a sharp, almost dismissive manner, his perfect mimicry of people's voices and expressions peeled off with contemptuous boredom. He didn't *seem* to be going out of his way to impress. He didn't seem to be anything at all other than what he was. He gave me a sense, for the first time in my life, of people who cared nothing for what society thought – of people who were daring, arrogant, unscrupulous, who were too big for the confines of the city I had known.

Is this really true? I packed my bags into the back of my old Holden and prepared to set off on the long drive. I had been to South-East Asia twice before, but in Australia I had never been north of Sydney. Perhaps what I packed is some indication of my state of mind. No suit. One tie, and three collared shirts. One semi-good pair of shoes. Lots and lots of tin cans, and a can opener. Mosquito coils. About a dozen refill canisters for my gas cooker. Two Army Disposal tarpaulins, one a spare in case the first one got torn or blown away. Why did I pack these latter things? Because I was not sure that such exotic items would be obtainable a hundred miles or so north of Brisbane, once one was in the tropics.

It didn't occur to me until several months after I had arrived in Darwin. I had sold the old Holden by then, signed my contract of articles and spent time enough at Tatham's for there to be no longer any doubt about the truth. I had been had. Or rather, I had allowed myself to be had. What had taken place on the thirty-fifth floor of the Rialto that day was a seduction.

SCENE WITH TERRY TATHAM. An argument over billing. We are sitting in his office – myself in the low,

school-like chair in which Tatham's less important clients, the poor ones, sit, and Tatham in the black leather swivel-chair behind the great expanse of his desk. At about my eye-level, sitting on top of a pile of documents tied with a red ribbon, I can see his nameplate. Terry W. Tatham, it says, in gilt-edged lettering. The 'W' stands for 'Whittington' or 'Whittingham', I forget which. I heard him saying it once, and he pronounced the 'Wh' with that upper-class English whistling sound, like the sound of a cane swishing through cold air.

"You're not within coo-ee," he says. He is holding my bill in the tips of his fingers, his nostrils flared, his lips thin with contempt. "You're not within a bull's roar of enough. Have you been to see Rita recently? Has she told you how much it's costing to run this business these days?"

"I don't know how much it's costing." My voice in contrast to his is calm, too calm. "I'm just going according to the scale, that's all."

Terry Tatham picks up his glasses, gold-framed of course, and sitting beside one of those expensive crystal paperweights. He adjusts them low on his nose and begins to read aloud from the document in a high, scathing voice. "One by standard telephone call, fourteenth of June. Six dollars fifty." He pauses, stares over the tops of the frames at me, just the way I have seen him examining hostile witnesses in court. "Six dollars fifty? That's not even enough for me to buy your lunch."

"I was only organizing for him to come in for his next appointment."

"You should get the secretaries to do that. Next item. Preparation and drafting of Work Health application. Twelve dollars."

"Twelve dollars. That's what it says on the scale."

"One hundred and twenty dollars, absolute *minimum*." He selects a fountain pen from the sheaf of them sitting in their holder by the paperweight, and, unscrewing the top and without a hint of irony, draws a big red 'zero' in front of the figure on the bill. "And if you made it three hundred I'd have no problems justifying that to the Registrar. None whatsoever. Two hours' research and preparation, at one hundred and ten dollars per hour . . ."

"That's for a solicitor, not an articled clerk."

He gives the merest flick of his wrist. "And another hour to draft it. For goodness' sake, it'd take *me* nearly an hour to draft one of those things. And then there's disbursements – telephone calls, postage, outgoings, all that sort of thing. Plus the care-skill factor. Have you thought of the care-skill factor?"

"I don't even know what the care-skill factor is."

"The care-skill factor's what you get when you've got *me* supervising you." Tatham looks at me, triumphant, his clenched jaw giving one slight jerk, as though stopping itself from adding more. He changes roles now: he is no longer the advocate, he is the judge giving sentence, his voice unforgiving and remote. "That Local Court scale was drawn up in 1971. I'm not going to cop that. Use the Supreme Court scale – use whatever you have to to bump it up. Help me to justify your wages."

There is nothing I can say. I do not want to say anything. Leaving the bill with him, red-pen scribblings and all, I get up and turn away from him to leave the room. As I walk out he calls after me, his voice broken suddenly in a shrill cry of fury:

"And get a new shirt!"

ANOTHER LITTLE SCENE with Tatham. It takes place in my office this time. My office is right next to Tatham's, but it is about a third of the size, and instead of the nameplate and the paperweight and the bristle of fountain pens, I keep on my desk a packet of Irish Moss cough lollies, some biscuits and a jar of Vegemite. Hardly likely to impress my professional status on the clients. Not that I get that many important ones – only the dregs, the ones Tatham gets bored with or can't be bothered seeing, or the ones off the street who want to complain that their Social Security's been cut off, or sue the Government because the power lines above their flat are beaming twenty-four-hour CIA propaganda into their brains. The poor ones and the lunatics. The ones who don't care that I haven't got a clean shirt.

This time, however, Tatham's made a bit of a miscalculation. The clients he shuffled off into my office three months before were business people – a dopey Germanic father and son pair with receding foreheads, to be sure, suppliers of industrial kitchen equipment by trade, but still capable of raising trouble when things went wrong. They were being sued by their own southern suppliers for thirty thousand dollars' worth of equipment they hadn't paid for. Their defence was that each and every piece of equipment had arrived late, or in the wrong place, or with essential parts missing, and that fixing these problems had cost them almost the full value of the equip-

ment. The only problem was – and in my ignorance it took me until the day of the hearing to work this out – none of their evidence would stand up in court. And so the clients had gone down. Judgement against them for thirty thousand dollars, plus another fifteen thousand dollars' costs. For three months I had been unable to discuss this case with Tatham, but three seconds after hearing this news he came sweeping into my office like a dark cloud.

"What's happened here?" He held the thin Brief to Counsel from the file in one hand, the forefinger of the other rapping on its plastic-covered surface. "What the bloody hell's been going on with *this*?"

"I left you messages." I sat forward, straightened my back, looked up at an almost dizzying angle into Tatham's fierce hawk-like eyes. "I told you I needed to see you about this case. I couldn't handle it by myself."

Tatham stared down at me a second or two longer; then, almost imperceptibly, drew back. Abruptly his eyes flickered away, down to the surface of my desk, which was scattered with its usual assortment of things: the food, paperclips, a plate with biscuit crumbs, bits and pieces of various of my files. He lit upon the biggest pile of papers there, the German businessmen's file. The problem with their defence was two-fold, I had discovered: firstly, nobody could understand it, the pile of dated and undated dockets and memos and handwritten notations on wage records were simply impossible to relate to the defence; and secondly, the documents were inadmissible in any case, since their original authors had all left the company, or were uncontactable or unavailable to go to Brisbane for the hearing. Tatham flicked peremptorily through the file, scarcely – it seemed to me – looking at its contents, then with a sort of 'Hrrumph' sound dropped it back on my desk.

"You should have settled," he said. "Even a day or two before the hearing and it would have been all right. Offered them the full value of the equipment, and let each side walk away with their own costs. The clients would have worn it. Just keep that nightmare out of court."

"I didn't know that it was a nightmare," I said. "I had the agents in Brisbane saying it was all OK. And the barrister said it was a watertight case."

"What did they teach you at law school then, eh?" Tatham took a step towards the darkened-glass window behind me, stared contemptuously from it a moment or two. "All right." He turned back. His voice had changed, moved into its clinical dictation mode. "There's only one thing to do. Bill them. Hit them with it quick."

"I'm sorry?"

"I want that bill out today. Go through the file and pick out everything that's chargeable. It should be at least, oh, five thousand. Get Rita to transfer any money they've got in trust into our account. And put a note in your diary to send out a letter of demand in seven days."

"What about a discount?"

"Bill them high, then knock two or three hundred off if you must. Send them a letter to go with it. Blame the judge. Blame our barrister. Blame the Brisbane agents, say we've given them the sack. Just hit them quick, before they've got time to go bankrupt."

"Don't you think that's a bit rough? I mean, we lost the case."

"Are you kidding me?" Tatham's eyes narrowed, his nose jerked several degrees higher. "This isn't nursery school any more, you know. You're in the shark-tank now."

TO LIGHTEN THE MONOTONY of the days in that place, I had my secret friends. Or at least, I thought of them as friends. There was Vivien, Terry's secretary, who would do some of my typing on slow days. Back straight, her fingers flying across the keyboard, she would tell me about her problems with her son, the drink-driver, the drug addict who had just killed a pedestrian – or, smilingly, about how Terry had got her to ransack the office looking for a court document he had left in his car. There was Rita the Hungarian, who had been a countess' daughter before the Second World War. Rita was the first to alert me to how rich Tatham really was. He did law only as a sideline, she told me. The really lucrative part of his business was the rent-collecting, the records for which it was her duty to keep in impeccable order, the real bully-boy work, of course, being done by contracted debt-collectors. Tatham owned whole blocks in the central business district, great tracts of land in the richer suburbs of Parap, Stuart Park, Fannie Bay.

More often, though, I would simply overhear the secretaries. They did a lot of their talking in the tea-room, in between pouring their coffees or scrutinizing the fridge for left-over sweet biscuits. They weren't like the lawyers. They never spoke in whole sentences. Their conversations consisted of allusions,

jokes, apparently irrelevant stories from last night's TV, bits of things that I would slot somewhere into my fragmentary picture of the whole.

I had other friends, too. Non-human ones. My packet of Irish Moss, for example, whose liquorice and aniseed flavours I would ration out to one before lunch, four after, little rewards marking out the hours until five. The pot plant in the corner with its wilting leaves – I never thought to water it – or my sunglasses, beside my pens on the desk, reminding me of the next time I would get to walk outside. At the beginning of the wet season once a sudden storm came over. Hearing it strike, I dropped immediately the urgent letter I was writing, walked trance-like through the reception area and stood motionless, staring at it, praying to it, for ten minutes outside. Each morning, when I flicked on the fluorescent light in my office – blinking, blinking, reality deciding whether or not to emerge – it would all be there waiting for me, the tiny and powerful symbols that marked out the progress of my day.

THE FUNNY PART ABOUT IT was that Terry Tatham actually *liked* me. I remember talking to him one day about what he called "my future at Tatham's". He called me into his office one lunchtime. Entering, I found him in his barrister's robes, eating take-away fruit salad with a plastic fork. It was a quarter to two, fifteen minutes before court resumed – and in his preoccupied manner I could foresee a conversation snatched, like practically every other one I ever had with him, between two bites of time.

"So." Tatham speared a piece of watermelon, pouched it with his last half-chewed mouthful into his cheek. "What are your plans for when you've finished your articles?"

"I haven't quite decided yet." I had been preparing for this question for some time now. Even so, Tatham had an abrupt gift, a barrister's instinct no doubt, for catching you off guard.

"You haven't said anything to me. Eleven months of your articles gone and you still haven't communicated. Vivien told me you're planning to leave."

"I did mention something like that," I said. It was an off-guard comment, made four months before.

"Have you spoken to Rita about profit-sharing?"

"What's profit-sharing?"

"What's profit-sharing? Who's Rita?" Tatham mocked. "When you become a first-year solicitor you can enter into a profit-sharing arrangement with us. Get a percentage of what you bill out, on top of your base salary. Every year you stay with us, you can renegotiate that percentage upwards. Until eventually, if you're good enough, you become a full partner."

"I see."

"I'm sure you *see*." Tatham pointed his fork at me, sent a fleck of fruit salad spinning across his desk. "The point is not what you see, but what you *say* and *do*. You've got a good future at Tatham's. If you commit yourself to it, that is. I've seen your work, I know it's good. How'd you like to have your name up there on that plate? Tatham, Spry and Lungwicz. Tatham, Lungwicz and Spry."

"I think . . ." – and after a moment's pause, I decided to say it at last – "I think I'd rather write a play."

Tatham's reaction was not what I had expected. He spun his chair away from me, stared for a moment from the window behind him. Then, abruptly, he stood up. Something in his manner suggested that his barrister's robe had fallen from his shoulders: he seemed more intense and perplexed, no longer inhabiting that role. He scanned his bookcase, drew a thin, black volume from its top shelf.

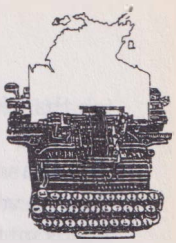
"Douglas Stewart," he said. He sat back down, began to flick through its pages. "I used to admire his work when I was a lad. I'm a frustrated scribe myself, you know."

I said nothing. Tatham closed the book, placed it on the desk in front of him. "So, what are you going to write, then? What are you going to call your script? Exploits of an articled clerk?"

"Something like that, maybe."

"Well, don't forget to give me a mention." Tatham's smile, for a moment, teetered on the edge of nostalgia. Then he looked at his watch. "Shit. Five to two. I'll be late again." He snatched up his file, poured the dregs of the fruit salad down his throat, clawed at the back of his chair for where he had left his tie. "You be in Court Two in half an hour. I'll need you." Halfway out the door he turned and flung back at me: "You can borrow that if you want." He gestured towards the play still on his desk.

I did take it home with me, but I never read more than a few pages. I didn't think it was much good.



Peter Wignell

Mick's Last Fish

BRIAN KELLY WAS STANDING in the dark backyard one or two paces in front of the pool. The fly rod in his left hand moving as an extension of his arm in time with the 'ten o'clock, two o'clock' mantra inside his head. The fly line formed an elongated figure eight as he started his back cast, then straightened out behind him. It formed another figure eight as he started to move the rod forward, then straightened perfectly, projecting the tiny imitation insect towards the middle of the one-foot-square felt pad Brian had attached to one of the pillars holding up the elevated house. As soon as the fly hit the pad dead centre a large gecko darted out from behind the light directly above the pad. The gecko grabbed the fly, shook its head and spat the fly out, looking as confused as a gecko can look.

This was the sort of thing Brian did on quiet, tropical, Darwin evenings with a few beers inside him. At these times he fantasized that he was extending the art of fly fishing to new species. The next morning he just thought he'd been a fucking idiot again and wondered what his father would think if he could see him fishing for lizards. He didn't need to think much, he'd already heard it a million times before: "You're forty-two years [or whatever age he was at the time] old, wake up to yourself, pull your socks up, grow up ..." and a thousand other incantations.

Over the past few months Brian had tied flies imitating beetles that had caught frogs and, more recently, tiny insects that had caught geckos. He'd yet to fool blue-tongues, frill necked lizards, snakes or birds. He'd thought of a ball-of-wool fly for kittens but ruled it out because there was no challenge.

The flies had no hook. He cut the hook at the bend and tied the fly to the shank. His latest model was the 'Mighty Velcro Gecko Blaster', little bits of ragged brown feather for wings and a small piece of velcro for a body. The velcro had been a stroke of genius. For weeks Brian had pondered on how to fish on a vertical surface. Then in a Green Can flash of inspiration the idea of felt and velcro had come to him. Now that he'd mastered geckos he'd work on blue-tongues.

This was not all idle mucking around. Brian saw it as part of his new trade. Brian had given up being a fishing guide. Partly because he had almost ended up in gaol after head butting some German clients and partly because fishing guides hardly ever got to fish. Only some fast talking from his cop mate Russell had kept him from being charged over the incident with the Germans.

Brian had taken up fly tying. It was never going to make him millions but it paid his few bills, kept him in vegies and beer and filled his tank for his trips to Shady Camp. His main source of protein was barramundi. By some miracle he was still living rent free in his late mate Paul's house, he had fishing tackle for all occasions, he had a swag, a mozzie net tent set-up for camping and his 4WD Hi-Lux ute was pretty reliable. Brian had everything a fisho could want except a good woman. He'd just about given up on them because he could never find one who understood that a life lived without fishing was a life not lived at all.

Brian turned out to be a natural at his new trade. For some reason his flies, mainly 'improved' copies of baitfish patterns, worked better than the originals. He sold them to a couple of local tackle shops and, as word spread, he supplied some southern tackle shops and had a few private clients. He was making ends meet and doing more would make it feel more like a

job than fun so Brian kept the supply just short of demand.

Brian was drawing the rod back for another cast when a voice startled him. He nearly jumped backwards into the pool.

"Shit a fucking brick, you are a bloody ratbag! The water's behind you, Mate," the voice said.

Brian gathered himself, looked up and saw an old man emerge from the darkness. The man looked about seventy and was tall, bony and cadaverous.

"G'day. Mick Miller," the man said, extending his right hand.

Still holding the fly rod in his left hand, Brian shook hands, saying his name at the same time. The man looked like he was at death's door but his grip was firm enough to have been a real hand crusher when he was younger.

"Eight-weight, eh?" the man said, looking at the fly rod. "Usually fish a five-weight myself." Then almost as an afterthought, "S'pose you get bigger fish up this way."

Mick Miller explained himself.

"I'm from Cooma, you know in southern NSW. I'm on me last legs so I drove up here to have a crack at that euthanasia business but the doc couldn't get another doc to fill out the paper work with this fucking court case going on or some bullshit like that. They tried to put me in the hospital and give me some palliative shit or whatever they fucking call it. Fuck that! I'm not going out like a bloody zombie. Anyway, I figured some shit like that might happen. Lucky I brought a rod, eh?

"I'm well and truly fucked, got cancer nearly everywhere except my lungs and liver. You wouldn't read about it. I've smoked rollies since I was twelve and drank since I was fifteen, looked after myself pretty good every other way and I've got fucking cancer everywhere except . . .

"Anyway Mate, I'm at the hospital talking to this lovely nurse, bit rough around the head but a figure better than you'd see in a girlie magazine, made me feel about thirty years younger. We're yarning away and the talk turns to fishing, I mention I wouldn't mind having a crack at these barramundi you got up here before I snuff it. All my life I only ever fished trout, except salmon once in Alaska, didn't want to die thinking I'd got set in my ways so I thought I'd like to try something different before I carked it.

"So this nurse lass says 'I know just the bloke for you'. Told me you were a bit of a ratbag but you'd do the right thing and you could fish the arse off most blokes around here. She gives me your phone number and address but I thought I'd give the hospital a miss and just front up. So what do you reckon?"

"Leanne!" Brian thought. She's done this to me. Mick didn't seem like too bad a bloke but the last thing Brian had on his mind was driving a half dead old bugger the 180 kilometres out to Shady Camp barrage and being his fishing guide. Still, he was pleased that Leanne reckoned he could fish the arse off nearly everyone. He worried a little about the *nearly* part. He couldn't think of anyone he couldn't fish the arse off, maybe just a couple of blokes, tops.

Brian invited Mick inside and offered him a beer. He declined the beer but said, "wouldn't mind one of them but" nodding towards a barely touched Christmas bottle of Glenlivet. Brian got the bottle down and poured Mick a healthy slug. He twisted the top off a Green-Can stubby. They both lit up and started talking.

"She really say that, that I could fish the arse off most blokes around here?" Brian asked.

"Well, close to it anyway," Mick answered with a smile. "She said you *thought* you could."

Brian felt deflated but chuckled to himself anyway. He liked Leanne, she could match anyone in a piss-taking contest.

Mick checked out Brian's 'workshop', a fly tying vice attached to the kitchen table and the various materials and tools of fly tying scattered around in disarray on the table.

They talked about fish and fly fishing. Mick inspected some of Brian's flies and said that he mostly fished dry flies and nymphs himself. Mick nodded towards the stuff on the table, Brian nodded back. Mick had a close look at a 'deceiver'; this one was made of a base of black hackle feathers with a black and white barred hackle down each side, a couple of strips of Christmas tinsel for 'flash', a collar of black bucktail just behind the head.

He fished around among the paraphernalia and copied the fly perfectly in about five minutes. While he tied he gave a Reader's Digest account of his life.

Mick was sixty-five, grew up in the Monaro and Snowy regions of NSW, had worked as a bricklayer for most of his life apart from a stint in the infantry in

Korea and, from the age of ten, had fly fished the streams and lakes around where he lived and further afield as he got older. He had fished the fly for fifty-five years. Mick had been married; his wife had died five years ago, no children. He had a few mates still alive and apart from that was alone in the world. He missed Dulcie, his wife, and thought about her a lot but what was gone was gone and he'd got on with life on his own, fishing almost every day since Dulcie died. Two years ago Mick found out he had cancer. He'd ignored it too long and by then there was nothing to be done about it. He was "fucked". He'd reckoned he'd just about had enough anyway when he'd heard about "this euthanasia caper up north". So here he was, ready to "bite the bullet". He didn't know if he believed in God or not and reckoned he'd find out one way or another soon enough anyway so he didn't worry about it.

After Brian admired the fly Mick had tied, Mick slipped outside. He came back inside with a photo album. Brian moved his chair closer to Mick's and they looked at the pictures.

Mick in faded black and white as a sandy headed boy proudly holding a small rainbow trout. Mick as a bony teenager holding a bigger rainbow trout. Mick as a raw-boned young man holding another rainbow trout. A hollow-eyed Mick, not holding a fish, in uniform with snow covered Asian mountains in the background. Mick as a still-young man, his muscles honed by a few years of soldiering and laying bricks, in a Jackie Howe singlet holding a very large brown trout with a Tasmanian lake as a backdrop. Mick in his thirties, still all hard bone and muscle, holding a huge rainbow in New Zealand. Mick in his forties holding a forty-pound, hook-jawed king salmon in Alaska. Mick, in colour now, in his fifties, smiling, holding another king-size Tasmanian brown. Mick at sixty, still strong but with different eyes, looking wistfully at a Jindabyne rainbow. Mick two years ago looking gaunt and bony, looking sadly at a plump, well-fed Geehi brown. Mick six months ago, looking like the Grim Reaper's offsider, holding a Eucumbene rainbow. Interspersed were pictures of a handsome country-looking woman, aging gracefully over the years, also holding fish. The pictures of the woman stopped in 1991.

Half the bottle of malt whisky and a good few smokes were gone now, there were five dead stubbies with their labels picked off on the table and Mick looked like he was holding back a tear or two. He was looking crooker and crooker.

"Dulcie took all them pictures, except the last few pages." Mick said almost to himself, "We were married for thirty-five years . . . I rigged up a tripod and took the rest myself. Loved fishing nearly as much as me, Dulcie did."

Brian couldn't figure out if Mick meant Dulcie loved fishing nearly as much as Mick did or if she loved fishing nearly as much as she loved Mick. He didn't feel that it was right to ask, Mick might think he was taking the piss, so he figured it was probably both.

"Better get going then if we're going to catch the tide at the barrage," Brian said.

Mick grabbed his five weight Loomis fly rod and reel from his battered old ute. Brian hastily collected some tackle and provisions and they were on their way. It was a two-hour drive and they should arrive at around sunrise in time to catch the last hour or so of the run-up tide and the first couple of hours of the run-out.

As they drove Brian explained fishing the barrage.

Shady Camp barrage is perhaps the best land-based barramundi fishing spot in the world. It is a kind of weir built over a natural rock bar. It was built to keep the tidal salt water coming up the river out of the fresh water draining off the floodplains. Below the barrage the country is flat and dead; the river looks like a big drain. Above the barrage the country is green and lush, lotuses growing in the shallows. Both sides hold big, big barra but the fish on the top side are wary in the daytime and only a brave and hardy few fish the barrage at night. The crocs aren't shy at night and the mozzies are murder.

After the wet, fresh water on the floodplains backs up behind the barrage and flows over until around the end of July. It roars over at first, gradually reducing until by mid-June it's ankle deep. At this time of year huge schools of mullet come up the river with the tide. Just behind them are mobs of barra. The mullet can't get past the barrage and accumulate there. It's a smorgasbord for barra. Some days they 'boof' like crazy, gorging themselves, other days, particularly if there's been a 'cold' snap, they just sulk.

The idea at this time of year is to fish with something that looks like a distressed mullet panicking in the water. That's why Brian had packed his fly box

with mullet impersonations: black and black and grey deceivers and poppers, some with a bit of red or a bit of tinsel in them, and his prized creation, the 'Monster Mullet Barra Slayer', a huge fly built around half a wine cork shoved through a big long-shanked hook and tied with black marabou feathers, black deer hair around the cork for a head and big stuck-on eyes. When dry it looked like half a feather duster, but it worked.

Brian noticed that he wasn't getting much response so he looked across at Mick. For a second Brian thought he was dead, slumped against the door of the ute. "Shit!" Brian thought. Then Mick mumbled something in his sleep and took a deep breath. Mick slept all the way, even over the last fifty-five kilometres of bone-jarring, corrugated dirt road.

As soon as Brian parked as close to the barrage as he could get and switched the motor off Mick woke up. He woke up alert and ready for action. Dawn was breaking and there was no-one else there. The night shift must have knocked off early.

The tide was still coming in. It was almost to the lip of the barrage and mullet were schooled up below. There wasn't much barra action but the occasional 'boof' sounded hopeful.

As they started to cast Mick looked across at Brian and said, "Better take it all in mate, watch the master in action because this is the only lesson you're going to get from me."

"Cocky bastard," Brian replied and ripped out what he thought was a perfect cast into current created by the run-off water coming over the barrage.

Brian looked across and his grin faded as he saw Mick unravel the prettiest cast he'd ever seen. It really was the work of a master. Brian thought he was pretty good but Mick was light years ahead. Watching Mick with a fly rod was like watching those old films of Bradman batting, the absolute self-assurance that everything would happen exactly like he wanted it to, not a shadow of a doubt in his own ability. Brian reckoned that, if it ever happened, Mick would probably jump into the water and shake the fin of any fish that beat him fair and square.

"Looks good in the air Mick but let's see if it does you any good in the water," Brian said. He was starting to feel a bit guilty about his competitive instincts coming out, getting into a fishing competition with a dying man. He stopped feeling guilty when a barra struck his fly. It was a reasonable fish and it stripped line, making the reel whirr. Mick was smiling as he watched Brian play the fish. Brian was using eight-weight gear with the fly tied directly to the leader so it was only a matter of time and the hook staying set. Brian landed the fish in five minutes, a nice salt-water barra, seventy centimetres and about eleven pounds. Mick inspected the fish. "Never seen a live one of these before. Nice looking fish; you handled him pretty good considering you didn't give him much chance with that heavy gear you're using," he said, dry as they come.

"Yeah, well, one nil's the score I believe," Brian came back.

"It's a long road that has no turning, Son. Watch and learn, watch and learn," Mick came back to Brian's come-back.

The tide water was lapping up the barrage now and mullet were swimming all around their feet. Brian hadn't picked up any more fish and Mick, despite his elegant style, was fishless so far, just taking his time between casts, subtly changing how he stripped the line back in, watching the mood of the water and the pattern of the 'boofs' very carefully.

There was an almost imperceptible change in the sound of the running water. Mick looked across at Brian and said "tide's turned" just as Brian was about to say the same thing.

"Gunna try one of them big black ugly things," Mick said as he marched back to the fly box sitting on the measuring table and rigged up with a 'Monster Mullet Barra Slayer'.

Mick was using a much lighter outfit than Brian, a five-weight rod with a leader tied to the fly line, a short strip of four-kilogram class line tied to the leader and another short shock tippet tied between the four-kilogram line and the fly so the barra's rasping mouth wouldn't cut through the thin line. Brian would have had trouble landing the fish he'd caught if he was using that outfit.

The combination of the run-out tide and the run-off water was creating a current that was sucking the mullet around their feet from the barrage. Mick stripped a short length of line off the reel and deftly flicked the big fly into the current, just dangling it there and twitching it from time to time. "Not how I usually fish but horses for courses, eh mate," he said.

After about five minutes of this technique the

water below the fly boiled and imploded with a huge 'boof.' The fly simply disappeared. Mick struck, the nine-foot rod bent almost double in a neat curve, line ripped from the reel and the fish exploded from the water about thirty yards away. It was a huge fish. A barra that dreams are made of, forty pounds easy. "Jesus fucking Christ!" was all Mick said.

Brian thought there was no way Mick could land it on that light trout gear.

The fish ran and jumped, ran and jumped again. All of the fly line and most of the backing had been stripped from the reel. Mick held the rod high, letting the curve in the rod and the weight of line in the water work on the fish. There were only a couple of loops of backing line left on the reel when Mick started to get a little bit of line back. "Fucking big bastard's nearly spooled me. If he runs again I'm fucked," he said.

Mick gained some line, the fish took some line, Mick got some back, the fish took a bit more. He'd slowly worked the fish out of the current and was getting the better of it when the fish jumped again and charged straight towards him. He wound line in frantically trying to keep it tight. The fish ran again, stripping more line. Slowly, very slowly, Mick gained on the fish, working it in inch by inch. The half hour it had taken fighting the fish had drained everything from Mick, and from the fish, but he played it like B.B. King plays the blues. It was nearly at his feet when, almost out of breath, he gasped, "Fuck me dead! Now I know why you blokes chase these bastards. Wish I'd come up here before I died."

Mick grabbed the short length of leader and dragged the fish on to the bank. He smiled and collapsed. Brian tried to pick him up but he said, "Get the fucking fish first you idiot!" Brian plucked the fly from the fish's mouth with his pliers and carried the fish further up the bank, then came back for Mick, propping him up against a rock and plonking the fish in his cradling arms. They both looked stuffed.

Following instructions Brian got the scales and his camera. It was a beautiful fish, one metre thirty long and exactly twenty-four kilograms, without doubt a world record for fly on the line class Mick was using. "Well fuck me dead!" Mick muttered, looking at the fish. Then with what was left of his voice he said, "Prop me up higher, get a picture for my album and get that big, beautiful bastard back in the water before she ends up like me."

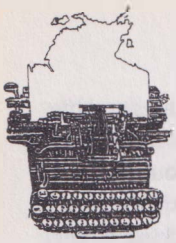
Brian propped Mick up more comfortably, took five pictures of him holding the fish and carried it back to the water mumbling as he did it, "Catches one bloody barra in his life and it's a fucking world's record." From behind him Brian heard the retort, "Like I said, Son, it's a long road, one-all I believe, only mine's bigger than yours," followed by a rasping, rattling laugh.

Brian swam the fish for a few minutes to get some water over its gills. Finally the fish flicked its tail, bit down on Brian's thumb and swam off.

Brian walked back to where Mick was, sitting propped up by the rock. Brian didn't need a medical degree to see that he was stone dead, with a grin from ear to ear. "Well fuck me dead!" Brian said. "You did it Mate, you fucking did it. Better get you out of here before the crocs have you for breakfast."

A couple of months later, after tying a few flies and sucking down a few Green Cans, Brian looked across at the photo album on the table amongst his paraphernalia and thought that if he ever grew up he'd like to be just like Mick, except he thought he could do without the cancer.

Brian reached for the album and opened it at the back. The photo showed Mick half propped, half slumped against a rock, a huge barra in his lap, both of them with similar looks on their faces. Underneath was the caption: "Mick's Last Fish: Mick Miller (1931–1996), Shady Camp barrage, June, 1996. Unofficial world record barramundi, 24kg, 5 wt fly, 4kg line class. A world class fish and a world class bloke."



Corroboree

Eerie the beat of the dancers
Their bare feet stamp in a circle
around the fire

Naked bodies tense
as the rhythm of clapping sticks,
boomerangs play

It shows they are celebrating
corroboree
to keep their identity alive

Laughing, feeling happy,
crying, singing:
makes good spiritual gathering,
like a hunter.

Eerie corroboree,
burning fire flames,
telling its tales
never ending.

Rosemary Narrurlu Plummer

Contributor Notes

► ***Janice Barr*** *won the Many Faces of Family Award in 1994 and was highly commended in the 1995 NT Literary Awards.*

► ***Bryan Clark*** *is based in Alice Springs. He is the author of an Aboriginal oral history* Yammatji, *and an autobiography* Journey Into Dreamtime.

► ***Rose Coppock*** *is a self-styled 'Central Australian Cattle Station Woman'. She published a book of that name in 1993.*

► ***Kieran Finnane*** *is a freelance journalist and arts writer based in Alice Springs.*

► ***Maureen Gibson*** *is inspired to write by working in remote areas of WA and the NT and presently Theodore, Queensland.*

► ***Stephen Gray*** *teaches law at the NT University. This piece is an extract from chapter two of 'Lungfish', a novel in progress.*

► ***David Kirkby's*** *fiction and poetry have appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies in the past two years.*

► ***Jennifer Moore*** *has been published in several anthologies. Two of her stories tied with each other for first place in the 1998 'The Women's Library' National Short Story Competition.*

► ***Val O'Neill*** *has lived in Alice Springs for six years and written poetry for the past four.*

► ***Rosemary Narrurlu Plummer****, born at Phillip Creek, is one of the Warumungu custodians of Tennant Creek. She is a founding member of Papulu Apparr-Kari (language centre), a life member of FATSIL (language federation) and a member of the Women's Advisory Council of NT.*

► ***Karyn Sassella*** *won the 1993, 1995 and 1997 Red Earth (NT) Poetry Award. In 1998 Karyn is writer-in-residence with the Darwin Theatre Company Palmerston Performance Project.*

► ***Mardijah Simpson*** *lives in the Centre and has been writing most of her life.*

► ***Michael Watts*** *works as a builder in Alice Springs and has published numerous pieces of poetry, prose and non-fiction in magazines, newspapers and anthologies.*

► ***Peter Wignell*** *has twice won the Arafura Short Story Award in the Northern Territory Literary Awards and his main passion is fly fishing for barramundi.*

► ***Alexis Wright*** *was born in Cloncurry, Queensland and her family is from the Waanyi people from the highlands of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. She is the editor of the anthology, 'Take Power', a collection of stories and essays on land rights in Central Australia to be published by IAD Press in 1998. She is currently working on her second novel and lives with her family in Alice Springs.*

Neil Boyack

Retail

a documentary from the inside

#1

The store is located on the main drag in the city of Melbourne. Trams, office foot soldiers, power shoppers, beggars, skateboarders. Filth disguised as customers come here to the store to buy and sell the CDs that they have stolen from an inner-suburban loungeroom. The shop is established, carrying both new and second-hand stock, new release and back catalogue. Frank, a regular, comes in. It's Thursday, his Beatles Monthly magazine is due in. Frank doesn't buy much, but comes in a lot. Hangs out. Says hi, I acknowledge with a nod of my head. It's 3.30pm in the city of Melbourne, when all workers are working, bank tellers telling. The city is as still as it can be in daylight on a weekday. A bum, also a regular on the green bench out front of the shop, sits and stoops into a newspaper, Crown casino cap pulled down over his eyes. He's nodding off, afternoon sun warming his back as he dribbles into the newspaper. Frank stands at the counter, opposite me, looking at the magazines there. CD playing in the store is Isaac Hayes' 'Hits', perfect for the lull in the day. There are no trams, no sirens. Frank stands there, doesn't say a thing. He was here this morning at 10.30. Same old. I don't actually know what Frank does for a job, but he wears a suit. I look at him, transfer vibes like Aquaman – get the fuck out, get the fuck out, leave me alone, why do you need to be here? The ringing telephone breaks things up. Tension is stalled, relieved. I pick up and answer and the bloke on the other end asks me if I've ever heard of Santana, which gives me a licence to be a smartarse:

What do you reckon mate?

Caller hangs up.

Back to Frank. Frank is definitive retail – in any retail outlet, you find Frank. Frank is a *customer*. Frank plans his day around visiting my shop. Frank considers the shop staff as little celebrities, a secret way into rock and roll, a little closer to the top, as knowing people in the industry. Knowing people at my shop, knowing me, is way cooler than being a regular at Sanity or Gaslight or JB Hi-Fi, those uncool, impersonal corporate supermarkets where unopinionated slave-staff consult catalogue after catalogue for the answers to rudimentary enquiries.

Still, there is silence between Frank and me. There are no new releases to talk of, and seeing Frank is a Beatles nut and I am the shop's techno expert, we have nothing to work with. I hold the Beatles responsible for initiating the Tribute Band industry, so I'm not rapt in them.

#2

In Allens one day, buying some new strings for my axe, overheard a bloke who was wearing bandanna and sweat bands, telling the shop assistant that he was a bass player, telling the shop assistant that he was starting up a Roxus tribute band.

#3

There are other demographics I should profile for you, like the Piss family. Called the Piss family for obvious reasons. They're rank. There is a he and she and they've brought their kids in on one occasion and the kids look like their parents. Odd, leaning toward Dobell-ish. Man brings in his CDs to trade for some new stuff: Estefan, Joel, Bon Jovi; he slides them across the counter toward me. Merchandise is stained as usual, curly little hairs throughout CD cases. CDs are scratched. Woman, who is shorter, talks to me while I look at their CDs, tells me stories of their next door neighbours out west in shitsville. Tells me stories of

their neighbours who break into their house at night and strangle their sleeping pets with rubber bands. You get a picture of an overgrown backyard with an empty clothes line, a broken down fence, a solitary light behind louvre windows, hiss of septic that goes day in day out, you get a picture of the horned beasts that come to life in their prescription tranquillizer dreams, as they lay slumped on grubby, checked lounge suite, Speed Reading Institute infomercial on late night TV, the only light in the room. Man quotes Plato, quotes The Bible, has a brain, you get the feeling that he needs stimulation and doesn't get it at home, but that doesn't compensate for the hell that has broken loose in his pants, over the years. I kindly decline the CD offerings, as I know they will be designated to the sale bin. With this, Piss Man is offended, it is the first time I have turned him down, he has been coming in for years, he is hurt even. They limp from the shop, knowing that an era has ended for them.

#4

You also get your cassette-only customers, of which there are two categories: 1) your hardcore punter who has never wanted to own a CD-player, cassette born and bred, goes to the Sandown Greyhounds, has an AM/cassette stereo in the car, and is used to the constant disappointment of nothing being available on cassette (which strikes me as odd because there are still a lot of cassette decks in the world – car stereo, walkman, ghetto blaster, etc.); and 2) strippers who work up the road and need music to dance to. Usual selections are AC/DC, Metallica, Doors, 80s New Romantic (which by the way is only months from being in-vogue in a fully blown way – note the content of soundtracks from new films). The strippers are very polite, sometimes pretty, always shopping in mandatory boofy blonde wig and trowelled on make-up.

You can bet your arse that cassette customers expect a rebuttal when inquiring after a title. Most of them show no emotion when informed the title they seek is not available. I think Chekhov must have had cassette customers in mind when he said "we toil without hope or despair".

#5

In retail, you are exposed to the socially inadequate, the timid, the stinky people, you deal with them. But if there's one thing you learn, it's PEOPLE ARE STUPID, anyone in retail will tell you that, and if there's another thing, you realize that *Clerks* was a documentary, not a fictional account.

#6

Retail is of course a service industry, however interpretations of what constitutes good service differ from shop to shop, assistant to assistant. I myself, having spent years in retail have seen the value of bullshitting and sucking up, and the frequent use of street slang to force your opinion or smokescreen it. But you do get caught out because you can never pick the mystery professional arsehole browser. Like the time when this older bloke walked in off the street, a dead tree Sunday, he was killing time, camera around his neck, duty free bag full of whisky and shit. I say, how's it going? He pauses, looks at me puzzled, asks me, what's IT?

I say, life in general. Shrug my shoulders. Then he gives me a lecture on how to greet people, and how my generation are responsible for the rape of the English language, and how abysmal my service is.

I say he has a problem in a kind voice, our eyes meet, he knows he's got a fight. I say that maybe he should go out and get himself a good fuck. He lets me get the last word in and that leaves me feeling guilty, the aggressor, which I don't like. That old fart was a professional browser with money in the bank. Any CDs he owned would have come by way of consolation prizes from bus trip competitions, on radio stations that advertise funerals.

#7

Another attractive feature of new/second hand music retail is dealing with the thugs and bums and junkies that try to sell you hot CDs. Their desperation is tiresome, their acting ability appalling. You become numb to all the stories, and can pick them a mile away if you don't smell them first. These people are full of rage, they are dangerous. They come fresh from burgs where they paused to eat food from the refrigerators of their victims. They always have a black sports bag – there must be a run on them. They take the stolen CDs from the sports bag and pile them up on the counter in front, telling you about their pregnant wife in Perth, and how they have to be there for the birth.

They shake, as you look at the merchandise. They light a cigarette in the shop, because last time they were free, smoking was allowed in trains and in shops. You tell them no smoking, they look at you dumb. Tension builds as you near the end of the inspection. You are agreeable, fuelling their visions of cash. Then after a trained pause, a true showman, you tell them you're not interested and you direct them to Cash Converters because you want them off your back, and you have all the titles in stock already and can't afford the space, or the money or some bullshit like that just to get them out of the shop. They're pissed off when they leave. The backyard tattoos on the fingers and necks and wrists stay in your head for hours. They rattle you. Sometimes you take them home, in your head. For days you wonder what these poor bastards do for Christmas, what could have gone wrong in their life for them to end up like this, why is there so much hate in them. I want to buy them a beer and chat, to show them that the world is okay. Sometimes. But by doing that you run the risk of getting involved, at some level, and that's what I am very afraid of. The junkies are a pushover, but the crooks are freaky. They intimidate, hint at death, staring at you, putting you in their memory bank – if there's room (the no-good-reason-vendetta-file). When they see your eyes, and *they* know that *you* know the gear is hot, they arc up a little, leaning into your personal space across the counter. You smell hell on their breath. They pester and hassle, and will settle for any sort of deal on the CDs. The only way out is to keep saying no. The resolve you find with experience is amazing. Most of them you never see again, on the streets or in the shop. They must go back to the can, for a bed and breakfast, or die, or find Jesus or go back to their wives and families and try to work their lives out. You get the feeling that these are the people that own the flattened single shoes on country roads.

#8

Asian dude comes in. A semi-regular, a Saturday morning customer. Buys UB40 LPs. I suspect that he's simple, not the full quota, mentally challenged. He stands at the stereo turntable, to the left of the counter. He stands there for a while, nothing to say, puts headphones around the back of his neck, like a DJ. Asks me if he can use our turntable to listen to his records because his is broken. I say no. He looks disappointed. He says he'll ring his friend David and see if David will let him use his turntable. He seems happy with that.

#9

There are people that come in and ask favours of you. And you do them because you recognize a genuine need, or you're touched by a look in their eye that hits the heart, or you empathize with them because they remind you of someone. Played an Archie Roach album as a favour for this Koori bloke who told me he was going home to Pambula. Showed me his special lucky stone. He sat outside the store, and smoked and reflected on things while he looked into his palms and the pavement; he was very appreciative. I hope he got home alright. A woman came into the shop one morning, carrying her crutches. Bandages on her wrists were old, rusty. Recognized her from the street. She asked me to play some 'Industrial music', so I put on some candy industrial shit – *Tabula Rasa*, by Einstürzende Neubauten. I told her a bit about the band, showed her pictures from the CD-booklet, pictures of contact mics gaffer taped to rocks and metal percussion, told her Blixa was in the Bad Seeds and all that crap. Told her about the band I was in once, Foil, and how we were all set to support EN on their Melbourne leg of the OZ tour, when the Beasts of Bourbon barged in at the last minute and kicked us off. She made notes like she was researching an essay. Then there's the bloke who came in to buy his records back, the ones his son had stolen and sold to us. He wasn't angry about it, he was resigned to the fact that every time his son comes down from Queensland on school holidays, he has to pack all of the small pinchable things in the house, and leave them at a friend's place.

#10

Little girl comes into the shop with a bloke that has no arms. Little girl has love hearts painted on her cheeks.

#11

Working in the public arena has many drawbacks, especially in a cool music store, i.e. lots of people fantasize about working in a music store. A major hin-

drance is people wanting to talk shop when you're at a gig or fucked off your nut at a rave. People ask you how the shop is. They ask you if the cd they ordered week before last has come in yet, ask you what the new Ed Kuepper album is like, ask you about the mixes on part two of the Orb's latest single, because they heard it was good. In their shared loungerooms they fill early morning hours with bongs and Rage on ABC and conversations about you – the bloke at the music shop. They use your Christian name. Say things like, yeah, that dude at the CD shop knows where it's at, he put me onto this and that, or, he's a real fuckwit, he don't know nothing. Soon you appear in their dreams and they work out that the music you recommend to them has an influence on the way they feel, how trippy their dope can be etc. A little influence on their lives.

#12

Sunday in the city. Play Link Wray and George Jones and Tammy Wynette because they're good. Watch Sunday loving old timers walk into the shop like it's their favourite bar. They wink at you and smile a country smile, they head up the back to the LPs like all the mates they've ever had are waiting there, up to the LPs, where the lonely go, secret place where women fart. They walk in thinking that your shop is filled to the brim with George and Tammy and Johnny and Waylon, only to be surrounded by techno and Jungle and Drum'n'Bass, and shit they've never heard of before.

#13

Rip-off 1) The two-part single. Rip-off 2) The tour EP tacked onto the album that's been released for a year or more. Rip-off 3) The bonus video that's tacked onto the album that's been out for six months. These are some of the ways major companies screw fans. Will the fans ever revolt?

#14

Another thug, who has turned into a regular on and around Bourke Street. Been hanging around for a couple of months now. Longest I've ever seen anyone last, he must have power, he must run the streets. His wrinkles give him the next-minute-could-be-his-last look. See him in the morning, when I'm opening up the shop, in town before the lunchtime wave of trash catch their trains in to score. Black and white checked shirt, short-arse, mean, smoker, talks with the deep rough voice of the mornings after, talks with cigarette hanging out his mouth. Hasn't noticed me staring at him – thank Christ. He has a scarred-up face, thick scar through his bottom lip, scars above eyes through eyebrow hair, has a head like a bag full of spanners. See him with teenage girls – he must be forty years old – see him with different young women, everyday, different women. He has an excellent supply of decoys. He holds their hands as part of his cover; maybe they love him. These girls are taller than him, heels or not. This morning, see him with a blonde bombshell, no more than eighteen years, chock full of innocence, high heels, new jeans, her whole life in the two backpacks she carries. She reminds me of my beautiful wife, so much so that I ring her just to see how she is, to tell her I love her, because I am so much in love with her. I see him pulling the blonde across the street in front of the shop. Has her by the hand. She trots in her heels as she can't quite keep up with him. He keeps pulling, looks like he is angry. I tell myself to keep an open mind, that maybe she wants to be in his thug life, maybe she likes the ways things are. Ask myself, what can he offer her, what will become of her? Wonder if he bites her bare shoulders with his broken teeth as they make love in a suburban caravan park on a hot summer day. I wonder if he dreams of rolling Armaguard vans or being a cop killer. I wonder if he listens to gangsta rap, like 2-Pac, Notorious B.I.G., not realizing that they are part of the Americanization of Australia. I tell myself to keep an open mind.

Neil Boyack published and co-authored Black *and* Snakeskin/Vanilla *with Simon Colvey. Their* See Through *was published by UQP.*

Brian Musgrove

Political Dope: John Howard's 'Drug War'

On 2 November 1997 a press release buzzed from John Howard's office: "Prime Minister Tough on Drugs". It announced the Federal Government's National Illicit Drug Strategy, filling the great emptiness left by the scuttling of the ACT 'Heroin Trial' in September and following reports in early October of plans to exclude methadone treatment from Medicare. Howard's $87.5 million package provoked disappointment amongst drug professionals, with in-house e-mail exchanges noting that its grandstanding language promised only a costly expansion of the 'zero tolerance' American system. 'Zero tolerance' means the technical removal of distinctions between different types of drug, different types of user, different degrees of 'offence', and no mitigating circumstance in the legal process. Zero tolerance also desocializes drugs, denies them an anthropology and history, and recasts the aim of drug policy-making as absolutist and punitive.

Howard's 'Tough' memo hinged on this concept and headed a Coalition initiative, recharged in mid-1998 in election lead-up, and recently abetted by a UNSW Press publication. *Drug Precipice*, co-authored by Athol Moffitt, John Malouf and Craig Thompson, offers itself as a work of "objective intent . . . an encyclopaedic type of reference work for political and other leaders"[1] – a work which takes most of its benchmarks from American prohibitionist thinking. *Drug Precipice* also recycles the grand narrative of Athol Moffitt's *A Quarter to Midnight* (a title alluding to the cataclysmic 'thermonuclear clock'), a 1985 inquiry into organized crime and the 'Decline of the Institutions of State'.[2] The demise of the state is real enough – in welfare and health provision or its leadership role on social justice issues – but *Quarter to Midnight* attributed the destruction of the state to the crime octopus, with drugs being merely one deadly tentacle. Now, in *Drug Precipice*, drugs emerge as *the* transcendent signifier of this decline.

Despite its resolve to cut through drug 'misinformation', *Drug Precipice* founders on a number of matters: not points of extraneous detail but, rather, basic intellectual principles which structure the book. One is the vision of the drug menace as centralized and monolithic; a subversive global totality, transacted in Australia through local franchises or agents, including Asians in Cabramatta and 'permissive' academic opponents of zero tolerance. A second is the suggestive, repeated image of the human body in deadly collision with the 'foreign body' which is the 'dangerous drug'; a molecular crisis, where the 'hard facts' of psycho-biological research are privileged. But the issue of drugs is always a case of mythology over pharmacology. In simple terms, drugs are socially-encoded, and the multiple subcultures configured around them – from the relatively closed cocaine club to the open-armed Ecstasy rave – are all compellingly constructed by a signifying 'struggle' involving the politics of group and identity and power. What drugs signify culturally, what they might *mean*, is a question that casts into doubt essentialist judgements about what they *are* and what they *do*: judgements assuming an ideologically-neutral pharmacology as the basis for demarcating 'harmful' or 'dangerous' *drugs* from 'benign' or 'beneficial' *medicines*. Drug subcultures are not the only social fractions subject to this struggle within signification. Historically, medical and legal discourses on drugs have been coloured by competing interests and contradictory chemistries, whilst peddling the illusion that they pivot on an ideology-free pharmaceutics. The British Pharmacy Act of 1868, for example, placing limitations on opiates, was largely motivated by rivalry between pharmacists and doctors over social status

and control of supply and profits from prescription. Genuine concern over the effects of opiate use was an ancillary and mostly absent consideration; the 'danger' of opium, both sides argued, was really that it was in the wrong professional hands. Later, the same struggle was replayed in Australia.[3]

But these are not the main problems of *Drug Precipice*. The book reads Australia's drug experience through the lens of the American scene, recommending apolitically that Australia's leaders ape the historic paradigm-shift that has occurred Stateside. This paradigm-shift is intimately bound to the rise of economic rationalism, the deregulated market, and a radical-conservative redefinition of government. Current policy orthodoxy in both the US and Australia must be understood within this political frame. The change in the US has been summarized thus:

> When Richard Nixon declared his War on Drugs, the conventional wisdom about drugs and crime was that they reflect "more than the character of the pitiful few" who engage in them and instead reveal shortcomings of "the entire society". Three decades later, we believe the opposite. Congress debates a 'Personal Responsibility Act' that exonerates society and ... blames everything ... on "crises of individual values".[4]

This moral devolutionism is entirely consonant with the economic-rationalist view of the public sphere as inherently atomized and competitive; the fetishization of individual enterprise and liability is a central tenet of Reagan-Thatcherism and its love-child, Howardism, in their crusades to casualize economy and privatize the state. Paradoxically, of course, this kind of devolvement also legitimizes the legal harassment and moral re-education of the individual: for the aberrant individual is the site where rational systems supposedly break down and the dream of a more 'open society' is spoiled for everyone, inviting what remnants there are of the state to re-assert themselves repressively. The issue of drugs focalizes contradictions in the ethos of economic rationalism and globalization, exposing the way in which the myth of the nation must be residually, comfortingly invoked, and its impending collapse imputed to low, narcotized Others rather than to those who are actually managing it out of existence. In this regard, future history will remember Drug War mentality as costly, fraudulent transference of blame for a crisis i the institutions of civil society onto the hapless fi ure of the demonized junky.

The image of the isolated, decommunalized dru user as sinful, biologically flawed, sick – and in a cases 'deviant' – considerably pre-dates the era c state-attenuation in which it has been recently re activated. This image is tagged the 'Grand Theor explanation of drugs, usefully critiqued by Alla Kellehear and Stefan Cvetkovski in the importan anthology *Drug Use in Australia*. They suggest tha the 'deviant' junky image, the 'Grand Theory', is pa ticularly attractive in times of social uncertainty stress, transition and value-confusion, where wide problems are projected onto the individual Other The image of the junky is always ripe for appropria tion, and the current Australian case is no exceptio In other words, today's 'breakthrough' paradigm shi to zero tolerance is an amnesiac version of many yes terdays; a shift which erases the complex specifics c drug sociology, history and ideological manipulatio as surely as John Howard wants to bury the 'Blac Arm-Band' view of Australia's past.

Likewise, the authors of *Drug Precipice* selectivel rewrite the past, pursuing the claim that Australia current drug problem is unprecedented. *Drug Prec pice* paints a jaded national portrait of Australia o the brink of narco-anarchy: a scenario which ap peared in relation to the anti-opium campaigns of th late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, th cocaine panics of the 1920s, the amphetamine craz after the Second World War and the psychedelic pro test culture of the 1960s and 70s. The view of a drug induced crisis in the apparatuses of the state, fro the suburban kitchen to the courtroom, would hav been particularly familiar to tabloid readers of th period between the world wars – a time when dru scandals were deemed as culpable as militarism, fas cism, bolshevism and global depression in th destabilization of nation-states. One of the centra arguments of *Drug Precipice* is that public opinio must be won back again in these affrighted terms that Australia should be shocked out of complacency overcome its sense of defeatism (the view that dru use is an inevitable social fact of modernity) and civ libertarianism ('harm minimization' and 'responsibl use' approaches) and embrace, instead, a 'no-use policy grounded in American thinking.

This reclamation of public opinion involves another historical rewrite and another kind of 'grand theory'. *Drug Precipice* regards Australia's drug scene as comprehensively shaped by the American experience, imitatively, interpreting this as a crisis in liberal democracy – "the more liberal and democratic the nation, the greater the drug problems".[6] From there, *Drug Precipice* sets up a showdown between two imaginary blocs. The first is an organic union of the paternalist welfare state (now long deceased) and 'people power' (lately reborn). The second bloc is the drug specialists and dope fiends who have monopolized the public podium for thirty years (the myth of a power that never existed) – but those primarily "responsible were adult intellectuals bent on removing legal restraints on the freedom of individuals to make their own 'responsible' choices about drug use".[7] Forces of the left, 'permissive' lobbyists and academics, with inexplicably bottomless financial resources (possibly, *Drug Precipice* speculates, from organized crime) and unlimited media access, have infiltrated the education system, hijacked debate and distorted public awareness of drugs: a syndrome seen, historically, in the linkage of drugs and the first death-blow dealt to liberal democracy by those who opposed the Vietnam war. History is travestied into conspiracy theory, but in this *Drug Precipice* is not a lonely aberration. The book's anti-intellectualism conjures with a pervasive cultural mood, and sits beside headline-grabbing works like Paul Sheehan's *Among the Barbarians*, with its swipes at the "outdated Marxist analysis" and "academic Marxism" which have conducted a "methodical and destructive assault on Australian history"[8] – a history which, like the Drug War, people power must win back.

Supporters of the *Drug Precipice* line, and Howard's 'common-sense tough on drugs' stand, should read Dan Baum's *Smoke and Mirrors*. Subtitled 'The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure', it studies the last three decades of America's experience of interdiction and prohibition, exposing bureaucratic incompetencies and the shameless, self-interested grasping for opinion-poll popularity and electoral survival which are chronic to US narcotics policy-making. The authors of *Drug Precipice* concede a similar situation in Australia – "Political action against drugs has always been popular in Australia and therefore politically advantageous"[9] – but their clear implication is that this opportunism is forgiveably moral underneath. At a micro level, *Smoke and Mirrors* discusses dimensions of the drug war which are publicly invisible: personalities, career aspirations and malicious power struggles in government agencies; byzantine back-room deals and trade-offs; the deficient working knowledge behind the 'tough on drugs' mind-set of successive administrations. In a cynical mobilization of public outrage at 'the drug problem', six American presidents (Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush and Clinton) raised instant moral capital by spending billions of taxpayer dollars to criminalize millions of ordinary persons, with no results, in the golden age of economic rationalism and out-sourcing or abolition of state services.

Apparently, however, there are some facets of government in the US and Australia which are exempt from fiscal accountability, and drug moralism and the money-pit zero tolerance option fit this category. If any other federal program cost so much to deliver so little so continually it would be thrown on the junk-heap. In addition to the $87.5 million shot in the arm in 1997, and an additional eighty million pledged to the war on drugs by Howard in June 1998, Australian governments spend over $400 million annually, on what two Melbourne University criminologists called an "enterprise with limited capacity to demonstrate what goals it is achieving".[10] In the US the wastage is bigger. Baum writes:

> Under Bill Clinton, the War on Drugs continues to consume more federal dollars than the Commerce, Interior and State Departments put together. While we argue about whether the country can afford foreign aid, the Environmental Protection Agency, public broadcasting, or the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, the federal drug budget quietly exceeds all of them combined.[11]

Smoke and Mirrors strikes chords which have an instant Australian resonance.

Macroscopically, *Smoke and Mirrors* is an indictment of official malpractice and corruption, without even touching upon the role of drugs in the 'Iran–Contra' affair; the deployment of narcotics as an official instrument of US geopolitics in the Vietnam debacle, revealed in 1972 by Alfred W. McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin in South-East Asia*; or, in an Australian–American Alliance context, the 'no worries' diplomatic com-

pliance suggested by John Pilger. In *A Secret Country*, Pilger writes that as Saigon was about to fall in 1975 "massive supplies of drugs which had been stashed in Vietnam" were flown to safety in Australia, landing on secret 'black airfields' maintained by the CIA. US intelligence agent William Corson confided this to Pilger, but added that the narcotics were quickly "redistributed to 'regional drug banks', thus providing the 'reserve currency' of international criminal activities associated with CIA covert action".[12] (Intriguingly, this 'redistribution' was concurrent with a cannabis drought in Australia, and the flooding of the local market with affordable heroin.) The association of US strategic interests and organized crime was, indeed, the foundation on which the post-1945 narcotics trade was largely built: the fast, efficient move by Euro-American 'mafias' into drugs in the mid-to-late forties was facilitated by Washington's sponsorship of crime syndicates to subvert communism in the west, using narcotics to bankroll 'pro-democracy' terrorism, arms dealing, anti-trades-union propaganda and right-wing political campaigning. All this suggests a very different complexion for the catch-phrase 'Drug War'.

As moral example or acknowledged legislator of the world's drug accords, the US is somewhat tarnished. Drug prohibition policy has been one of America's most successful exports from the turn of the century, after its acquisition of the Philippines in 1898. There, concern over Chinese opium-smoking, the colony's productivity, and the recreational attractions of drugs to a bored occupying garrison led to the conceptualization of drugs as a national security problem, linked to colonialism and America's arrival on the international stage. 'Drugs' was the issue which established America's role as World Policeman, but US motives were not always wholesome. As early as 1906, when President Theodore Roosevelt was asked by Bishop Charles Brent to address the opium problem in the east on religious grounds, the US government eagerly saw an ethical response as a front for cementing Sino-American trade relations. This was continued through America's chief international narcotics negotiator Hamilton Wright, and studies like John Palmer Gavit's worldwide best-seller *Opium* (1925), whose especial denigration of Britain's record in the opium business was designed to establish America's moral credentials as a means of opening Chinese markets to the US as a preferred trading partner.

Successive US administrations have prevailed upon aid-dependent client states to transform their regional (often traditional indigenous) economies, their legal systems and, occasionally, their basic governmental processes – all in the cause of protecting Middle America from the 'foreign' drug 'scourge', 'plague', 'epidemic' or 'invasion'. In this connection, from the beginning of the twentieth century drugs were also a catalyst for America's economic and strategic expansionism; with the so-called 'American system' of international prohibition, representing a transparently colonialist redefinition of US domestic crisis as something produced 'elsewhere'. Wars on drugs are a paramilitary, legalistic and rhetorical means of protecting the imperialist centre from recalcitrant margins which threaten to 'stone it to death'; drug wars invoke a vestigial sense of the nation-state's integrity, and exploit the necessary Otherings which ideologically predispose home-ground to accept checkpoints, body searches, patrol boats and helicopters – the hard reality of borders – as well as modes of surveillance and the erosion of common rights designed to catch the devious 'Other-Within'.

Zero tolerance . . . desocializes drugs, denies them an anthropology and history, and recasts the aim of drug policy-making as absolutist and punitive.

This, then, is part of an elided history which should balance the view that today's drug problem results from the hijacking of public debate by powerful left-wing lobbyists and drug-taking ideologues. Historically, the drug 'problem' is as close to the corridors of power as its solution – the 'Drug War'. In slightly more abstract terms, Baum notes that America's War on Drugs has been "a precious metaphor"[13] – meaning, that the phrase 'Drug War' is a rhetorical node which attempts to resolve a number of social conflicts in a mystifying display of government responsibility and moral re-armament. Richard Nixon's first War on Drugs was consciously declared at a moment when the war in Vietnam showed signs of being lost: the Drug War entailed a deft transposition, or compensation-fantasy, for embattled US prestige. The same applies to besieged peacetime governments in Australia, whose 'tough', pro-active determination on matters like drugs requires constant critical scrutiny.

Stephen Murray-Smith's 'Censorship and Literary Studies' (1970) remains one of the best arguments for this much-needed critical vigilance. In the parallel context of censorship, Murray-Smith wrote that the raising of political capital through interdictive legislation not only establishes a bond between politicians and the majority population unaffected by legal prohibitions, but is also 'cathartic' for politicians themselves – "the kind of authoritative, unambiguous, far-reaching and morally righteous action which politicians would like to be taking all the time, but which in most cases the nature of politics itself does not permit".[14] In public life, however, the politician's catharsis is usually someone's nemesis: the conscription of public opinion under the generalship of politicians in the Drug War requires monitoring, and questioning, as to who the winners and casualties *really* are.

As with so much of the Howard Coalition's derivative agenda, its current drug policy has absorbed many of the historical and ideological traces, and rhetorical manoeuvres, of the US system. One such manoeuvre is manifest in the catalogue of woes with which the drug trade is rhetorically associated. Yet the woes transposed onto drugs are systemic to capital itself, so that the drug trade is not quite the Other but, rather, the Brother of licit commerce. As a brilliantly 'precious metaphor', the black economy of drugs shadows and parodies its twin, late capitalism, mythically operating in a way that many ordinary Australians might more readily associate with the downside of globalization: the effortless trafficking of commodities across frontiers; the consequent diminishment of national sovereignty; the dominance of cartels and the disempowerment of small business; the immense accumulation of untaxable wealth and undistributed profit; the destruction of families and communities; alienating changes to traditional social practices.

The concept of 'zero tolerance', too, has a disturbing metaphoric ring in the present Australian political climate. Junkies have always been easy targets in diagnoses of what ails the body politic, and the 'dope fiend' has become the folk devil 'par excellence' of the century.[15] But the dope fiend's extreme, deviated position may no longer be unique in Australia. So many sensitive issues here – Native Title, immigration, 'Asianization', unemployment, waterfront 'reform' – have lately involved wilful misinformation, qualified prejudice and outright intolerance as legitimate platforms for decision-making and carrying public opinion. The zero tolerance policy applied to drug users is now officially, if tacitly, dispensed across the board. In a situation where the death of 'political correctness' and the return of a peculiar brand of 'free speech' is promoted by Howard, and in fellow-travelling populist polemics like Sheehan's *Among the Barbarians*, the junky's fate foreshadows the fate of all those for whom low tolerance might soon reach absolute zero.

ENDNOTES

1. Athol Moffitt, John Malouf & Craig Thompson, *Drug Precipice*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1998, p. xii.
2. Athol Moffitt, *A Quarter to Midnight: The Australian Crisis: Organised Crime and the Decline of the Institutions of State*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1985.
3. Virginia Berridge & Griffith Edwards, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England*, Yale UP, New Haven, 1987; Desmond Manderson, *From Mr Sin to Mr Big: A History of Australian Drug Laws*, OUP, Melbourne, 1993.
4. Dan Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure*, Back Bay Books, New York, 1997, p. ix.
5. Allan Kellehear & Stefan Cvetkovski, 'Grand Theories of Drug Use', *Drug Use in Australia: A Harm Minimisation Approach*, Margaret Hamilton, Allan Kellehear and Greg Rumbold (eds), OUP, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 48–59.
6. *Drug Precipice*, p. xii.
7. *Drug Precipice*, p. 123.
8. Paul Sheehan, *Among the Barbarians: The Dividing of Australia*, Random House, Sydney, 1998, pp. 25, 35.
9. *Drug Precipice*, p. 195.
10. Adam Sutton & Steve James, quoted in Diana Bagnall, 'Agony and Ecstasy', *The Bulletin*, 15 April 1997, p. 18.
11. *Smoke and Mirrors*, p. viii.
12. John Pilger, *A Secret Country*, Vintage, London, 1991, p. 194.
13. *Smoke and Mirrors*, p. viii.
14. Stephen Murray-Smith, 'Censorship and Literary Studies', *Australia's Censorship Crisis*, eds Geoffrey Dutton & Max Harris, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1970, p. 80.
15. Jock Young, 'The myth of drugtakers in the mass media', *The Manufacture of News: Social problems, deviance and the mass media*, eds Stanley Cohen & Jock Young, Constable & Sage, London, 1981, p. 327.

Brian Musgrove learnt his cultural materialism under Raymond Williams at Cambridge. He teaches Literature at the University of Southern Queensland. He is writing a book on drug narratives.

fiction

Homelife

Nigel Featherstone

for Michelle

Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.
Robert Frost, 'Directive'

Will

You're standing at the door, slightly nervous though you've been there before. In your tight-fingered grip is your black-bound copy of the *New International Version*, that's the *NIV* for those in the know. The door opens in front of you and Graham welcomes you inside with a sweep of an arm.

"How was your day?"

You say "OK. Yeah."

And he says "Tea or coffee?"

"Love one. Tea, thanks."

"Just white?"

You say "Yeah. When's Matt's brother coming around?"

Graham says "Should be soon."

"This is going to be right heavy," you say knowing that what you've just said isn't quite what you wanted to say.

Graham says "Once he's here, I think we should just get into it."

"Yeah, I reckon. No point in delaying."

"Come on through."

You and your cup of tea and your *NIV* follow Graham into the front room where you take a position on the couch. Graham's on the single seater opposite and you don't really know what to talk about. You take a few anxious sips from your tea, looking vacant to give the impression of thoughtfulness. The door bell rings and you hope Matt's brother has arrived. Then you imagine how he might look. Withdrawn? Sad? Vague? Who knows. You get the jitters because you have no idea about any of this. You know nothing about grief and you're about to pray for someone's dead brother. And you didn't know Matt very well anyway though he was admired by many at Kaleen Baptist, particularly the older lot, as being a serious young man with a serious young face, committed to his God and relentlessly responsible. You know less about Matt's younger brother Daniel but Graham asked you to come to pray for him because he needs care and you said "Yeah, sure" because a large part of you is attracted to the idea of being around death. Besides, Graham's one of the Youth Elders. But now, like when you're losing your virginity, most of you is scared. Though you don't know much about losing virginity, you know only about *keeping* your virginity because that's the way things must be. For the time being anyway.

Graham ushers Daniel into the lounge. "Daniel, you know Will, don't you? From Youth Group?"

Daniel says "Yeah" and sits down in the other single seater leaning forward to one side as if he's got a gut ache. Which he probably does.

You take your time but eventually say "How are you?", stressing the 'are'. You wish you hadn't asked because Daniel says "Good thanks" and you know that's bullshit: bloodshot eyes, a hollow face, a slightly legless gait.

Graham looks to Daniel and offers "Tea or coffee?" and Daniel says "Nah" and you think no wonder.

You look to Graham for direction because he's older and he's the Youth Elder and you reckon he should know what he's doing. Graham's eyes cross to you and you imagine that your face says "I don't know why I'm here" and you reckon that Graham's thinking that he should have asked someone a little more helpful to come along.

Graham, slowly, calmly, says "Will, Daniel asked if he could come and pray with me tonight. I thought it would be good if there were three of us so, Daniel, I invited Will to come along as well. It's probably good if we get straight into things. Does anyone need anything? Will, another cup of tea?"

You say "No thanks".

"Right," says Graham. "Daniel, what do you need tonight?"

Daniel's only young, probably sixteen. He's quiet and pretty and pale and he says "Dunno really."

You look to Graham who says "Prayer is something we can do together. Through Jesus we can ask for God's love and support and healing. We can ask for the Holy Spirit to enter the room and our hearts and begin to work through the grief we have in all of us because of Matt's accident. Will, shall we move closer to Daniel?"

You say "Sure" and rise and step to where Daniel's sitting. Daniel leans forward. You kneel. Graham crouches next to you. You feel your hand slide over Daniel's thigh. You feel his warmth. You feel Graham's hand and forearm slide over your shoulder and neck and other shoulder. You don't do anything with your spare hand.

Graham says "Let's pray" and you close your eyes. Hearing breathing, smelling breath.

There's silence and you think that there's no way you're going first. You offer your primary prayer in silence: Jesus, place your hand on Daniel's shoulder, help him to understand what's going on around him. To feel your love.

". . . and your love." Graham's been praying aloud. "Lord, we cannot try to understand some things that happen around us. But we know that you are caring for us. And we know that your love will wash over us and we will be clean. You understand death. Through your crucifixion you experienced such horrible pain and through your pain you took away our sins and gave us the Holy Spirit. Father, we humbly ask that you send your spirit into this room, that we may feel your love amongst us."

That silence again. Blood-pumping silence. You open your eyes though you know you shouldn't and you see Daniel's face, his eyes open, staring, they're blank. You glance across to Graham's face who's only about a hand's length away. Smelling of pizza, his eyes closed. You slam yours. You haven't said anything.

You open your mouth. "Lord, place your hand on Daniel's shoulder. May he feel your love."

Then, like receiving a bullet direct to the heart, you're shot with questions, each one warm and flooding through your body. God's taken away someone's life, Daniel's brother's life, and we're here asking for his assistance? No sense, neither now nor later. Maybe that's what faith's about. Making sense of unanswerable questions. Living with the realization that you know nothing. Perhaps. So you offer aloud "May Daniel have the faith to work his way through this. Lord, now more than ever we need you. Not just Daniel, but all of us. To help us in our grief. And Daniel's mum and dad, that they too may feel closer to you. And those who knocked Matt over."

Graham says "Yes, we are here to feel closer to you. That Daniel may feel closer to you."

And you say "Yes closer. How we need to be close to you. Without that, we can feel no real love."

Graham: "Lord Jesus, through your presence we ask that Daniel may feel you inside him, around him, protecting him."

You: "Yes, in this dark passage. There is no place where you cannot shine."

Graham: "We ask that you may enter this room. Come, fill Daniel with your love. Come closer."

You: "We need you, Lord. Closer. Yes. Yes, we need you. Yes."

And you leave it at that. Too close. Part of you is panicking at this, what you've done. A bigger portion is reeling, excited, spinning. You hear Graham ask again for the Holy Spirit to come. You feel that silence around you, a blanket of peace. You try to take it but it takes you first. Then for a second you feel Daniel's pain, it burns like piping hot food. In your mouth, down your throat, in your belly. Grief-stricken, gut-wrenched. Quartered. You raise your right hand and place it over Graham's shoulders. You take your left hand off Daniel's thigh and slide it over his leaning forward shoulders. You think that he may be whimpering. You know you are. Your hand slides slowly over Daniel, pressing harder.

And you know that this is the closest you have come to anyone or anything. In your twenty years. Your gut shrinks and quivers.

You need water.

You say only to yourself, This feels like home.

Matt

He says "Look, there it is, there, the bridge."

You say "Looks better than in the photos."

"Shall we park the car and go check it out?"

"Sounds fine to me."

Getting out of the car you pull your jumper over your crotch but that doesn't do much to hide anything. Walking towards the bridge you want so bad to put your arms around James but you can't, not right now.

You hear him call "Hey, I think we can get down to the river over here." And you follow him across the road.

Pointing his finger like an explorer, James says "This is Mongarlowe's general store and a few houses. That's it. Great place, eh?"

"Jesus!" you say. "Smaller than I thought it would be. Still, suppose it's home to some crowd."

"I didn't think you were allowed to blaspheme like that."

You don't know what to say in response so you follow him down through the tall grass, pushing wattle limbs aside, watching your step with a worried eye.

James says "Just here's a good spot to hang out for a bit. Can you skim rocks?"

"Yep."

"We can do that later."

"What about now?" you bargain. "I'll beat you. First person to skim across to the other side."

"You're on."

You win. While skimming you've been checking him over; you never thought guys like him ever did sporty things. Though, true, skimming's not that sporty. But you've been laughing and stirring and you're glad you've won a game of river skimming.

James says "Let's catch some sun. Over there, that looks good."

You follow and your breath trips itself up.

He slumps his bum to the ground, pushing his legs out in front of him, his arms pressed into the grass by his sides. You sit beside him. It's a Sunday and the midday sun feels all right.

James says "Thanks for coming out here, Matt."

You, polite as ever, say "Well, thanks for driving us."

"I'm glad you wagged church."

"I've been off it for a while."

"Me too," he says, laughing.

"You've always been bored with church," you qualify. "Bet you've never been in your life."

"Went for my sister's wedding. None of it makes sense to me, that's all."

You say "You and me both."

"Do you still believe in it?"

"What, religion?"

"Yeah."

After a small pause you say "It's just trying to make sense of things. But lots of it is just rubbish."

"What bits *aren't* rubbish?"

"Well, I'm sure there was a guy called Jesus who did amazing things."

"Why?" asks your friend.

"Because Jesus-like characters keep happening. Like Kurt Cobain. Like Michael Jackson."

"What?"

"Well, he stood up for things . . ."

"Maybe Kurt, but I can't come at Michael Jackson." Laughing.

With a slight huff of a giggle you say "Well, maybe not Jacko, but Kurt kicked against the things he hated but it was the things he hated that killed him. He was popular, people loved him. They worship him now. Maybe Jesus was just an earlier version of Kurt Cobain. Perhaps anyone who risks their lives to reject things they hate has a little bit of Jesus in them."

"Sounds a bit too pop philosophy for me. So you think there's heaps of people who have a second coming, is that what you mean?"

You say "I guess", missing the gag.

"You're such a thinker, aren't you. Think, think, think. That's your role in life."

"Not really," you say, only trying to be modest. You think that thinking is very prestigious. And James thinks you're a thinker. That counts, that will resonate for quite some time.

James rips up a clump of grass and pegs it into the river. It makes a small splash, then floats with the stream of water. You and he watch it as if it's an ad on TV. Then you feel heat on your leg, a soft platform of warmth, rolling, pressing gently on your thigh. You have to keep your eyes on the now submerging grass. A collapsing world.

James says "Does that bother you?"

"No," you say, obviously. Bravely, you look at his hand moving up and down your thigh.

You hear him say "Nice huh?"

You say "Yeah." You lean backwards, you have grass prickling against your neck and the mass of the wooden bridge above. It's solid, been there for years. Then you see James's face come over you like a beautiful white cloud, smiling, sweet, keen. You see his mouth, perfect in shape and colour, young stubble on his upper lip, on his chin. His eyes are getting a lock on yours and they're moving in closer, your groin an oven. Tight. Pumping blood. James slides his hands across your jumper, up to your neck line. You feel the tip of his fingers against your skin, they're feeling the woollen rim. Then they go back down over the corrugations of your ribs, down onto your stomach, to the bottom hem of your jumper. He raises it gently, tugs a little to free your T-shirt from your jeans. You feel his hand, warm and smooth and strangely familiar, touch your bare stomach and then up again over your ribs and onto your chest. And your nipples. His eyes now almost touching yours, and you realize you're kissing another guy. You roll with it.

And you know that this is the closest you have come to anyone or anything. In your nineteen years, you haven't come out of yourself as much as this. Your throat dry and stuck.

Breaking the kiss, you say "You feel like home."

James says "Mmm, yeah."

You need water.

You resume kissing.

Jack

YOU'VE COME HOME usual time. The front door is unlocked, that's odd. The door onto the balcony open, some music on. You think Charlotte, who's been staying with you for a few days before returning to her home out west, must be around somewhere, maybe she's ducked up to the shops or something. She's been making friends with some of your neighbours so perhaps she's out chatting. Whatever, she mustn't be far away.

You put on some music, ditch your work clothes and jump into the shower. You don't usually have a shower straight after work but you do this afternoon. Rough day.

After dressing, you head to the balcony to put your towel out to dry. You think, I must make a trip to the laundromat. You fill your pack with a week's worth and head down the stairs of your apartment.

Slipping between the carport and the wall then onto the planted nature strip. You look up and see it: blue and red lights spinning, banked up traffic, small crowds in clusters. There are your neighbours and strangers and Charlotte. And a push bike, mangled in the gutter. On the median strip, chaos: a television camera, police vans, ambulances and cars parked randomly. In the middle of the road, surrounded by a circle of paramedics, is a boy's body. Facing up to the sky, his shirt off, head back. Blood flooding on the bitumen.

You see the TV man walk away, leaving his camera standing on a lifeless tripod, the machinery pointing like a judge's finger.

Charlotte comes up to you. You say "Are you all right?"

She says "I could do with a stiff drink. Or seven."

You look back across to the boy on the road and the paramedics. One stands up, shrugs her shoulders and walks to the ambulance as if someone's just pissed her off.

"I was having a cigarette on your balcony," begins Charlotte, "when I heard the thud and then the Fuck! Fuck! I looked at the clock. It was 5.50 when you normally come home. As I ran out to the road I said to myself 'It better not be him'."

"Were you the first here?" you ask Charlotte.

"There was some other bloke who was trying to give CPR but he didn't have a clue how to do it properly. So I gave it a go but the poor little guy had no chest left, everything a mush. It felt like a sponge."

"You all right?" you ask again.

"Well, I'm just great, what do you think?"

"What happened? He just come right into the traffic?"

"Mustn't have looked. He just went whack into that car's windscreen."

You're not sure how to comfort someone like this. You ask "Is he going to live?"

Charlotte says "I think he's pretty well dead, Jack" as if to suggest you haven't quite taken in what's happening around you, you've been a bit thick. And she'd be right.

"There might have been a pulse when I came out,"

she continues, "but I couldn't really tell. Probably just spasms."

You look back across to the road. Another of the paramedics stands and walks to the ambulance, grabbing a blanket.

"How old was he?" you ask.

"Dunno. About eighteen, nineteen."

"Do we know the name?"

"Nope."

"Have they found the family?"

"See that police car? In the back? That's the brother. They went to the house but only he was there. Someone said the parents are on the way." Charlotte: the expert of this accident.

You stare into the car and watch the head of the silhouette tilt to look out to the road.

The paramedic returns and lowers to a crouch. The others stand and let their colleague place the blanket over the body. This can't be a tear coming? For Christ's sake you didn't see it happen; you probably were calmly parking the car when Charlotte was out on the road getting her white skirt dirty with the blood of a stranger.

You say "I'm going across to the shops. You want anything?"

"I like that," Charlotte says. "Someone's just died on your doorstep and you just keep on with your routine. Nothing's going to stop you."

"I don't want to sit here and watch. Not like that TV camera over there. You want anything?"

"A couple of bottles of red would be good. I'll pay you back later."

Walking across the road and towards the shops you pass people to whom you want to say "Someone's just died crossing the road" but you can't be sure that it'll come out right. At Woolies you want to tell the checkout girl that a boy has died only a few hundred metres away. In the newsagent and the liquor store you want to do the same. But you remain silent, returning across the road where the ambulances have now disappeared leaving the police to interview the driver of the car and question witnesses. Charlotte's still there, chatting to someone in a gutter. You walk up to them, say "I'll be at home" to Charlotte and "I just live in that apartment up those steps if you need anything" to the young man with the pale face. He looks up to you like a dog in trouble and doesn't say a word.

Later, with the road open again, you tell Charlotte that you're going back to Woolies to get milk. Charlotte doesn't say anything; she's on the phone to a friend talking about the accident. You feel pathetic for not providing better counsel.

As you close the door behind you she yells "For fuck's sake look both ways before crossing the road."

At Woolies you pick up the milk but that isn't what you've come for. You buy flowers. They're red and pretty and wrapped in blue paper, dripping a little.

You recross the road, the streetlights showing a place bereft of accident relics. No glass, no blood stains, missing the mangled bike. No nothing. A road. Transport. Cold bitumen.

You sit the flowers at the base of a tree near the place where the bike had rested.

Someone died here. Someone you knew nothing about. And the boy knew nothing about you and your neighbours. But for those moments when he had one foot here and one foot there – wherever 'there' is, *whatever* 'there' is – you and your neighbours cared for him more than anyone else.

Walking back up the stairs of your apartment you think, I wonder what was the last thought he had before crossing the road?

No chance of ever knowing that.

Charlotte's still on the phone.

This is the closest you have come to anyone or anything. In your thirty-eight years. Your gut shrinks and quivers, your throat dry and stuck.

And you won't tell Charlotte about the flowers, no-one will ever know about the flowers.

On Sunday, as regular as clockwork, you'll make your trip to Kaleen Baptist and say a prayer for the boy and his family and the people in your neighbourhood. For the time being you grab a drink. Water washing your throat, the warmth of your hand moving slowly up and down over your forearm.

You think, Strange, I've never felt more at home.

Coffee

The edges of the fields were green, you could see them
through the narrow streets like a distant movie,
a few tiny people moving about slowly, sowing
or reaping. And in the other direction, a glimpse
between two high white walls, the glass-green sea.
We brought bad weather with us – bluish clouds
blowing across the sky, and a chill darkness
covered the fields, silver flecks on the wave tops,
storm wrack on the shore. I had a vision
of people descending on this isolated place
bringing bad manners with them, that is, manners
that were adapted to a different set of values,
survival in the bear-pit of the city, let's say.
So we sat on the oars of the self, and life just drifted.
We found what was forbidden, isn't that
what we're always looking for, then abandoning?
Along the shore, life balanced exactly on the knife-edge
between the drab and the sublime, "between the shit
and the champagne", she said, spying on the town,
cigarette slanting from her lips, binoculars held steady,
the lenses at the front racking and peeping in and out.
"When I was young I led myself into mischief",
she said. "High on joy, that's what I want,
and I want anyone's arms around me." She was
holding a tiny drawing and showing the customers,
then she pulled back. It's building it up from these
tiny pieces, day after day, so that months
turn into years, and it gets done, but so slowly.
She was painting too much, drinking too much coffee –
she put something in it – her boyfriend killed himself.
I had gone to the city, the Big Smoke, and
in that crowded beehive my thin talent for being led
led me by the nose to the magazines with the bright leader,
but it's just a job, yet I couldn't tell her that, as if
it were all just cheap drink, all at the magazine's expense.
You forget so much. Later there was a tough time,
locked away, I guess, endless winter, you wonder
what he was thinking about year after year –
the rope around the rolled carpet, maybe, the lumpy
body in there – he sank back into his seat
at the end of the show, then the lights were fading.
What I did, she said, I figured I couldn't be nabbed for.
It was above the ordinary, beyond the pale.
She threw down the brush, and started crying.
From the hotel to the place of worship, a few
sad steps. "A glass of water – God help me."
She could see it all, like a half-forgotten dream.
Coffee was brought to her on the beach,
something like scotch poured into the coffee,
that makes you sweat, that makes you dizzy.

John Tranter

That Year

that year I got a full-time job
of entering data in my c.v. and applications

that year my face was against me
I tried to hide it in a book

that year I glanced at my death
when someone bumped into me from behind

that year I stopped writing poetry altogether
thinking my life belonged elsewhere

that year no more letters came from china
like a sudden power failure

that year there were many women
and none were friends

that year I scraped all the hard coins together
and started thinking of buying a dream

that year we decided not to go back to china again
because someone by the name of australia seemed to like us here

that year I was never able to turn the clock back one hour
on the new video set after daylight savings stopped

that year the one by the name of australia said no
to poetry and yes to poultry

that year my chinese poems about australia
were collected in china censored

that year my faxes around the world came back
with bad news and no news about poetry

that year more poets fell in love with fiction-making
fortune-making way-making for themselves

that year a.b.c. became c.b.a.
'cause it can't broadcast a word

that year cut was the fashion
when howard became the heroine and hanson the hero

that year I lost all my diaries
and I had not a single tear

that was the year of rats

(written in the imagined year of 2007)

Ouyang Yu

Appreciation Sale

Unmask the planetarium's hollow
dome, opening its entire eye
on the unforeseen if suspect
or hallowed heaven, imagined
if not mapped; the Censor speaks
by smothering, cleaving to the family
secret as if its hard shell were home.
Evasion's an industry whose
small cap funds accrue profit –
cosmonauts, for whom novelty
may still be value, sell Mir objects
on QVC. Space Pens write words
without gravity, weather in-
accessible in space as some
poems, wrinkled maps folded till
new boundaries wager elegance
against political lines of conduct:
guard your border's hegemonies,
encircled like the boy who's drawn
to suicide as, flipping back and back
through grief's Rolodex, he avers
a grandfather killed himself. So
we hold to preconstructed patterns
like caulk that's too brittle because
it's not silicone. Gun seals it,
but open appeals disrobe process;
extras arrive to play ordinary
citizens whose patriotism is
performed in Nikes or jerseys,
Goods unadvertised on medieval
pageant wagons. (NO SIGNS ON
FENCE says the sign on a nearby
fence.) And so I know not to do
what they say not to do and that,
too, is private the way Lot was
private once his wife had died or
how you were before managed anger
unburdened anarchies of self-
loathing and the old pedophile
apologized, then turned to floss
his teeth in raptures of the almost-
done, body stripped to its
essentials, bowels & teeth,
crazed wires for hair, eyes
undiminished even if he cannot
remember a granddaughter's name
was the same as mine. Given
essential repetition, we practice
scales, tone elevated, interior
diction mismanaging funds
that make the graphs more lovely.
Virtue's partitions are too clear,
hard drive sectored like a midwest
traffic pattern, and the balloon
that rises over it alters atmospheres,
rare helium trapped as reverse ballast
to launch through cloud, becoming
magic (defined as 'anything you
can't see'). A five year old puts
the electric train's engine in its midst,
caboose at the head; truths are
impeached like those assumptions
I fear most: that children come and
they are not well; that I hear the old
hurts and am left untorn as an old
calendar remains intact, days
reinforcing value in failing
to pass like relay runners
who can't surrender their batons,
assuming in all things perpetuity,
even in the ice that fidgets come spring,
states altered like pebbles in high surf,
conditions forecast to remain the same
and that is what changes most, the roiling
weft, articulated expansiveness of surf,
loose adumbrations of . . . and the words
which, spoken, do: I do, and you shall,
and obedience is not abject but inscribed
in respect and non-repugnance at
the act of falling ever short. Perfect the
bend of Kaneohe bay where I thee wed
at this terminus, this patched ground
where there was, before sugar, a heiau,
and where worship, if once broken, still
claims its force like a standard form
and the myth diminishes like a test tube
bird with yellow hat and red feather who
drinks from a glass on dry days, then
rests through the ordinary deluge.

Susan M. Schultz

Exotica at Lake Joondalup

to Ato Quayson

Lake Joondalup – satellite city –
shaping suburbs laid out
like empty circulatory systems,
blood traffic-hungry,
buttressed walls and formatted
ground/lake, stele squeezed
tight together, industry's
treated pine setting root
in little Arcadia – a plastic module
Swedish look, equipment
as exact as folly, highly
photogenic lakes used as backdrops,
birds mounted
over shopping centres.
Spiritual ladies stretch palms
towards Snyderesque
parrots, mystical glow
suppressing muscular twitches
within neat oval faces
retaining fluttered states of plural bliss,
dense flights of crows
invading space, as if to lift
or break sacred bonds
of Nature, avoiding
association charismatics
in scrub that's close
to the lake's edge, a fringe
through which birds
move carelessly.
Oblivious, though out of reach,
white-faced heron and egrets
defend territory silently,
quick slice of light knifing water,
prey darting shadows
of grave movements.
Paperbark groves cluster.
A small fish loses its head.
Paperbarks skinless
ringbarked flesh bone-like ivory
stripped back pentagram
red paint and a litany of bottles,
Angel's Trumpet decaying
earthmoving equipment
poised on boundaries forced
into one another's flesh – a defensive
reaction against depth,
against vast mounds of water
beneath dirt tracks
ploughed by yellow cars.
The car a trope, a giraffe
or Nile Cow perfectly
yellow in yellow light,
post-colonial jibes
strangely Skeltonic
as precisely doggerel rhythms,
plastic oil containers,
spray drums from market gardens
rotting in ground
hesitantly peaty.
Deeply historic unearthing
will be sealed beneath
a cap of asphalt and concrete,
only power lines
humming alternative lifeforce.
Zoo-bound giraffe
preserving late twentieth-century
expediency – Crosse's
imported exotica, lacking
rosetta stones between Victorian England/
Joondalup

John Kinsella

Feral-66

Alex Hutchinson

THE WHOLE PLACE stinks of boiling meat and stewing fruit.

I hate meat (just turned vegetarian) but stewed fruit's okay.

We used to go to the carnival a lot when I was little. I remember I used to cry until Mum agreed to take us. But that was while Dad was still working and the carnival came out this far.

Have you ever tried to grow potatoes?

No. I didn't think so.

Potatoes are worse than stewed fruit but not as bad as boiled meat.

We were eating potatoes the day they forgot my sixteenth birthday.

You know? I was at the dinner table, eating this big, fat steak and there was this red chunk in my mouth and I couldn't swallow it. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't force it down. I kept it in my mouth so long that salt and juice ran out my nose. I decided to stick to greens from then on.

You know? I woke up, and I went downstairs and nobody said anything. So I thought, okay, it's a surprise party. I'll get home from school tonight and they'll all jump out and yell.

Mum says vegetarians used to die from lack of vitamins and iron and stuff.

Surprise! But they didn't. Only it was a Wednesday, so I thought maybe they're saving the party for the weekend. So I kept silent. Didn't tell anyone. Not even my friends.

But I had this dog once, who got run over. Right across the middle. Guts and gore and intestine spilling out onto the road, and he was so long and flat in the middle. His face was fine. Perfect. But he was still dead.

I waited till Sunday, and they were starting to get ready for Kath's birthday. And I said "Kath, he doesn't look like a dog no more. He's all raw in the middle."

That started a really huge row. Lots of screaming, some stuff got broken. Dad blamed Mum for forgetting, but it was his fault just as much. Dave and Kath and Steve and Mum and Dad all forgot. Some family.

Stewed fruit for a week.

And that night, when I'd gone to bed, Dad came looking for me. I thought that was pretty nice. I thought he was finally going to give me a present. I was hoping it was going to be something small like jewellery or something. I found out it wasn't all that nice pretty quick. I'm not stupid. I learn fast.

Happy Birthday.

Fat and greasy and stinks of meat.

Pretty sad about that dog.

That was the beginning of the end as far as I can tell. As close as I can pin it down, anyway.

Six months later, I stopped going to school.

The next day I got this big cardboard package with a bow and purple wrapping paper with a doll in it.

I didn't like the teacher and the kids didn't like me.

Steve wanted to stuff that dog. Put it back together and stuff it and put it on the mantelpiece. He gave up when he couldn't figure out a way to cover up the tyre track.

A doll with a tyre track is no good at all.

We had this project at school, a group thing, where we had to make this diorama from wood and fruit and meat and stuff.

You have to understand; there's not many people out here. It's a small town. Word got around. Like you'd think. Everybody knew that dog and was sorry. He even got a funeral.

And what's with a birthday anyway? They give you a present for still being alive?

I wasn't talking much by this time. I'd learned to keep my mouth shut. It wasn't anything against the other kids, I just didn't have much to say. One kid hit me, but I didn't make a sound. That only made him worse, so I squealed a bit, then, and he stopped.

Steve thought that dog would be even better stuffed. It never did fetch the paper or slippers or pipe or any of that when it was alive. Just ate food and took up space and sometimes did a shit on the carpet. Steve thought that dog wouldn't bother anybody up there on the mantelpiece.

But he gave up. And now the dog rots in a hole in the ground and everybody's talking about getting a new one. A little one this time. Cute. And they're going to send it to obedience school so it does what it's told.

There's a hand on my thigh in the kitchen and it's not mine. It lurks there, beneath the table, while everybody eats one-handed.

I wonder who it belongs to?

After the fight at school I met this guy. He said he was real sorry about what had happened and did I need any help? or someone to talk to? or just a shoulder to cry on?

Dad laughs and gets up and watches TV while Mum stares at me and makes me do the washing up.

Tomorrow I ran away.

I told him I don't cry any more, but thankyou verymuch for asking.

I put some stuff in a bag and took a packet of seeds and went and hid. I thought I'd plant a garden of tomatoes, maybe some beans when they were in season.

There was something to be said for a shoulder. Strong, upright, supportive, kind.

But the oval wasn't so nice either.

Yesterday I run away.

I walked for a while, through the bush, and for a week I didn't see another person alive.

I slept by the river most nights, on the soft smooth rocks, almost warm with body heat. A lot of mud. Mud works as well as newspaper for keeping in heat if you know how to stack it. And I don't mind being dirty. I don't mind being cold. I don't mind being by myself. Really. I don't mind.

I imagine Dave and Kath and Steve will self-destruct back home without me running surveillance.

I don't mind that, either.

He found me when I was swimming.

I imagine the whole household imploding, sucking in on itself; Mum by the dinner table, awash in a sea of empty cans; everyone else spinning, spinning spinningspinning inward until there's nothing left but a wisp of smoke and a black burn mark on the ground where the house used to be.

I didn't see him at first, there behind the trees. I don't know how long he had been watching. An hour? Two?

But that's pretty unlikely. They'll probably get along fine.

I can smell.

The river had turned cold in the shade and I was

clambering out of the water, one hand on this big piece of wood I'd found to help me float. It was all eaten through by bugs at one end, but still solid, satisfying wood at the other.

Mum knew. I'm certain she did. But she just packed a bigger lunch. Carefully packaged sandwiches (no meat) with gladwrap an inch thick and a clear little twist on top.

Dead things float in the river. Birds, mostly. Sometimes a sheep or a pig or something from a farm upstream will slide by; bloated from the water and the flies. I get out, then, and wait a while for the water to wash the filth away before going back in.

The voice is quiet against the roar of the river on the rocks.

"What're you doing out here, Peg?"

"Nothing."

"Why aren't you at school?"

"Don't wanna go no more."

"Because you should be at school."

"Don't wanna."

"They don't know where you are. Nobody does. Only I figured it out. Thought; where would Peg go? Where would she go if she didn't want to be found?"

I just stared at him.

"And they're not going to find you. Are they Peg?"

He's undoing his belt.

I have a stick.

He's undoing his belt and I have a stick and now he's dropping his pants and I have a great, big fucking stick.

"You gone feral? Huh Peg? They say you have."

"Ain't gone shit."

The sound of his ribs breaking bounces up my arm, dislocating my elbow. But the pain, it feels good, and I watch his eyes bulge and his tongue loll for a full fifteen minutes before I kick his body into the river.

He floats pretty good for a fat sonofabitch.

I don't think I'll ever go back.

To school.

There's a trick to resetting a dislocated elbow. Mine goes real easy, ever since. Well. Ever since. Dad, he says. But that's not important. Not now.

Anyway.

You have to pull and then twist. You have to pull real hard and twist real quick. It's easier with another person to help, but I don't need them.

No more wasting time. No more shitting on other people's lawns.

I can do it by myself.

One swift, hard tug and I feel the bone snap back into place. Inside my head burns a white light flares. I almost black out. The sudden burning in my mouth tastes of copper.

But then I open my eyes.

And I don't scream.

Didn't scream.

Not once.

Colleen Spencer

Annette Trevitt

Colleen Spencer was fed up. She was in the kitchen, painting her toenails when she got the phone call. Her mother, Ida Close, was acting suspiciously in the town's car park and "can you come and get her". She finished polishing her left foot. This was the last straw, Colleen thought, as she screwed the brush back into the bottle. She didn't care what they decided to do with her mother any more. She had had enough. Colleen walked outside and sat on the back porch and had a cigarette. The phone rang again but she didn't answer it. Her bloody mother can wait, she thought, as if she didn't have enough already on her plate. She had another cigarette.

Ida Close stole cars. She stole them to drive to the cemetery to visit her dead husband. Colleen used to drive her until the car blew up nine months ago and Ida's friends, well they just got sick and tired of taking her. Colleen's father had died twenty-three years ago. Ida never remarried. Instead she lived with the memory of him very much alive. Her friends found this odd and frankly annoying, "It's as if he's still around", leading a richer and fuller life than their own husbands.

Ida couldn't afford the town's taxi and her arthritic knees meant that she couldn't walk the seventeen kilometres there and back. So she stole cars. The town frowned, tutted and said enough was enough. One councillor insisted they should lock her up. "Get that confounded woman off the streets" he would cry at meetings. Everyone knew that these outbursts were because Ida had stolen his car from outside Linda Thompson's house and he still hadn't been able to explain to his wife why his car was there in the first place.

Colleen was sick of it. She had tried reason, threats and even bribery but nothing stopped Ida joyriding to the cemetery. The last thing she wanted to do was to chase her crazy mother around the town. She had enough things to deal with. She had no money. Her daughter was in the city, losing her reputation and her ex-husband was singing country and western songs over the radio about their marriage and its break-up. Ever since he had left two years ago, he only ever called at some ungodly hour in the morning. He would tell her that he still loved her and wanted her. Colleen would go over to his place and ask him to stop. He would tell her to get over it, "It's your problem, you pick up the phone". Then he'd tell her that she had no

idea how much he didn't care. He'd sit there silent, passive and hungover. Colleen would match this violence with her own and break something. Once calm she'd try again to tell him how she felt only to look down and see his cowboy boots tapping out another new and humiliating tune.

Colleen took her time walking. She was lighting a cigarette when she saw a commotion at the top of the street. As she got closer, she saw that a car had slammed into a fence. The front end was smashed in, the doors were wide open and there was no sign of the driver. Her heart leapt into her mouth. She heard one of the boys who was peering into the car say that there was blood on the seat and a woman reply, "Blood or no blood look at my fence". Colleen felt hot and sick. She tried to think of what to do. Her mind was racing but her body wouldn't move. Everything seemed far away. She looked down at her burning cigarette. She was trying to remember when she lit it as a car pulled up beside her. She flicked the cigarette away and got into the car.

Her mother looked small and tidy behind the wheel. "Nice car," Colleen said. Her mother nodded and pulled away from the kerb. The car was a brand new manual. Colleen didn't know her mother could drive a manual. The sly old dog. She unwound her window and rested her elbow on the ledge. Ida turned onto the road that headed out of town and put her foot down. Colleen pulled a cigarette out of the packet on the dashboard. She looked around for the lighter and wondered if the love her mother still had for her father was the same as the love she used to have for her ex-husband. She pushed back into her seat. This car was built for cruising. She watched her town slip off the horizon and then squinted her eyes and let everything go blurry.

Imagine Day

Paul Hassing

Feisty and Fon were power walking along the banks of the Yarra. It was a hot summer Saturday; nearly lunchtime. Having trekked from Armadale, Fon was feeling they had bitten off more than they could chew. Fitzroy was still five tortuous kilometres away. Feisty decided to distract Fon from her cruel blisters and protesting calves. He pointed at a tall poplar tree.

"Look, Fonnie; see how that branch is dying off?"

Fonnie raised her sweat-soaked brow and squinted into the blinding sun. "Yeah."

"Imagine being a leaf on that dying branch, watching the dieback heading toward you. Chances are, you'd forget all about the view and how groovy it was to be a leaf. You'd be consumed with the fear of death. Paralyzed. Unable to think of anything else."

"I guess so," replied Fon wearily.

"The thing is," continued Feisty with mounting enthusiasm, "poplars are deciduous. That leaf is going to fall off months before the dieback gets to it. When it goes, it'll have spent its whole life worrying about something that never posed a true threat."

Fon concentrated on the baking asphalt of the bicycle path. "Uh-huh."

Feisty beamed at the blue sky, pleased with his keen eye for nature and powers of philosophical interpretation. The couple walked in silence for a time.

"Fonnie."

"Yes, Feisty."

"This is a great walk, isn't it?"

"It's a bit longer than I thought it would be."

"Sure, but it's great to be out, isn't it?"

"Yes. It is."

"Imagine if this whole freeway were covered in those dimpled concrete tiles they use in carparks."

"What?"

"You know, those ones that have little recesses, like egg cartons. You lay them down and cover them with topsoil. Then you sow grass seed. When the grass grows, the concrete foundation stops cars from sinking into the earth or tearing it up. Beats the shit out of a normal carpark surface."

"Oh, yeah. I know the ones."

"Well, imagine if the whole South Eastern Freeway were paved with them. Imagine the extra oxygen. It'd look great. Man, it'd be fantastic, don't you think? Fonnie? Why don't they do that? What's your theory?"

Fon regarded the noisy freeway. Her poorly-fitting sandshoes squelched with perspiration. A trio of relentless flies strafed her wet face, effortlessly evading the angry swish of her arms. Her armpits chafed and her head throbbed. She drew a deep breath.

"Feisty."

"Yes baby?" said her boyfriend brightly.

"Can we please stop imagining things until we get home?"

Feisty looked at her, surprised and hurt. His brow furrowed. "Why?"

"I'm really hot and tired. I find it hard work picturing all the things you describe. Especially since you've had me doing it all week."

"I have?"

"Yes. On Monday we had the farting biting cat, as well as bride-sniping from that penthouse next to the Fitzroy Gardens. On Tuesday, it was the slate tiles from Mars and the clothing that hurts people if they don't look good in it. On Wednesday I had dinner with Debbie, but as soon as I got home, you told me all about the piano-wire banana lounge that slices people into bits if they don't lie on it properly. Then, on Thursday, Steven came over, and both of you went on for ages about camouflage bean bags getting lost in the garden. Finally, yesterday, after a really shitty week at work, I came home to your idea for a dining table with a built in hologram unit that can record and replay the events that occur around it."

"I see," said Feisty, crushed. He was easily crushed.

"It's not that I don't enjoy your ideas, baby," explained Fon carefully, "it's just that it's easier for you to invent them than it is for me to picture them. And when, like today, I'm hot and tired and thirsty and uncomfortable, I don't really enjoy the experience as much as you obviously do. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Yes," said Feisty, sulking.

"Please don't think that I want you to stop imagining stuff. I don't. I just need to be given a breather now and then."

"So you don't want me to stop completely?"

"No, baby. Of course not. I love your ideas. I wish I could think of them myself. Well, not all of them; some of the stuff you come out with is pretty weird. All I'm saying is that I can only handle your imagination in small doses."

"I see," said Feisty, recovering. "What if we had one day per week when I could tell you all my shit? I could save up everything during the week and hit you with it on the weekend, when you're relaxed."

"That could work."

"Yeah? You wouldn't mind?"

"No, not at all. I'm just too tired during the week. If you gave me a break for six days, I'm sure I'd be fine on the seventh."

Feisty gripped Fon's shoulder excitedly. "Choose a day!"

Fon thought carefully. "What about every Saturday?"

"Does that include today?"

"No. I'm too hot. We'll start it from next Saturday, OK?"

Feisty was momentarily disappointed. They were approaching a floating pontoon bridge. He had already invented the troll who lived beneath it and was bursting to tell.

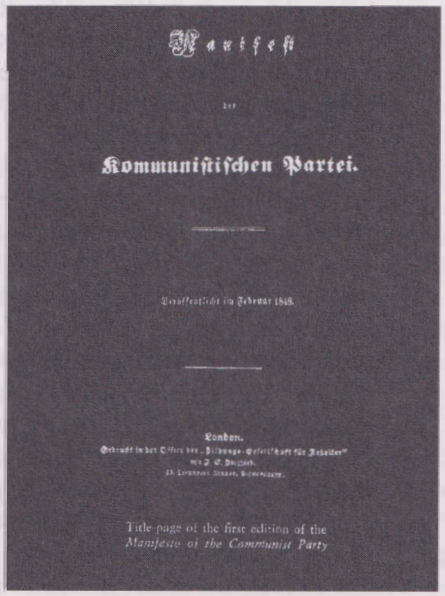
Who's afraid of Marx & Engels? a symposium

The Communist Manifesto (Penguin Classics, $9.95)

Gary MacLennan

THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY of the Manifesto enables us to ask some fundamental questions. Specifically, is the Spectre of Communism still haunting Europe? Is revolution still a possibility? If one adheres to the actualist school of thought that marks the approach of thinkers like Karl Popper and his followers then the answer would appear to be 'No'. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the demise of the Eastern European regimes, and the development of 'market socialism' in Deng's China would all appear to amount to proof that the spectre has indeed been laid to rest.

Yet fear and suspicion linger. The old mole of revolution could still be grubbing away and may be about to pop up in the most startling of places. Thus in the recent Hollywood movie *Air Force One* this fear was given a vivid manifestation when the 'evil' general was released from prison and marched out to the gates to the accompaniment of the Internationale sung by the other prisoners. In the Pentagon and the Kremlin the anti-communists


Manifest
der
Kommunistischen Partei.
London.
Title-page of the first edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*

cringed in fear. The spectre was abroad once more.

With the demise of the Soviet Union the most commonly available edition of the Manifesto is the Penguin edition introduction by A.J.P. Taylor. The Introduction was written in 1967 and is redolent of the smug complacencies of successful Keynesianism. But the dialectic is as always remorseless and what seems dated in these days of Economic Rationalism is not Marx and Engels' text but rather Taylor's attempts to show that it is only a "literary curiosity".

The Introduction, when it is not making howlers such as in its summary of the Marxist theory of economic crises, cannot resist the stupidly snide. Thus for Taylor, Marxism is a religion and the Manifesto is its holy book with the same status as the Bible or the Koran. When language is used like this it has no meaning. It should not be necessary to point out that there are no rituals or taboos associated with the Manifesto. That it has never, in other words, functioned as the Koran and the Bible do.

Though this is just so obvious, there remains an interesting contradiction. Presumably Penguin want to make money by getting us to buy their edition of the Manifesto. Still they stubbornly cling to Taylor's Introduction, possibly as an antidote to the Manifesto's message.

I have however no intention of saying that the Manifesto is a timeless or universal document. To suggest this would be to fly in the face of the whole Marxist tradition which demands that its core research program be constantly brought up to date. Thus the Manifesto has nothing to say on the issues of race, mental and physical

handicaps, sexuality, and the environment. Neither is there much concrete utopianism nor a clearly developed ethical framework. All these are serious absences in any emancipatory text.

Nevertheless that this remains a great book can be seen from the Manifesto's opening section – 'Bourgeois and Proletarians' – in many ways its most brilliant achievement. In about fifteen pages Marx and Engels lay bare the development of capitalism. Moreover it is our fate to live in a time when all the great prophecies have been fulfilled. Ours is indeed the era of "uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions". All that is solid has melted into air and all that is holy has truly been profaned. The capitalists have covered the entire surface of the globe. They have nestled everywhere. They have battered down all Chinese walls and all nations now accept the bourgeois mode of production.

This incidentally is writing at its very finest. In a time when we have seen bad writing (otherwise known as Postmodernist Theory) brought to a fine art in the works of Derrida, Baudrillard et al, it is truly refreshing to go back to the Manifesto and see language used to persuade, to inspire and to communicate rather than to demoralize and obfuscate.

There are other passages in the Manifesto which are among my personal favourites. Some of these were labelled as deficient by Engels and Marx in their 1872 Preface to the German edition, but I think they pay a rereading. The passage on feudal socialism also has interesting contemporary resonances if one thinks for example of the careers of the priests Costello and Brennan. Given the complicity of the ALP and the weakness of the Left these men are currently among the most potent sources of opposition to the Howard Government.

Yet in this passage from the Manifesto I think we have a very accurate characterization of the fundamental truth of their politics. We have but to substitute 'Christian' for 'feudal' and 'Church' for 'aristocracy':

> In this way arose feudal Socialism; half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future; at times, by its bitter, witty and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart's core, but always ludicrous in its effect, through total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history.
>
> The aristocracy, in order to rally the people to them, waved the proletarian alms-bag in front for a banner. But the people, so often as it joined them, saw on their hindquarters the old feudal coats of arms, and deserted with loud and irreverent laughter.

Another aspect of the Manifesto has to do with its attitude towards Modernity. The Manifesto can be read as a celebration of the achievements of capitalism. Certainly that is how it was portrayed in a recent *New Yorker* article. But Marx's later writings show that he was not the simple apologist for modernity and industrial development that some have claimed. He was aware of the terrible price that was being paid by the pre-modern cultures caught up in the spiral of capitalist growth.

Still it must be admitted that Marx did expect great things when we are at last compelled, as he put it, to face with sober senses our real conditions of life and our real relations with our kind. It remains to be seen however what will emerge from the disillusionment that follows the victories of capitalist modernity. With the total triumph of capitalist values there is now no hiding place. The 'Free World' won the Cold War decisively and we can now see the brutal realities of the resultant New World Order.

The imaginary flowers on the chain have indeed withered. Will we as Marx believed proceed from this disillusionment to pluck the living flower? Or will, as Weber argued, the Old Gods ascend from the grave bringing with them a new era of irrationality?

I do not know the answer to these questions of course. But the recent waterfront dispute here in Australia has shown us all that there is resistance in the people and that they can defy the logics of capital. Around the world the same pattern is emerging. The public upheavals in France in 1995 show that more and more people are looking at the future the capitalist class has prepared for us all and more and more they are saying "no thanks".

Whether this refusal can gain sufficient strength to emerge as a movement of genuine transcendence remains to be seen. But for the moment we must hold to the memory that we have seen the working class move. Workers did down tools and march onto the streets in support of other workers. Such actions are unthinkable in terms of the ideological view of human nature that has buttressed Economic Rationalism. Instead of the supposedly universal Possessive Individual we had workers and the community acting together to resist the state. For a brief period it was as

if the concluding exhortations of the Manifesto were being heeded. Existing social conditions were, if not threatened, at least called into question. Workers did unite and even if the chains were not cast off we were all shown how they might be broken.

Lani Giesen

> "But the evil," answered Momus, "is that they hold for certain that they are in the light."
>
> Giordano Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*

THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO is not just a political tract but an invocation, an incantation sung to call forth – to make manifest – the 'nursery tale' spectre of its authors' imagination, with Marx playing the role of demiurge. In spite of the fact that the ideas he propounded have been, and continue to be, revised, revamped and re-evaluated, the Manifesto stands as it was, as static as the *Book of Revelation*, frozen perhaps by its very nature. A manifesto is a public proclamation of a Plan, not an invitation to discourse, and a Plan cannot help but be wrong, even if only morally, even if it becomes true. While outlining an intent and a program of action, a manifesto lays claim to a privileged knowledge of what that program will effect and a claim to that kind of knowledge is always a claim to power. *The Communist Manifesto* is as unequivocal about this claim as it is possible to be. It frames itself as prophetic, as visionary, and by doing so brushes away small inconveniences like human diversity. It would be funny, if it weren't taken so seriously. As easy as it now is to refute its prophecies, the mythological strength of the text remains, still moving people to become adepts, like Eco's Belbo in *Foucault's Pendulum*, "not through enlightenment, but *faute de mieux*." Like the opiate, it mystifies the people rather than liberating them.

Manifestos are perhaps bound to mirror the patterns of power they wish to overthrow because they are nearly always formulated in an adversarial context. A manifesto is shaped by that which it wishes to defeat because it enters the arena on its enemy's terms and must immediately define itself against. Polarization becomes unavoidable and the opposing forces begin to operate on a symbolic level rather than an intellectual one, with all the simplicity and persuasiveness that level entails. A.J.P. Taylor, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Communist Manifesto*, classes the document as a sacred text. The number of editions currently available in spite of its reduced applicability to present fact, both in print and in hypertext, attests to that analysis. Like the Bible, its ongoing prominence has more to do with its symbolic unity than its accuracy. In the religion of Communism which has grown up around the text, "two great (polarized) classes" face each other like the Great Prostitute and the Bride and the outcome of this confrontation is the monism which arises once the proletariat has "won the battle of democracy" and class distinctions disappear. By Marx's definition, history as we know it there ends. O come the New Jerusalem. With some irony I am left to wonder: Surely we've developed past the point of believing that we are heading somewhere?

By claiming to know the path which will take humankind beyond the class struggle, the Manifesto creates a new hierarchy even within the class it claims to represent, starting from the most "advanced and resolute", moving down toward those who are yet to be rescued from "the idiocy of rural life", and even further down to the unrescuable, the *lumpenproletariat*. The Communists are the initiates, the Chosen, the new bearers of a new *noblesse oblige*, and as such their call invites adherents rather than comrades. The Manifesto states quite openly that the Communists "have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march", the advantage of *pronoia*, and they are therefore entitled to direct the proletariat, not exercising power in their own name of course, but in the name of a force greater than them all, a force that justifies using measures which would otherwise appear "untenable" – the inexorable force of history. They are simply the messengers of fate. Under the umbrella of science, the Communists claim a future moral sanction for their paternalistic vanity but, as Popper tells us, the future cannot be scientifically determined. But the future *can* always be deferred, leaving the masses in a perpetual Kantian nonage.

If we strip the Manifesto of its mythology, if we reject its absolutism, if we seek no more the date of the Apocalypse, the text becomes just so much posturing and the book becomes fetish. The prophet is revealed as the charlatan if measured by his own yardstick; history does not bear him out. The modern epoch has not "simplified

the class antagonisms", it has not split society more and more into "two great hostile camps". Good and evil have not conveniently revealed themselves as pure form and the new world that the proletariat was to win, like the proletariat itself, is as far away as ever. In its detached certainty, the Manifesto reduces all human relations to a class relation, ignoring entirely the complexity of the human animal and failing to acknowledge the cultural nature of the individual which remains however they may slip down or climb up the rungs of Jacob's economic ladder. This failure is damning. Where there is a man, the Manifesto recognizes only an aspect. It rejects all else because it is not in accordance with the Plan. Unless socialism (of whatever form) accepts, and embraces, the diversity of forces which act upon an individual in society, it has no claim to moral superiority, no matter how it overflows with rhetoric about "the free development of each", because it has no affinity with those it wishes to free. This reticence to fully engage with the people shows clearly that the Manifesto has an agenda separate from, and valued more highly than, the will of the people.

A Plan always reveres the future at the expense of the present, it callously rejects those it imagines, in its arrogance, it has already saved, but because it pretends the future is assured it can become a flame to the moth of hope in those rejected, those who will not live to see the future, those who will suffer to see the future. If they are left waiting for the end of history, for the New Jerusalem, they are left mystified and have no way of escaping their chains. A manifesto seeks only the abstract freedom of an abstract people. As an aim, this is not high enough.

John Leonard

THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO was written in 1848 by Marx from a draft by Engels at the invitation of a small group of German émigré revolutionaries in London, as a manifesto of what, in that year of European revolutions, Marx and Engels believed should constitute true communist doctrine. As time went by, of course, and even within the lifetime of Marx and Engels, the text acquired the status of a classic, and Marx and Engel's successive prefaces to the various editions in several languages of the work (reproduced in the Penguin Classics edition) in part document the changes in the European political situation over the next half century. To say that *The Communist Manifesto* is a historical document is a truism, but one which is not to distinguish it from any other text, political or not, or to detract from it, for, as Marx and Engels would have been the first to agree, all cultural productions are a product of their own place and time; the important question to ask is whether a work is still useful, can be used in productive ways in our place and time.

A great deal of *The Communist Manifesto* has become irrelevant to the immediate needs of people seeking inspiration or information; in this category would fall the large sections of polemic against various contemporary political movements and figures. There are also in the work a great many things one would want to disagree with: the idea that the bourgeois revolution has "simplified the class antagonisms" of pre-modern times, the notion that the bourgeois revolution leads inexorably to a communist one, or the very idea of revolution itself, and so forth. These were arguments which were very plausible ones to make in 1848, but which the advantage of hindsight allows us to modify or overturn completely.

What I take of value from reading *The Communist Manifesto* is the effect of passages like these:

> Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its turn, reacted on the extension of industry: and in proportion as, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed.
>
> The bourgeoisie . . . has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous cash-payment. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value. And in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable, freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

> The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe . . . All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries . . . that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe.
>
> [The bourgeoisie] compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation in their midst . . . In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

Now, allowing for a difference in phraseology and terminology, if these are not startling and accurate descriptions of the world of global capitalism in which we live presently, then they are astonishing presages of it, and make *The Communist Manifesto* more of a document of immediate political insight for our time than, for example, the Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition, written by A.J.P. Taylor from the smug security of the Keynesian world of 1967 Britain.

What I am saying is that the description of certain features of early capitalism by Marx happens to fit quite well the conditions of the third phase of capitalism, the one we are presently experiencing, 150 years later. Of course it is important to remember that Marx was not criticizing the main dynamic of the bourgeois paradigm he described. He was instead celebrating it, as carrying out the hard spade-work for the proletarian revolution he was sure would follow from all this revolutionary activity. He saves his criticism instead for the *incidental* cruelties and stupidities of the bourgeois revolution. And this is where Marx and I part company; I see Marx's descriptions as very true and telling, and an illustration of the essential unity of modern thought: conservative, liberal, social democratic and communist. Marx's descriptions are more vivid and accurate than others, but his celebration of economic development is essentially the same as those of political and economic thinkers from every part of the spectrum of modern thought – it bears witness to the cruel, misguided self-delusion of western thought of the past two hundred years, which celebrates the great development of western political and economic empires, developed at others' expense, and reserves criticism only for features which, it takes for granted, will disappear at some time in the future, as a consequence of the very process which caused these problems in the first place.

It is a measure of the extent to which western thought is so much of a homogeneous bloc that Marx, who for 150 years has been reviled by the mainstream of the western political tradition as a revolutionary, an outsider, the Other, is in fact simply someone who shared all the basic premises of this tradition, but differed only on a few unimportant details, such as what the development of world capitalism pointed to. And the history of nations which espoused Marx's ideas bears this out too. It has been well remarked that the Cold War was simply the rivalry of two different versions of capitalism.

Only in the last few years has a politics begun to emerge which questions these very basic premises. And it has taken the forthcoming and very grave crisis in the environment to jolt even the few people's minds who are as yet of this persuasion, and to instil in them a sense that the old shibboleths of continued and unrestricted economic growth, economic and cultural imperialism and the endless deferral of the expected non-material benefits of the modern paradigm will serve no-one in the long term. The green movement is slowly and painfully working out its ideas and, even more painfully, attempting to introduce them into the public arena; to *The Communist Manifesto*, and the Marxist tradition, this movement owes almost nothing, as its beliefs in social equality, social justice, and redistributional economic policies, its commitment to local economies, local needs, and a responsible existence *now*, not some time in the future, come from other traditions and have other rationales. However it is to works like *The Communist Manifesto* that we turn to help us understand the unfortunate past of the western tradition, and to attempt to avoid falling into those same ways of thought.

Gerry Harant

THERE IS A HANDFUL of writers who have changed the course of world history: Darwin, Einstein, Galileo and some of the founders of religions. Curiously, few people ever read their books. Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* always seemed to me to fall into this category, but the recent reprint of

Penguin's 1967 edition (there was a previous one in 1988) shows that there is still a demand out there.

The Manifesto's thesis is simple. All history is class struggle, and the next one – Marx wrote in 1848 – would lead to the proletariat doing away with the bourgeoisie. This would bring the abolition of the wages system and universal socialism. From then on there would be no more problems – history would be at an end.

Why did this simplistic concept take the world by storm? Why did, at one stage, half the world's population live under regimes which claimed to be based on the ideas of the Manifesto, most of which had been established by the action of their communities?

One answer is that the Manifesto is a document of hope. In 1848, Europe was in a period of social upheaval and any doctrine which promised a better world was welcome.

Those of us who participated in the Moratoriums in the world of 1968, with social upheavals taking place around the globe, can identify with these sentiments. Then, too, there was simplistic analysis and hope-inspired prophecy. There was, after all, some basis: the spread of national liberation, the apparently perilous state of capitalism which had led to concessions to workers in turn bringing rising living standards, the rise of the women's movement, the "Prague Spring" promising "Socialism with a human face", all could be interpreted to presage a better future.

Curiously, Penguin's current edition brings us a whiff of this. The reprint includes an introduction by historian A.J.P. Taylor which was written in 1967. Many of his criticisms of the Manifesto are written from the point of view of a society which sees itself on the up-and-up, a society in which the individual capitalist has been replaced by benign managers and class struggle seems to have lost its validity. You can read it all in Galbraith's *The New Industrial State* published about this time. Taylor's criticisms of the Manifesto are applicable in many ways, but somehow they don't seem to address the areas which need revision to make the document relevant to the present day. If ever proof was needed that all sociology is dominated by the social conditions of its proponents, this is it. Many of Taylor's assertions have proved more untenable after twenty years than Marx's after 150.

Taylor, although clearly on the side of the angels, does not admit to any philosophical outlook in his introduction. Let me say that my critique, which follows, is that of an unreconstructed Marxist. There is, in fact, nothing odd about a Marxist critically analysing Marx. Marx refused to be called a Marxist. Marxism is a methodology, not a creed. If we allow for Marx's youth at the time the Manifesto was written (he was under thirty), we wouldn't expect the maturity of his later writings.

Indeed, exuberance, self-confidence and frequent exaggeration has made this document what it is, an identification of an enemy and a powerful call to revolt. Would anyone want to reprint it 150 years later if it were a dry-as-dust exposition with every i dotted and t crossed?

There is little that is novel in the Manifesto's analysis. The concept of classes was already old at the time it was written; there were any number of prescriptions for radical reform – indeed the latter pages of the Manifesto contain diatribes against each of Marx's perceived rivals in the field. One is driven to the conclusion that the Manifesto is greatest where it is least reasonable, where it predicts as inevitable developments which did not occur and, indeed, could not occur; in short, where it turns from being a piece of sociology or political science to being a piece of oratory.

In the Manifesto Marx left a legacy which led millions of people into positive action towards their own emancipation; it generated hope amongst people who had never read it and were not ever likely to read it. That's the Manifesto's positive side. There is, unfortunately, a darker legacy, that of hopes left unfulfilled. Why did Marx go so wrong in so many ways in the Manifesto? It seems to me that much of this is due to the fact that when Marx wrote it he was not a Marxist.

In his later writings, Marx constantly – sometimes maddeningly so – refers to Hegelian principles of thesis–antithesis–synthesis in the sphere of science and extending into social science. To put it simply, there are what we would nowadays call feedback mechanisms which prevent linear relationships between action and outcome. Perhaps Marx's most important innovation was to extend this realization into the social sciences, to explain why actions often have precisely the opposite effect to that predicted and desired.

The Manifesto ignores these insights. The myth of a linear cause–effect relationship pervades the tract, allowing it to propose a direct

progression from class struggle through revolution to political Nirvana. Again, we have to posit this in the ideology of the time, the same ideology that led Darwin to propose an evolution from the "lower" to the "higher" in nature. Hegel also, despite having proposed the "unity of opposites" concept, saw human thought developing along linear lines to perfection. Marx's preoccupation with the means of production apparently blinded him to many areas where bourgeois thinking had made its inroads. In this way, even as late as the chapter on primitive accumulation in Book 1 of *Capital*, technological innovation appears as a natural progression, its dynamic independent of ideology, leading inexorably to class upheaval.

Despite its unsuitability for 'socialist' practice, the bourgeois 'majority decision' adversarial style of debate was maintained in socialist forums. So was the polemic, no doubt based on German philosophy, a counter-productive way – if ever there was one – to conduct comradely discussions. Despite all the talk about democracy, testosterone flows freely in the Manifesto when discussing and denigrating friend and foe alike. These bourgeois practices blended smoothly, if smoothly is the word, into the practices of subsequent Communist Parties where they created havoc, allowing Lenin's suppression of the Workers' Opposition and ultimately the rise of Stalin and his show trials. Despite the leavening effect of feminism and green politics, many 'radical' left parties still perpetuate the bourgeois practices pervading the Manifesto.

Could another Manifesto be written today? For me, the answer is a resounding yes. Combining the third world will to struggle with the political experiences of three hundred years of capitalism in the west, a new Manifesto could point an accusing finger at the corporate criminals running today's world. It could embody aims of sustainability, freedom of expression and, more needed now than ever before, the right of every inhabitant of this earth to live free from hunger, disease and fear.

After all, revolutionary action arises, as it did in 1848, out of the contrast between the way people are forced to live and what they perceive to be possible. Were it not for the class society and its power structures, the aims outlined above are demonstrably achievable. It is cause for righteous anger that, at a time when objective conditions for human survival and dignity seem to be better than in all of previous human history, we have more hunger, more disease, more superstition and more oppression than ever before.

Human beings of the world, unite! We have nothing to lose but the threat of extinction!

► ***Gary MacLennan** has been a long-term member of the Brisbane Left and has participated in major struggles around civil liberties, gay rights, Land Rights, strike support work and pro-abortion campaigns.*

► ***Lani Giesen** is studying at Victoria University of Technology.*

► ***John Leonard** is a freelance writer based in Canberra; his poetry collection* 100 Elegies for Modernity *was published by Hale & Iremonger last year.*

► ***Gerry Harant** is a retired engineer and 'an old leftie'.*

Please don't say who told you . . .

a personal account of experiences in research

Debra Smith

Over the past eighteen months I've been involved in a research project about the effects of the Victorian State Government on the wellbeing of rural Victorians. A community report of the completed research was launched in April. It was found that people generally do not support the amalgamation of local government, they have concerns about the privatization of public utilities, and they believe that community services are reducing. A significant number of people in East Gippsland do not believe they are better off since Jeff Kennett came to power. The report details these findings, provides examples of positive community action, includes a report on the prevalence and effects of gambling, and concludes with the suggestion that communities may be well served by focusing their efforts on developing social capital. The main aim of the research was to develop a greater understanding of the needs of the area and to use this to develop services. Overall, the report is not supportive of the Government, even though the National Party MP in East Gippsland has a strong majority.

This article is not about the findings of the research, but about the reactions to the project and the report. Kennett claims to welcome criticism yet he has created an environment where only the brave, or stupid, dare to criticize. The first indication that the research project was not welcome came from a local

government Commissioner, prior to the commencement of the project. He told the Director of the community agency auspicing the project that although he personally thought it was interesting the agency needed to take extreme care in its implementation, and should perhaps reconsider proceeding with the idea. The agency obtained trust funding and the project went ahead.

One of the research methods included a series of interviews with community service providers from the Department of Human Services and local community agencies. Responses from staff were illuminating. Before the interviews began a guarantee was elicited from me that no staff or services would be identifiable from the interviews. I gave this guarantee and it resulted in a large amount of interesting material which, for this reason, has not been published.

Most of the managers in the Department of Human Services who had interviews scheduled cancelled or failed to turn up for their appointments. When there was a lot of negative comment in the press concerning the public hospital system in late 1996 the Regional Director of the Department of Human Services told me that it was a "matter of marketing . . . we simply haven't got the marketing right . . . there's nothing wrong with the system . . ." Patients in public hospitals were spending up to twenty-four hours in casualty departments, they were dying because of a lack of ambulances, elective surgery was constantly delayed, waiting lists were growing, and many smaller hospitals were being closed while others were being privatized. Only a matter of marketing?

A manager of a large regional community service told me that I "would never work for the Government again" following the completion of the project. The responses obtained in these interviews are indicative of what it is like working for the Government. That you must not criticize was obvious and it was interesting to note the perception that the results would be negative before they were even compiled.

Early in 1997 a regional meeting of community service providers was addressed by the Regional Director of the Department of Human Services. He made it clear that if these agencies did not provide services as directed his Department would not be purchasing services from them. This unsubtle threat seems to have been carried out with particular vehemence in this region.

During 1997 staff employed in the Government-funded services established for problem gambling received a letter from the Minister for Human Services. In this letter he instructed staff to refrain from any political comment (a political comment being anything which suggested that gambling might be causing problems) and threatened to withdraw funding to any agency where staff did not comply.

The most recent example of fear occurred when I naively sent a brief review and a copy of the report to a rural women's network magazine. I was contacted by a person who has asked to remain anonymous and told that they thought the report was very interesting and they would like some more copies to distribute throughout their personal networks but they could not possibly include the review in the magazine as they were Government funded. She was very apologetic and supportive of the research, but felt it was too risky to future funding to even include the review of the report. When I commented that the report was not that controversial she replied "even the title raised eyebrows in here".

The title, 'They Wouldn't Dare Would They? The effects of the Victorian Government on the well-being of rural Victorians' had been changed prior to publication from the 'Kennett Government' to the 'Victorian Government' to avoid controversy although the use of 'Kennett' was simply as a description of the specific Government. The research and history has indicated that they would dare to close or privatize services and amalgamate local government, that they would dare to attempt to silence public servants and staff employed in funded agencies, and, in addition to labelling any criticism of Government policy or action as unVictorian, they have frightened people into silence.

Brisbane Line

Marg Henderson

The aftershocks from One Nation's success at the Queensland state elections, and the ramifications of economic rationalism as dominant governmental ideology and policy were acute presences at this year's Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) conference held in Toowoomba in July. The conference theme of 'Australian Literature and the Public Sphere' was highly appropriate given this current sociopolitical context,

with these two factors ensuring that ASAL '98 was relatively politicized in terms of papers presented, ensuing discussions, and a general undertone. Perhaps it was the Toowoomba location, being in the middle of rural conservative/reactionary heartland that heightened delegates' awareness of the big changes wrought by late capitalism, even in the fields of Australian literature.

The conference got off to a good start with Graeme Turner's keynote address, where he argued that market ideology is now dominant in all spheres of life, including the public sphere, government policy, and the arts. The growing commercialization of government arts and cultural policy, the rise of the importance of celebrity in Australian literature, and the tameness of Australian publishers in not publishing Australian literary criticism, are symptomatic of market ideology.

These themes were to be repeated in the first panel session which featured the productive combination of Sophie Cunningham (trade publisher at Allen & Unwin), Robert Dessaix, John Frow, and Cassandra Pybus, although again the notion of the public sphere was seen as a Habermasian singularity, rather than a set of plural and overlapping spaces. Frow traced how free trade policies like GATT and MAI erode the liberal public domain (of information) where knowledge has been, till now, freely available, and which will have disastrous effects on local culture industries such as film. Pybus used the example of social realist writers to show how literary institutions (as personified by figures like Leonie Kramer and A.D. Hope) police boundaries of literary value and taste. In this case, the literary establishment privileged texts that worked through the emotions and inner-life, values which are still emphasized in some versions of literary criticism, and which have had a major influence on Australian literary history. Dessaix defended his elitist version of literary values, and described Australian literary culture as fairly minuscule, reflected by the public's supposed lack of interest in it (but we know how Dessaix hates writers' festivals). From both Dessaix and Cunningham we got the standard though polite form of 'academics not really understanding how the real world works', though I know that in the ivory tower when the photocopying paper runs out or the stationery cupboard is bare, there's no more to replace it.

Indeed, the two panel sessions were a very successful feature of this year's ASAL. The other session, 'Histories and Futures?: Small Magazines in Australia' with Ian Syson, Laurie Hergenhan, Elizabeth Webby, Carole Ferrier, Dennis Haskell, and John Tranter, was also lively, if at times a bit depressing.

Elizabeth Webby, from Sydney University, delivered the Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture and she also challenged the workings of economic rationalism and the discontent voiced by One Nation. Webby gave an overview of changes in the teaching, research, and publishing of Australian literature, linking this to changes in the Australian public sphere more generally. She sees the contemporary period of Australian literature as marked by the break-up of WASP male hegemony, but also marked by a lack of history (or at least, a lack of interest in literary history, though this area was well represented at ASAL). Webby argues that reading books from other countries and other centuries is one counter to this ahistoricism and a growing intolerance. Although it is strange watching liberal humanist literature try to accommodate in its bush legends the newly disaffected, who are a new class fraction and political subjectivity and not just updated and amnesiac Men from Deebing Creek. (Deebing Creek was the site of an Aboriginal mission in Ipswich.)

Apart from a rather generous selection of literary big names (who were generally good speakers, unlike what you hear at some literary festivals), the rest of the papers covered a wide variety of topics, and also showed the updating of the study of Australian literature. There was the usual ASAL emphasis on literary history, with some interesting papers on, for example, literary censorship cases, the Australian Pocket Library, and Australian magazine culture. And there were the continuing feminist, gay, lesbian, queer, and Aboriginal revisionings of Australian literature. Noteworthy was the analysis of Aboriginal writing not only in the traditional literary sense, but also in terms of the Stolen Children Report and the legal (con)texts surrounding the Mabo and Wik judgements. The conference theme meant a sizeable number of papers engaged with the critique and histories of literary institutions, from reviewing and publishing, to the canon and professorships.

ASAL is also about the Australian Literary Society's awards, and quite a bit of socializing. David Carter won the ALS award for literary criticism with his study of Judah Waten. Readings, book launches, a literary lunch, a couple of conference dinners, good food and coffee, and

efficient organization made the conference friendly and enjoyable. And even though we were in a town of tweed coats, ASAL seemed to be less 'tweed coat and pipe-smoking' than usual. History at work, or just the whims of fashion?

Breaking at the Marrickville Youth Resource Centre

Carole Strong

THE TERM 'BREAKDANCING' comes from DJ Cool Herc, a disc jockey who used to run underground parties in New York's South Bronx back in the late sixties. He would play funk and soul artists such as James Brown and Parliament, and would spin the records, alternating between the drum breaks on two copies of the same record. He would chant "*b'boys (break-boys) are you ready*" over the breaks and the guys, and occasionally girls would perform acrobatic dance steps, robotic movements of funky dance steps in the middle of the crowd. The dance steps in conjunction with the DJ techniques and rhythmic chants, over years developed into the culture known as Hip-Hop.

Also featuring graffiti art, the culture began to appear in numerous movies, film clips and began to inspire many musicians to incorporate elements of Hip-Hop into their music. The American rock band Blondie had graffiti in their film clips as well as rapping. The Clash and Sex Pistols also worked together with Hip-Hop artists. Rap group, Sugarhill Gang, had chart success with their song 'Rappers Delight', as did Grand Master Flash and The Furious Five with their song 'The Message'. The movie *Flashdance* featured breakdancing and films such as *Breakdance*, *Beat-Street*, *Body-Rock*, *Electric Boogaloo*, *Style-Wars* and *Wild Style* exported the Hip-Hop culture globally in the early 1980s. With the world tour of the breakdancing group Rock Steady Crew and their songs 'Hey You' and 'Up Rock', breakdancing became a worldwide phenomenon. Songs such as 'Street-Dance' by BreakMachine and 'Breakdance' by Irene Cara also served to bring attention to the breakdance part of Hip-Hop.

Breaking was a worldwide success and in the early eighties most shopping centres or parks would have a breaking crew spinning on a piece of lino or cardboard with their ghettoblaster pumping out music. Crews (groups of young people) would compete in battles to try and outdo each other by executing the best, latest or most original move. Discos and neighbourhoods had their own competitions and in Australia the TV show 'Countdown' had a national competition which battled state against state. Molly Meldrum, the host of 'Countdown', also coined the incorrect term 'rap dancing' a phrase which unfortunately still remains in Australia to this day.

Because of breakdancing's sudden upsurge many people classified it as a fad, something that would merely come and go like earlier trends such as the hula-hoop and yoyos, and in many respects it did. The fad of breakdancing died out in the mid-eighties, but at the same time many people who had adopted the entire Hip-Hop culture continued to preserve it in conjunction with graffiti, rapping and deejaying. Graffiti then began to take the main focus especially in Australia and at Hip-Hop parties (which were mainly frequented by graffiti writers or 'bombers'), breakdancing would always be represented. Rap music and deejaying then began to become more widely accepted in the mainstream and in some respects began to lose their original Hip-Hop roots. Breaking still continued in the underground Hip-Hop scene, especially in Germany, France, South Africa and Australia. Although small in number, breakers began to make contact with each other on an international scale and many homemade breaking videos were distributed globally.

Old-school breakers began to teach younger hip-hoppers the art of breaking from time to time but nothing official was established. Breakers would meet at Glebe Youth Centre or at Hyde Park in the city but meetings became unreliable so a more official venue was sought. Marrickville Youth Resource Centre, an organization with a history in early Hip-Hop workshops became the new venue for breakdancers to meet, practice and learn form each other. With minimal advertising the group soon grew in numbers from six to forty and incorporated both males and females from over thirty nationalities. "Breakers come here from everywhere," said Matthew 'MISTERY' Peet, coordinator of the Breaking Project. "We get people coming from all over Sydney, from as far as the Blue Mountains. There are our own local Marrickville young people as well as breakers from interstate, even breakers from overseas drop in sometimes. For a while we had two exchange students from New York coming here to learn." With breaking appearing in film clips and movies again, the group

will probably get bigger.

Other aspects of Hip-Hop culture are offered at Marrickville Youth Resource Centre. Many rappers and deejays use the breakdance group as a meeting place and at present the entire two-story building is being painted by graffiti writers and young interested artists, thanks to the Australia Council and Marrickville Council. Hip-Hop and especially Breakdancing is a great form of expression for young people. It is an expression that does not focus on 'difference' but attempts to break down barriers of gender, socio-economic and cultural background. Young people who frequent the Hip-Hop scene often speak or 'rap' about their common struggles around issues such as the use of public space and the civil rights of young people.

Magazine Wrack

Nathan Hollier

THE RELATIVE DECLINE of the book in the face of expanding communication technologies, and a concomitant decline in literature from its place at the centre of national culture, are subjects which have exercised much debate in recent years. A 'New Literacies' issue of *Southern Review* contains articles by academics, many of whom are prominent in this field, that encourage a broader conception of 'cultural' rather than purely 'literary' literacy. The journal's editor, Cathy Greenfield, sees the function of this edition to lie partly in its rejoinder to media beat-ups about falling standards of education. Ironically, such beat-ups are given a 'ring of truth' through a public awareness that schools are being run down. Government Ministers then act on this awareness to cut education funding further, in the name of getting 'back to basics'. The broader literary industry, itself having a deep and vested interest in both book publishing and traditional notions of literature, has not always engaged in the most dynamic way with such technological and social change. In an impassioned inaugural *Masthead* editorial, Alison Croggon diagnoses: "Art in Australia is compromised – not by repression, not by exile or ambition or murder – but by petty ambition, pointless argument, shallow theorizing, suffocating nationalism and all the other accoutrements of the 'arts industry'." Nationalism and insularity need not be collapsed into one another but in the case of Australian literature and literary studies, this is perceived at least to be a constant danger.

Questions of Australian identity and culture seem to run particularly easily into questions of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism. As Helen Daniel notes (July *Australian Book Review*), the relatively small size of the literary community, which is to say also, of serious publishing and of arts journalism, raises perennial questions and problems for writers and critics. She is referring to John Docker's National Library Australian Essay (July *ABR*), in which Docker spells out his concerns for this community's future. In arguing that "the urgent task for Australian criticism is to reject the English model, with its deployment of nationalist criteria", that "Australian criticism by contrast should become cosmopolitan and internationalist in its values and awareness", Docker characteristically tells a personal story. Chiefly, the story involves his being given the cold shoulder by colleagues at ASAL conferences and gatherings. He suggests that literary critics are far too chummy with those writers selected as 'literary', that this stifles imagination and debate: "Australian literary studies has therefore become distressingly inturned and hence mediocre, and the brightest young minds are turning to more intellectually challenging fields like cultural studies or postcolonial or diasporic cultural theory or study of non-Australian literatures". He connects this incestuousness with a vapid arts media, including the "interviewers and commentators on ABC literary and arts programs . . . The ABC dwells in safety, self-satisfaction, superficiality, because, I think, it desperately wishes to please its middle-class audience, to reassure them of their collective cultural superiority".

But are not the best young minds he refers to also predominantly middle class? For all the talk of rationalization, the 'best' universities, as Denise Meredyth reports (*Meanjin* 57), are becoming more, not less exclusive. Her review article is worthy of the two important studies of education that it examines. Simon Marginson's work reveals, amongst other things, that though the market forces shaping education policy are not in any persuasive sense 'rational', neither are they seriously threatened by sociological or other critiques. Is there not a chance then, that the trend Docker identifies in relation to Australian literature, the feeling that it is under attack, may be influenced also by these external and structural factors?

I am a fan of Docker's writing, and to the extent that his anecdotes

politicize personal stances I like them too, but it is worth telling an anecdote of my own to point out what may be elided within his tale. I bumped into a couple of university acquaintances at a pub last year. They had switched from the English department, where I still wallowed, *tres* uncool, and had joined Cultural Studies. They were pissed enough to show some open amusement at my thesis topic, 'Australian poetry anthologies', and I would have liked to have asked, had I not been too pissed myself to think of it: "What are you guys studying, Kristeva and the French symboliste poets, *Natural Born Killers* and Battaille or perhaps Deleuze and *Blade Runner*?" The point is that there is nothing inherently radical, stimulating or even extroverted about being uninterested in Australian history or traditional cultural forms. As David Carter outlined in last year's invaluable *Canonozities* issue of *Southerly*, Australian literature and its study has in one sense always been a fight against cultural and economic trends, or 'realities' as the politicians say. True, the imperialist basis and praxis of English does spill over into Australian literary studies, as Docker mentions and as Leigh Dale discusses at length in her recent work on the matter. However, the fact that intellectual and other cultural trends stem largely from the economically and culturally dominant western nations, the fact that publishers are increasingly, as Wendy Lowenstein points out in *Ulitarra* 13, multi-national and conglomerated, only emphasizes the fact that the study and production of Australian literature, now as with the enthusiasts and dilettantes of the past, is a struggle against the grain, is in itself radical. There will always be people to tell us (and sell us) what is new, but in the absence of local infrastructure, it is difficult to remain aware of what was and perhaps remains complex, interesting and valuable in Australian culture.

For this reason it was pleasing to read Felicity Plunkett's *Ulitarra* review of Ouyang Yu's *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*. Plunkett says Yu's poetry "could be seen as part of a tradition of anti-poetry in more avant-garde writing in this country, with a similar jagged energy to π0's work. Ouyang Yu's 'sick man from asia' is to π0's 'NICE/ FAT/ GREEK/ BOY' what a long line of self-styled quirky blokes in Australian writing – from bush balladeers to the subhuman rednecks – have been to one another. I'd suggest that there's always been an alien counter-tradition". There have been several. As Jennifer Strauss mentions in a review of some recent poetry, for instance, "the old paradigm of Australia's divided self – Sydney or the bush – still has some life in it" (Autumn *Island*). Ouyang is also interviewed in *Ulitarra* 13 and together with his article in the Winter *Westerly* on problems facing contemporary Australian-Chinese writing, actively contributes to a wider understanding of this diversity.

There are young writers at work on the (publishing) margins, as a trip to the cities' cool bookshops will reveal. *Siglo* is a journal which seems to be defying, or perhaps embodying, the anti-subsidization *zeitgeist* (couldn't bring myself to say 'brave new world'). Boldly claiming that *Siglo* "will change the way you think of a literary magazine" (July *ABR* advertisement), it is handsomely produced, rich in colour, by a young editorial team based in Tasmania. It is also filled with sponsorship material, though nothing too grating for the cultured consumer. Philip Mead's assessment of a Kenneth Slessor CD-rom could well apply to the journal itself: "It is the latest instance of the kind of sophisticated cultural production that is going on in Tasmania currently". This is some proof also, I suppose, that not everyone supporting Australian literature is insular and old-fashioned.

Feedback

We have received a great deal of positive comment on our two most most recent issues. The reprinting of the first issue in 150 was a success and we have only a few copies left for sale. One word of criticism over issue 151 has been the failure to include an editorial. Whatever the merits of that criticism, its absence meant that we were unable properly to thank Matthew Peet and David Purton of the Marrickville Youth Resource Centre for their terrific cover image on 151, 'Here to Stay'. Nor could we thank Philip Deery for sacrificing his only copy of the very first issue of *overland* in the process of reproducing it in issue 150. Perhaps there is someone out there with two copies who can let Phil have one of them.

Floating Fund

Our ongoing struggle to stay afloat is buoyed by our generous supporters.
Many thanks to the following: $5000 Anon; $250 G.G.; $18 F.S., $16 F.S.; $15 R.G.; $8 D.R., A.B.M., P.D.; $3 R.A.W., R.E.G., R.O.: Totalling $5332.

Groundbreaking clichés

Lindsay Barrett

Ian McLean: *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* (CUP, $39.95).

WHEN I WAS A CHILD AT PRIMARY SCHOOL in the 1960s my teacher told me that I wouldn't have to worry about Aborigines when I grew up because they were all dying out, and that by the time I was an adult they would probably all be gone. 'Worry', this was the word she used, more in the sense of making the effort to avoid something unpleasant than in terms of showing concern. 'Dying out', a stock phrase from the lexicon of evolutionist colonialism, these were words she used too. Yet this teacher was no colonial throwback: she was a gentle young woman in her twenties, who would also play us Seekers records and urge us to sing along, on the ride to 'morning town'.

I don't know how many of my classmates, a mixture of Celts, Anglos, Chinese, Greeks and Yugoslavs would remember this minor moment from their education, yet it is testimony to the legacy of racism that almost all white Australians carry, often silently, within them. Not that my teacher would have thought of herself as racist; nor would many Australians of the time, even as they waited for the passing of the Aborigines while decorating their homes with ashtrays bearing Aboriginal motifs, prints of Namatjira paintings, and black, spear-clutching garden gnomes. Thirty years later this double-bind persists: in Mackay Michael Ettridge splits from One Nation, climbs into his car and starts towing a giant sign around the district, displaying the words 'Pauline Hanson did the dirty on Cathy Freeman, Pasquarelli and me – don't you be next!' Meanwhile Michael Duffy claims (presumably with a straight face) that *This Whispering In Our Hearts* is the best of Henry Reynolds' books because it has white people for heroes . . .

It's just these sorts of paradoxes that Ian McLean's remarkable book *White Aborigines* works to illuminate: the subtleties that traverse, as much as any of the objects of outright racism (like the lunatic claim that the so-called Aboriginal Industry has gone too far), our current structure of feeling. I call McLean's book remarkable because in little more than 150 pages he manages to examine the consciousness of a society warped by the twin practices of genocide and cultural reification, while at the same time producing one of the few mature books on the history of non-indigenous art in Australia. I use the term mature because, in contrast to so much art history written by white Australians, which generally never gets far beyond celebrating the fact that we actually have an art history worth celebrating, McLean puts this history squarely into a dispassionate, focused colonial and political framework. The phenomenon of Euro-derived Australian art is something he takes for granted. It's what it *means* to us that is important here.

Underpinning McLean's work is, in his own words, "the persistence of age-old Western meta-narratives of identity that continue to stage our politics of identity, and which are constituted as much by the constructions of forgetting as by memory". In this light he then sets out to examine the manner in which Euro-derived Australian society, as it grew during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, created its own indigeneity: while the land was stolen and its own-

ers dispersed or murdered, the transplanted Europeans struggled to become the white aborigines of the Antipodes. It was essential then for the 'Australians' that the Aborigines disappear, in order that they then displace them, literally taking their place. While this perversely utopian colonial project may have failed, what McLean shows us is how, two hundred years later, the residue surrounds us, influencing our national life on a daily basis. To an extent, we've been here before: this interactive relationship between Europe, the Antipodes and cultural production immediately brings to mind the work of Bernard Smith, and so it's no surprise to find McLean acknowledging the key role of Smith in the development of his own work. Yet *White Aborigines* takes us far beyond Bernard Smith's shadow, and while still writing within the paradigm established so well by Smith (that blend of politically conscious art history crossed with what we now call cultural studies), McLean produces a particularly postmodern book; the sort of history that would have had pride of place in that Postmodern Multicultural Republic which we deluded 'elites' thought, until recently, was just around the corner.

Despite his postmodern sensibilities McLean's analysis is almost structuralist in its precision. This is not necessarily a bad thing as, totalizing aside, structuralism had quite a bit going for it as an analytical tool. To this end McLean never allows any object of culture to exist for and of itself, but rather, consistently positions his objects of inquiry within the political parameters of the society in which they circulate. Consider his sketch of the three modes of painting successively dominant in the colonial period: "The sublime is the principal aesthetic trope of exploration, the grotesque of invasion and the picturesque of settlement." Moving on to Heidelberg, he outlines the "bad conscience" of Impressionism, observing in the artists' camps at Mosman on Sydney Harbour in the 1890s a "repressed Aboriginality":

> . . . the impressionists adopted what they considered to be the bohemian virtues which, once seen as signs of Aboriginal laziness, are now emblems of a sophisticated avant-gardism. It is fitting that the sole surviving Aborigine of the area, a Cammeragal "known as 'Tarpot' ", spent the last years of his life "in a cave near the ferry wharf".

For me this passage with its simple juxtaposition is the most singularly striking of the book. Walter Benjamin wrote that there is no object of culture that is not at the same time a record of barbarism, as culture, like history, is generally fashioned by the winners. But McLean gives us an alternative history of the objects of Australia's high culture, working from the European invasion onwards to create a counter-narrative to that of the mythologized story of art in Australia: more important than what Heysen put into his paintings is what he left out, the people of the land he painted; Clem Christesen founds a journal and calls it *Meanjin*, yet he has no interest in Aboriginality; Nolan puts his black Ned Kelly figure, the white hero, into a haunted, lonely landscape using exactly the same grotesque tropes which the colonial painters had used to place Aborigines in the bush. And so McLean continues, changing tack with the Aboriginal renaissance: Namatjira, rather than being either the hapless victim or genius mimic that he has often been stereotyped as, was instead responsible for mapping the new co-ordinates of a "third diasporic space which was neither Aboriginal nor European, but somewhere in between". Gordon Bennett finds a way of being between both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia, and "exceeds the binary logic of the colonial paradigm".

This is a partial list of McLean's observations, but they coalesce into a coherent, striking narrative, and if *White Aborigines* has a flaw then it's in this very partiality: basically the book is too short. While this is a fault, it's an acceptable one, as *White Aborigines* is a timely book, and as day to day events show us, this type of politically informed historiography is exactly what we need, maybe now more than ever. In terms of structure this problem is most glaring: drawing on Derrida and Irigaray, McLean starts his investigation with a working through of antipodal Australia as an "othered" place, "Ocean" in terms of the European ontology which created Australia as a social space. This is important work, but he quickly leaves it and moves on to 'practical' questions to do with cultural production in the new colony. I've read other reviews of this book that argue that this in fact demonstrates that this (so-called) trendy over-theorization doesn't work in relation to Australia, and so it shouldn't be used. This is rubbish. Rather, it needs to be worked through in more detail, and McLean is in too much of a hurry, and indeed has too much

ground to cover to get weighed down by it. Similarly, the narrative rushes too quickly from the sixties up to the present in the concluding chapters.

Yet these sorts of criticisms are inevitable in relation to such groundbreaking work, and they point to newly opened historical and theoretical spaces rather than to any real failures by the author. These days cliches are an increasingly valued currency. So why not join in? I urge anyone interested in Australian art, history and culture to have a look at this book.

Lindsay Barrett teaches at UWS Hawkesbury.

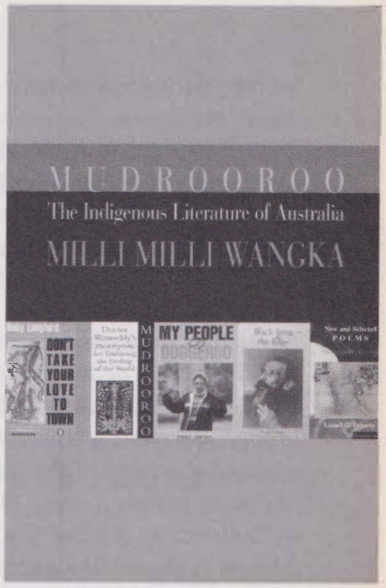
Maban Reality

Gillian Whitlock

Mudrooroo: *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka* (Hyland House, $24.95).

THIS SECOND EDITION of Mudrooroo's history of the Indigenous literature of Australia (the first edition was titled *Writing from the Fringe*) is a sign of the turbulence and industry in black writing in Australia in the eight years since the first edition. 'Turbulence' and 'industry' are to be understood here not just in terms of volume, nor the obvious effects of the changing political contexts of black and white relations and debates about Indigeneity and Aboriginal rights, but also Mudrooroo's ongoing work to find a language and conceptual framework to represent this literature to himself, his people and the 'settler' critics and publishers who control the production, dissemination and discussion of contemporary writing in Australia. Inevitably, it also alludes to what is shaping up as an ongoing debate about Mudrooroo's own identity, legitimacy and place as an Aboriginal writer and critic.

One of the new sections in this second edition is an appendix: 'The Last Interview: Mudrooroo talks with Janine Little and Carole Ferrier'. I found this useful, in part because Ferrier talks about a recent "very anxious" article about Aboriginality and anthropology and I realized I was about to hatch a 'very anxious' review of this book. In part this is okay, for Mudrooroo's typecasting of critics, reviewers and academics ("white academic Joy Hooton", "black academic Dr Roberta Sykes") allows me to recognize the 'white academic' hackles which rise at features of *Fringe* which recur here: the idiosyncratic use of 'postmodernism', 'postcolonialism' and the like; confections such as "natural science reality texts"; the ongoing and tiring returns to Sally Morgan and battlers – enough already! – the scattered quality of the writing and argument when read in terms of academic requirements for the discourse of 'literary criticism'. Sure, "all this strangeness deserves is a bullet between the eyes, or rather a research grant to imprison it within the folds of properly constituted discourse and theories". But Ferrier's questioning here also reminds us that, despite Mudrooroo's contention that of all the books "in that bloody library at the University of Queensland the only Aboriginal author who has made it is Sally Morgan", in fact there is a copy of *Writing from the Fringe* in that library and it is "scribbled all over, dozens of people have been reading it".



There are some important shifts between the first and second editions of this book. The first, Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing from the Fringe. A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, has been superseded by the second, Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*. The idea of 'fringe' permeated the first edition, recurring in the title of each chapter: 'Reading the Fringe', 'Listening to the Fringe', 'Acting Fringe' etc. In this edition a shift from 'Aboriginality' to 'maban reality' and 'Indigenality' is an attempt to move into another paradigm, and eschew the centre/periphery implications of 'fringe'. What remains in place is the basic typology of Indigenous writing developed earlier: the songlines as a foundation for all Australian creativity, the 'natural science reality texts' of the sixties and seventies, 'maban reality' for the shape-shifting of Mudrooroo's own fiction and writers such as Sam Watson, and Tidda's writing, the kind of 'writing as truth' which

Mudrooroo associates with women and autobiography in particular.

Like *Fringe*, *Milli Milli Wangka* foregrounds Mudrooroo as a reader. A prescriptive one at that in his determination that if Indigenous creative writing is to thrive as a separate entity it must be as independent as possible from white Australian influence. As he points out at the very start, things have changed a good deal since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1990. The formation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1992 brought forward a political agenda for Indigenous reconciliation tied to the push for a Republic. This is of course already history. Writing this review as I do in Canberra on the last day of the Wik debate in the Senate, it seems like ancient history; things have changed a good deal again. Mudrooroo is ambivalent about this period of reconciliation – when he associates it with the publication and reception of the autobiographies by Morgan, Langford Ginibi and Ward at the end of his introduction we see the extent of his own alienation from this project. His own vision is of a restoration of Aboriginal sovereignty which would include such cultural reorientation as the appropriation of The Dreaming as the heritage of all Australians; the songlines of the Indigenous ancestors, the great epics singing the land, are potentially part of a common heritage. As he suggests, such an appropriation is not impossible: the British empire in its heyday appropriated the Greek epics as inspiration for their imperial culture although these epics emerged from a past every bit as foreign as that of pre-invasion Indigenous Australia. For Mudrooroo literature has a major role to play in a reconciliation process which grounds a sense of national identity in the land, and incorporates a recognition – ethically, legally, spiritually – of Aboriginal sovereignty of the land. In the songlines in particular he identifies the basis of an Australianness which doesn't rely on European and American precursors, but on a language of the land.

Here, as in *Fringe*, Mudrooroo remains firmly committed to a literature of Indigeneity which is grounded in the Indigenous communities and their oral traditions, and which recognizes the different communities and cultures which make any singular, totalistic representations of the Aboriginal "downright fictional". The struggle over representation is fundamental to the production and reception of Aboriginal writing; it is politically important that Indigenous Australians recapture their representations, using literature, music, art, film to empower themselves. This argument for a diverse and communally based system of Aboriginal cultural production is made over and against a singular, homogeneous and totalized settler culture, for all that Mudrooroo recognizes the fictionality of any totalistic 'Aboriginal' or 'European' identity. And yet it is easy to see why this is so. This brings me back to what is obviously a conceit, the view that Sally Morgan is the only writer in the library. At the heart of this is not paranoia so much as a realization that the production of cultural texts of all kinds occurs through a process of selection and critique which, although market driven to some extent, suppresses the emergence of a diverse and contradictory expression of identities and identifications. When the stakes are high, as they are for an Indigenous community where images, words and sounds are crucial to discourses of empowerment and resistance, the operations of 'taste', 'the market' and so on do work to re-present Indigeneity for settler acceptance and consumption. The problem is, then, how a diverse array of Indigenous cultural production – and there is a concern for texts, images, sounds of all kinds here – can circulate. How do alternative texts get produced, circulated, consumed in the presence of a hegemonic industry which organizes and determines cultural value and the circulation of cultural artefacts of all kinds?

Although earlier discussions of Oodgeroo, Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis and Archie Weller are recycled here with some updating, there is a new chapter on 'Maban Reality and the Indigenous Novel'. This is Mudrooroo's paradigm for understanding the aesthetics and politics of his own work, and the other writers who produce his most preferred versions of Indigenous writing: David Unaipon, Sam Watson, Lionel Fogarty and the filmmaker Tracey Moffatt. Maban reality is a fluid, shape-shifting mythical reality, quite unlike the "natural science reality texts" of Jack Davis, Oodgeroo and Kevin Gilbert. For Mudrooroo maban reality is akin to Latin-American magic realism, characterized by a firm grounding in the reality of the country together with an acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality. Most importantly, as it emerges in narrative fictions such as Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung* it is able to reach a wide audience of western readers, without

making the kind of compromises which Mudrooroo identifies in the popular autobiographic writings of Ginibi, Morgan and Ward.

Mudrooroo is no Skip Gates, but then Gates is no fiction writer either. This book, like *Fringe*, makes the reading, writing and production of Aboriginal literature a site of struggle, and an important one in the campaign for Aboriginal rights. *Milli Milli Wangka*, like *Fringe*, ensures that this isn't just a debate amongst established academics, but one where there is a contentious, polemically critical voice which urges a different reality.

Gillian Whitlock teaches at Griffith University. She is currently writing on women's autobiography.

Time to reflect

Ruby Langford Ginibi

Roberta Sykes: *Snake Cradle* (Allen & Unwin, $22.95).

ROBERTA SYKES' LIFE STORY, *Snake Cradle*, is a remarkable story. I couldn't put it down. I do understand the amount of courage it must have taken for her to backtrack over her life. The remembering of what happened to her, the continual racism throughout her early childhood – the pack-rape in her teenage years – would be like having to re-live it all over and over again, adding to her stress.

I'm glad though, that she's taken the time to reflect back over her life because it's time for this country to read and know our stories of struggling to survive in this very racist country. Townsville, Queensland, was the place of her birth. She had a lot of illnesses in her childhood and battles afterwards to get out and away from all the oppression.

She was educated at Harvard University in America, gaining her Doctorate. Afterwards: involvement and passion in Aboriginal politics in this country, the Aboriginal tent embassy in 1967 before the referendum giving Aboriginal people the right to vote and be counted in the census. Her non-acceptance by even some of the Aboriginal organizations, because of having been born to a white mother and a black father she never knew, through no fault of her own. Her continual involvements in the Aboriginal struggle, her winning of the human rights medal for that involvement and commitment to our black struggle for equality in this country.

I take my hat off to this lady Dr Roberta Sykes, whose life has surely been survival of so much adversity. I can't wait to read the last two books of her trilogy about her amazing life. Well done Bobbi!

Ruby Langford Ginibi wrote the award-winning Don't Take Your Love to Town.

Dissecting the Dead Donkey

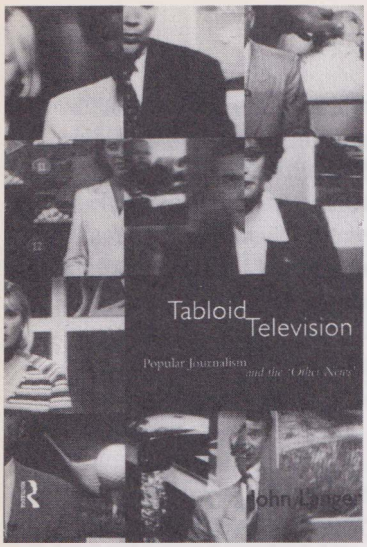
Jennifer Maiden

John Langer: *Tabloid Television: Popular Journalism and the 'Other News'* (Routledge, $34.95).

IN THE BLURB, Dr Len Masterman of the University of Liverpool calls this volume "the most original and important contribution to the study of news this decade". Whilst this probably sets up unfair expectations of great revelation and lateral logic, there is no doubt that Langer's book is unusual and worthy of much attention. Briefly, he uses a fastidious, laborious but sometimes bright and beautiful style to argue the case for serious study of the "other news". This is the 'human interest' or 'light relief' news held in contempt by academics, and which accompanies the reporting of national and world events on news bulletins. Langer's thesis is that this news is not an aberration which should be dismissed but a codified and purposeful jigsaw of storytelling forms. These confirm the social hierarchy but also offer the chance to understand it, and even perhaps to undermine it – although Langer seems understated and ambivalent about this last possibility.

He terms the conventional academic distaste for "other news", "the lament", and documents instances of "the lament" so thoroughly that one begins to find his own form of textual storytelling a little uncomfortable. At times it suggests too prickly a hybrid between sociology and theoretical postmodernism. In fact, he quotes Barthes and Sontag quite often – without perhaps recognizing that neither of these critics seems to rely quite so heavily on such a rationale of research.

One of the problems in Langer's methodology is



that by necessity his research sample is small – in this case the Melbourne early evening television news over a short time period. He breaks down his "other news" into categories such as "the especially remarkable" (involving either professional celebrities who achieve results with seemingly little effort or temporary celebrities who achieve often eccentric results with a great deal of effort), "victims" (who "encounter an unanticipated turn of events which ensnare them in a state of crisis from which they cannot emerge using their own efforts and resources") and "communities at risk" (in which unexpected disasters happen to ordinary communities, often with a strong anthropomorphizing of objects and natural elements, which seem to engage in an irrational vendetta against human beings).

Part of Langer's thesis, then, is to move back to earlier critical theory which indicated that the audience/reader is manipulated by conservative social structures through the news, and away from later assumptions that the audience/reader is an independent, assessing entity. Rather than return completely to the suggestion of a monolithic, manipulative power structure, however, he incorporates Gramsci's theory of hegemony: a constant struggle between powerful forces which is evident but still dominated by the actual ruling power. One example Langer gives is a story about Madonna enjoying motherhood. The possibility that this might subtly radicalize the concept of motherhood isn't discussed.

When he discusses "Destabilizing Pleasures" in the "other news", he confines the possibilities of dissent (which he accurately associates with pleasure) to the audience's joy in experiencing predictable storytelling, or their anarchic delight in the possibility of chaos or violence. He touches on the fact that "our power as spectators is constructed as both one of empathy and identification but also one of distance and detachment", but merely decides that "as spectators . . . we can potentially be released from our moral obligations". The idea that such a regular reversal of the incarnate and disincarnate might make better moral choices possible is not really present or explored.

Likewise, the ethical possibilities for thought between the alternating rhythms of "serious" and "other" news is not recognized – only that the latter reveals metaphysical messaging more clearly than the former. Significantly, in the later portion of the volume, when Langer chooses to abandon methodology and speculate, he theorizes that 'Hard Copy' style tabloid programs are a development of the "other news" he has described, and that one of their targets may well be the newly unemployed middle class who need to be adjusted to acceptance of their lot, as the older economic lower classes have been.

There is no discussion of the macrocosm of twenty-four-hour satellite news, the metaphysical effect of its subjects and rhythms, or the fact that the "other news" Langer tries to define is now redefined by its proximity to these newer and larger patterns.

Nevertheless, the fields of definition Langer employs are useful and refreshing. In particular, he ties in his "other news" categories valuably with traditional themes and methods of storytelling in a way which helps explain their survival and vindicate their use by journalists. He does not really suggest, however, that the original function of these stories was to protect the social structure.

Langer seems seduced off course somewhat by Andy Warhol's "utopian/dysutopian vision: a future where everyone would be famous, for fifteen minutes". He refers to Warhol quite often and finishes his chapter 'Politics, Pleasures, Spin-offs' with the observation that for a member of the audience appearing on television means that in "a cultural 'scene' where existence increasingly depends on being seen, his ontological status is confirmed: videated, now he *is*." Well, no – it just as likely means that the audience member has entered a sphere of choice over incarnation and disincarnation where he can be either subject or object. In this regard, he has the same powers as the hierarchy does, and the same ability to demythologize fame and its contexts. Like Warhol himself, he can undermine fame by familiarity.

Instead of the title I've chosen I would at first have liked to call this review 'Don't Drop the Dead Donkey' (that last "other news" item which never quite made it on the perceptive British news satire) but Langer's thesis closes in on itself so much that he al-

most seems to be arguing that "other news" (although not the study of it) is undesirable, after all.

This is clearly not a failure of nerve in such a tenacious debater. One assumes, rather, that he has built up his map of reference and now rests back briefly for the vaster explorations to come.

Jennifer Maiden is a NSW writer.

The missing why?

Richard Smith

Peter Mudie: *Ubu Films: Sydney Underground Movies: 1965–1970* (UNSW Press, $44).

THIS BOOK DOCUMENTS five years of Sydney based avant garde (underground) aesthetic practice. Its focal point is the work and lives of the Ubu group of filmmakers – Albie Thoms, David Perry, Aggy Read and John Clark. Compiled by Peter Mudie, who provides a preface and an overview, it is published with the assistance of an Industry and Cultural Development Grant from the Australian Film Commission.

Ubu should appeal to anyone interested in the history of Australian independent film and artistic culture prior to "the introduction of bureaucratic support for and intervention into, the arts in Australia". Its central proposition is that the films of the Ubu group, and the various activities of its members, are important contributions to avant garde art movements of the late sixties and early seventies in Australia and abroad. To this extent the book functions as a corrective to received opinion about the group and its place in this period of Australian avant garde culture. It also seeks recognition of the group's efforts to establish "a cinema that could embody a multiplicity of forms". Mudie points out that "Ubu Films was Australia's first group devoted to making experimental films, and the first Australian organization to establish an extensive network for the exhibition and distribution of independent films. Ubu produced Australia's first lightshows, and published the country's first underground newspaper, *Ubunews*."

The interest of the group for me is that it used cinema as the foundation of a new collectivity – "*living cinema*". This idea of *living cinema* seems to be the sense in which the term *underground movies* should be taken, that is to denote the concept of collectivity that emerges out of the group's various experiments. It goes without saying that this collective experiment runs counter to the "entrenched and restrictive conservatism" of the late Menzies years. "Underlying the thrust of Ubu was the principle of exploring a truly modernist and democratic form of cinema, with all its variations and possibilities."

Ubu is itself an extension of the idea of *living cinema*, an attempt to reassemble the impact and force of its propositions through a montage of image and documentary material. Most of its 270 or so pages consist of images or reproductions of images. It compiles not only stills and frames from the films themselves but images of the lightshows, and reproductions of other artwork by Ubu. This material demonstrates the diversity of activities that constituted the idea of *living cinema*. *Ubu* is worth a read for this aspect alone. The interrelations between the films, the lightshows, and the theatrical work are only hinted at but nevertheless suggest the scope of Ubu's concept. The proliferation of material is such that I tended to browse rather than read, to move back and forth between texts and images in a less than systematic way. The preface makes it clear that a more ordered approach to the material is encouraged; the structuring device for this is the chronology. The chronology locates Ubu's activities in wider historical contexts, and provides mainly factual material about the production and exhibition of the films. Archival documents such as posters, transcripts of letters, fragments of script, directorial notes, news items and photos provide the detail. Photographs provide the images of the day-to-day activities of the group, on set, eating at home, drinking at parties, appearing at festivals, etc. These images together provide the *mise en scène* of the films. The films are the centrepiece of the book and the chronology is designed to create a space or moment for the reader to reflect upon the wider contexts in which the films were produced.

While the idea of *living cinema* is demonstrated in the images themselves "the question of why they wished to pursue their experimentation within the field of filmmaking cannot be so easily defined". Mudie's Overview does not pursue the question any further. This is not a serious fault of the book because

the how is more important than the why. The question I would ask, though, is why is 'Skippy' not included in *Ubu*? It surely has some place in the how? After all Thoms was writing and directing episodes of 'Skippy' during the Ubu period, an experience that would surely have provided ample knowledge and experience of the apparatus and would have complicated the collective's "underground" relationship to "escapist entertainment" and the prevailing conservatism.

Richard Smith teaches in the School of Theatre, Film and Dance at University of New South Wales.

Globalizing Australian Labor?

Mark Bahnisch

Mark Latham: *Civilising Global Capital: New Thinking for Australian Labor* (Allen & Unwin, $24.95).

PETER BEILHARZ, who should know if anyone does, wrote in *overland* 150 of Mark Latham as a future Labor leader from whom we can expect something. (Those of us overworking in universities might expect at the very least a stronger challenge to the quasi-marketizing project of Kemp and West.) Latham has delivered in *Civilising Global Capital* something both expected and unexpected. Expected because he positions himself as an intellectual in the NSW Labor Right tradition. And unexpected because rather than telling us how we might revive Labor tradition and truly try to civilize global capital (which might not be a bad idea), he has produced a variation of the TINA (Margaret Thatcher's 'There Is No Alternative!') theme so beloved of globalizing politicians everywhere. As we look at the parlous state of Australia in 1998, it would seem globalization is a given, and the best we can do is construct a sort of post-Fordist provisional utopia where full employment is guaranteed to the information rich, and the rest of us await the happy day when we can pay our dole back to demonstrate our reciprocal obligations as citizens. Nowhere in Latham's text is any sense of how we could resist what is clearly the omnipotent globalizing subject of capital. Rather, things like the deskilling of work, the growth of personal service labour and the destruction of Australia's manufacturing base are just happening. Resistance is futile, but if we follow Latham down his path, she'll be right in the long run.

So is this text significant as a sort of Gotha Program or Future of Socialism for the coming millennium, a new utopia for Australian labour? A light on the hill we could actually see? Not really. What is interesting is more the way he consciously positions himself within the discourse of labourism, and at the same time uses its rhetorical strategies to subvert it. *Civilising Global Capital* is also interesting insofar as it might bring useful insights on the regionalization and spacialization of poverty and wealth and the work of labour economists such as Bob Gregory to a wider audience. Certainly, the text's most powerful images are those of the economic and social hollowing out of areas like Western Sydney. But this is just to say that lurking within the contradictions and interstices of the text there are building blocks for the reconstruction of the social democratic project, a ghost of a progressive political strategy.

Latham's title is a self-conscious nod to Nairn's *Civilising Capitalism*, a sign to the reader that we should understand Labor history as a long struggle to humanize a ruthlessly efficient system of production and distribution. Whitlam (who provides a foreword) is invoked to justify the reinvention of Labor programs in opposition, and to exorcise the spectre of the 'politics of nostalgia'. Keating's big picture foregrounds the new strategy: "the big picture was never big enough" because capital has rendered his traditional social democratic distributionist strategies obsolete! If this is not enough to engender a certain suspicion about the continuity of Latham's ideas with the Labor tradition, Blair and Clinton are wheeled in from offstage, to point the way forward. Social democracy is now about investment in education and infrastructure to support internationally competitive firms, à la management guru Michael Porter of Harvard Business School. It might be nice to intervene in markets or stimulate economic growth, but international capital won't let us.

End of story.

Although Marx is written off in one sentence (and workers are apparently not exploited by the structure of the capitalist employment relationship but because they are unfortunately information poor), a class-based argument raises its head in chapter

eight to question the amount of money going to all those nasty capitalists in manufacturing. This chapter could have been written by a secret agent of the Productivity Commission ("Industry welfare is bad!"). Nowhere is it recognized that those OECD economies which have a strong manufacturing base have out-performed those like the UK's and Australia's where industrial sectors have been sacrificed on the altar of finance capital. The labourist discourse of the past is invoked to obscure what Beilharz has called the emptying out of the Labor tradition, and to disguise the text's qualified celebration of markets and competition.

Latham's project is not terribly original. If new thinking was expected, I'm disappointed. *Civilising Global Capital* gives itself away with headings like 'New Collectivism' and 'New Labor' in the last chapter. What Latham would like is an Australian Labor Party of Blair's 'radical centre' where welfare cuts and neo-liberal economic policy are disguised by rhetoric and political 'theory' promoting the end of the left/right divide and the new 'mutuality'. The deconstruction of this sort of Blairite discourse would be worth a book in itself. In Latham's text the key message is that "during this era of globalization and insecurity, each of us plainly need to do more to advance our interests". The role of the state is to support appropriate individual behaviours through appropriate incentives, and to ensure mutuality through promoting reciprocal obligations – a rhetoric directed at business but hitting the 'information poor' as they struggle to pay back their dole after they get their new jobs as waiters or personal servants.

Civilising Global Capital is a depressing text, masking a recipe for neo-liberalism mildly spiced with a dash of infrastructure investment. The reconstruction of the social democratic project in Australia is a task still awaiting a beginning. It would be helpful if potential social democratic renovators took their starting point from an analysis now 150 years old, rather than the latest populist tome on globalization:

> The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country . . . All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones . . . In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations.

Sound familiar?

Mark Bahnisch teaches in the School of Management at the Queensland University of Technology and in the Department of Government at the University of Queensland.

Somewhere Better

Michael Wilding

Anne Whitehead: *Paradise Mislaid: In Search of the Australian Tribe of Paraguay* (UQP, $35).

UNLIKE OUR OWN SAD TIMES, the nineteenth century ended with a vast array of socialist schemes, both theoretical and practical. There were the utopian fictions of William Morris and Edward Bellamy, there were the radical political movements ranging from Fabian to Communist, there was the development of trades union organization and activity, there were the beginnings of parliamentary labour parties, there was an active women's movement, and there were the developing scenarios of revolution. It was in this context that the New Australia Co-operative Settlement Association was established, and set up its community in Paraguay.

It was just one of many contemporary attempts to initiate a fairer, juster, better way of life. That it failed does not mark it off as very different from most of the other initiatives of those times. A hundred years later most of them seem to have failed to deliver what they promised – the parliamentary labour parties, the trades unions, and the soviet revolution. What is important is that these attempts were made. They remain there as inspirational for better times ahead.

William Lane and his associates took up land in Paraguay in 1893 because they were not able to acquire it in Australia. They were not committed to being remote or isolated. Remote from what? South America was no more 'remote' than South Africa or Australia in the 1890s, it was all perceived as frontier for development. They did, however, try to isolate the settlement from the pervasive destructive elements of nineteenth century society – from alcohol and from any social or political conflict with their immediate environment. But they took the seeds of destruction with them. My own reading of the contemporary records is that there were one or more agents provocateurs within the first batch of settlers who systematically disrupted things from the very beginning, so that the first settlement rapidly fell apart.

Anne Whitehead accepts this interpretation as likely. Her own concern, however, is not especially with the politics of the enterprise. Lloyd Ross's *William Lane and the Australian Labour Movement* still remains the best introduction to that aspect. And though she contributes some hitherto unpublished materials – notably the letters of the Englishman Tozer who joined the pioneers when they arrived in South America – her study does not significantly supplement Gavin Souter's history of the settlement, *A Peculiar People*.

Paradise Mislaid is a different sort of book. It is a hybrid, revisiting the story of New Australia in parallel with a personal travelogue of the author's own visits to Paraguay. The focus is divided pretty well equally between an account of the original settlement, and an exploration of the individual histories of those members of the movement and their descendants who stayed on in Paraguay. Amidst it all we are given pretty well everything you ever might have wanted to know about Paraguayan history – the Jesuit-run communal settlements for the Guarani, the war of the Triple Alliance that left the country almost without menfolk, the war of the 1930s, and the Stroesser dictatorship.

As much as with the original settlers, Anne Whitehead is concerned with their descendants. She has travelled on the river boats and railway trains along the routes the pioneers took, she has revisited the original settlements and she writes movingly of the few, fading relics, the neglected graveyards. She has also met and interviewed the octogenarian survivors, remembering the last days of New Australia and Colonia Cosme from their childhood. And she has followed the extraordinary stories of the families still there through their successive generations. Two I found especially memorable. There was Leon Cadogan, who did so much to record the language and myths of the indigenous peoples of Paraguay and to press for some amelioration in their living conditions, drawing international attention to what was in effect planned genocide. And there is Robin Wood, never knowing who his father was, who after a series of dead-end jobs in his youth made a spectacularly successful career writing story lines for comics sold in millions throughout South America.

The New Australia movement was far more than a 'footnote' to Australian history. It was part of an international movement, an amazing experiment in practical communism. At the same time it was yet another aspect of Anglo-Celtic expansionism. It was an expression of political hope, and it was full of contradictions. That is why it continues to hold its fascination for us.

Michael Wilding's novel of New Australia, The Paraguayan Experiment, *was published by Penguin in 1985. Out of print in Australia, it is available in Bengali translation from Papyrus publishers, Calcutta.*

The Australianity of this Literature

Dan O'Neill

Mammad Aidani: *A Picture Out of Frame* (Black Pepper, $15.95).

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO some of the best energies of Australian literature were devoted to defining and registering what was typical of the nation. It was always possible for discerning spirits to see that enterprise as somewhat foolish. Christopher Brennan, in the Sydney University magazine *Hermes* in 1902, for example, saw "the Australianity of this literature, which largely dealt with and was mainly addressed to mythical individuals called Bill and Jim" as "painted on, not too la-

boriously, from the outside". What was wanted was something cooler and less chauvinistic. But neither the writers he mocked nor Brennan could have predicted the present state of affairs in which the national writing scene is full of the most 'untypical' characters, being Australian in the many ways that their various pasts in various parts of the globe have made congenial, natural or necessary to them. Among those ways is that in the tradition of Conrad, writing as someone who has embraced the English language with a passion born of a love of its literary potential, writing about places that are 'over there', writing with the complicated feelings of the migrant, the refugee, or the exile, writing with the conviction, wrested from widespread forms of modern suffering, that all countries, all cities, are capable of showing the same terrible things about the plight of being human that have driven some people to this country, where they are still at least free to write. This, for some people nowadays, and for those who read them, is 'the Australianity of this literature' as well.

Those who are already familiar with the poetry of Mammad Aidani will know that he is such an Australian writer, resident here as a left-wing opponent of the Khomeini regime from 1982, after three years in Europe, principally in Italy. I am sure they will welcome this prose work, as will readers who here encounter him for the first time. The genre lies somewhere between novella and prose poem. It was a good idea to precede it by a foreword consisting of an excerpt from a letter that the writer sent to his family from Brisbane in early 1983. For its preoccupations give the best clue to the real content and the real method of the work that follows. He speaks of 'the war' (it remains that undefined and thus potentially historico-mythic throughout) that continues, of his isolation ("People here do not talk about the war and us at all, as if that part of the world that I come from is irrelevant") and of his desperate attempt to maintain some kind of human continuity, some link with them and with what he must keep on valuing to survive – "I'm seeking goodness and love, for beauty and knowledge, as you have taught me with your simplicity and poverty." He speaks also of the necessity he feels to keep on writing: "I feel now that I'm alone I have to create my world in my mind's imagination ... I have this strange feeling that if I don't write I will die unnoticed ..." Writing helps him in "forgetting the pain".

The work has two parts. Its overall effort is to keep alive the images that remain in the mind of the exiled anonymous central figure who is first presented to us as someone looking back with his fading memories to an otherwise irrecoverable past, to a land that is, for him, a village and then a city slum of his childhood and adolescence. He is in a barely furnished kitchen in a new land, and the reader joins him in a painful effort of recall, of going inward to glimpse, fan alive, and warm the mind and heart at, whatever ashes of the old life remain there for his imagination to cherish and extend into a renewed attempt to live.

Aidani has very evidently given a lot of thought to the travail involved for a writer in working, not with fantasy elements, but with what is genuinely *there*, and in building on the remembered fragments of the precious past to recover the world that one once lived *inside*. In fact, for the reader, a great part of the subtle but firm structure of the work is the well communicated process of gradual emotional breakthrough to a solid connection with the threatened past of the central figure. In the first chapter we see and feel this effort begin, as the narrator shows us the exile, under the pressure of his great need, trying to get too far:

> He returns to the side of the chair, thinking, "What would it be like to be prosecuted and to be waiting for the following morning to be hanged or shot?"

This thought, which will not be explained until near the end of the second part, and which is centrally important to the effect of the whole work, exacerbates the frustration and despair of exile. And, in the mind that has been cruelly torn from its native context, it is a thought that can only stay alive after that mind has gone back to the beginning. Hence, for the rest of part one, we see in quickly evoked flashes a retrospect, from childhood on, of images, fragments, residues that are deftly interpreted with the later knowledge of the character-narrator so as to go beyond the boy's then world. For the boy has "a vast array of images" but, "like the others, he has no language other than a vocabulary of three hundred words".

The true pathos of the work lies in the sort of healing that the central figure is trying to bring about by this attempt to go back from the world he now lives in, to re-connect that old world that has made him to this new world that is so big, so cruel and merciless, and that was already there in the occupation of the

city by the soldiers. This, which he begins to remember, and, as it were, re-make in part one, is the obsessive theme of part two. Years of living in cities of strangers seem to lie behind Aidani's skill in evoking the imprint of massive events on the collective psyche, as gleaned by the lonely and sensitive individual from the look and feel of public spaces, crowds on streets, queues, bare trees and other indices of gloom, anxiety and suppressed anger.

He is good at the poetic evocation of the symbolic and allegorical dimension of events – a conversation between friends as the troops begin their seizure of the city, the return and then death of the family's long-lost adopted stray dog, a train's crossing of a stretch of desert to get from village to city, the gathering of migrant Kurds on a particular street in town. In fact, as a true poet, he shows facility in managing the lyric and the epic tasks of writing, guiding the reader to the individual's and the people's feelings. He has yet to become master of the dramatic. The dialogue, except where it can be read as the externalization of archetypal thoughts of quasi-mythic figures, reads a little stiffly, set-pieces designed to expound thoughts of the author, rather than the utterances of living beings. The conversation of the mother and father of the central character seems mainly devoted to demonstrating the poverty and oppression that afflicts their whole class. It contrasts unfavourably with the power and tenderness of the more direct evocation of the character-narrator's feeling for the love between his parents. It is true of the work in general that its life resides in the saturation of memories of a treasured past in the powerful feeling that the act of writing both calls up and embodies in words. Its true unity lies not in the concatenation of its episodes or the interaction of its characters, but in the sure growth and flowering of its emotional world towards a climax of sensibility, after which we return to the central character sitting at his desk in the new country. There he is trying to deal with the question of how he has survived while his friend is dead at the hands of their common enemy. We are back with the isolation and alienation of the foreword, but the confusion has abated.

The ending of the book is both calm and dark. For a political radical it presents both a realistic presentation of a common experience of defeat in our time and a real problem about where to go from here:

> He wishes he could hear from someone or write. But, he knows, as they would all know by now, that memories are private possessions. And although many things can be stolen or destroyed, the people's private memories cannot be. So, although they may not be able to speak out as they wish and as they need to, they still have their memories.

As a prose-writer, Mammad Aidani still has a lot to learn, principally I think about the rational and craft-based elements that distinguish this kind of writing from poetry. But on the really indispensable thing, the intuitive grasp of the way feeling holds material together and makes it alive all the way through, he is already totally sound. His capacity for the undefended and honest expression of positive and valuable emotion marks him off from the more common Australian mode of ironic and laconic understatement, in a way that makes him an unusually interesting new voice in the cacophonous national choir.

Dan O'Neill is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Queensland.

The Destruction of Bailey's Pine

Ray Verrills

Len Fox: *Bailey's Pine* (self-published, $20).

I FIRST MET LEN FOX during a cottage lecture in a suburb of Sydney, where he was the speaker. The Communist Party used to organize talks on topical, political, social and cultural questions in the private homes of party members or sympathizers. The speakers were usually leading members of the party, and the audience comprised local party members and sympathizers, and anyone else who could be persuaded to come and listen. Len was a well-known and respected member of the party at the time, and I myself had recently become a member.

I remember him as a serious and well-spoken man with a touch of melancholy in his expression. I recall his talk as interesting and enlightening, though I don't recollect the subject.

I did not meet him again till many years later,

though I did read his contributions to the party press. I had lapsed from the party in 1949, and rejoined in 1957. Around 1960 I was persuaded to do some work for the Australasian Book Society, and through this I became involved with the *Realist Writer* literary magazine, of which I subsequently became editor under the pseudonym Ray Williams. The magazine was a newly created revival of the original *Realist Writer* which began in Melbourne and became *overland* in 1954 under the editorship of Stephen Murray-Smith.

Frank Hardy was the editor of the first few issues of the new *Realist Writer*, but was now anxious to leave the position and pursue his own writing. The result was that Jack Beasley, a dogmatic Stalinist and Lance Sharkey's pet 'worker intellectual', was arbitrarily brought onto the editorial board. I myself was also arbitrarily co-opted onto the board to assist with the workload.

Beasley's dogmatic approach soon aroused opposition on the board and alienated many actual and potential supporters of the magazine. It took some time and a bitter struggle to oust Beasley, and the magazine never seemed to fully recover from the taint of his Stalinism. Len Fox was one of those who, despite his intense opposition to Stalinism, continued to give the *Realist Writer*, or *The Realist* as it later became, some support. His first loyalty, however, continued to be to *overland*.

Now aged ninety-three, Len has been a writer all his life, and has had a great deal of work published. He is still writing, and in 1997 he published a novel, *Bailey's Pine*. Essentially it is an imaginatively recreated or fictionalized history of his own family, in which he himself plays a part as the character called Lionel. In his introduction to the book he points out that it is neither a biography nor an autobiography, but a work of fiction, and should be read as such.

The novel opens in the year 1900 with the recently married twenty-year-old Helen Barnett standing on the front verandah of her new house in a south-eastern suburb of Melbourne. She is gazing at a tall young Norfolk pine which grew on an old farm called Bailey's. The pine, in its subsequent growth, aging and eventual felling some years after the Second World War, symbolizes Helen's development from an innocent and idealistic young woman into an elderly, wise and experienced matriarch after passing through a variety of struggles, conflicts and traumas, interspersed with periods of happiness and triumph.

Helen is married to a descendant of a tolerant, liberal-minded and cultured Jewish family who emigrated from London to Australia in the 1830s, and eventually settled in Melbourne. There is no tradition of fanaticism in the family. Hence most of its members are not rigidly opposed to 'marrying out', that is, into a non-Jewish family. What is more important is that there is a tradition of moral integrity and social responsibility, which plays a significant part in the consciousness of the descendants.

Helen's husband is twenty years older than herself, and of quite a different temperament. It is not surprising that understanding and communication between them is often apt to break down, but the undercurrent of love and respect, combined with the concern of each for the family and for the welfare of society in general, holds the marriage together. Under the influence of this family environment the children, while ultimately pursuing their own different paths in life, grow up into successful and responsible citizens.

The First World War has some effect on the family, but not as much as might have been expected. The Great Depression also affects their lives, but again not as much as it did the lives of so many Australians.

By this time Helen's sons, Henry and Lionel, are in their thirties. In this last part of the novel, political issues have become much more important. Lionel grows aware of the dangers imposed by the upsurge of fascism, the rise of Hitler and Mussolini, and the threat of Japanese militarism. He joins the Peace Movement, and then the Communist Party. His brother is sympathetic, but not so politically active.

The novel ends with the destruction of Bailey's Pine, brought about by the expansion of Melbourne's suburbs and the disappearance of the old farms after the fifty-odd years of Helen's marriage. It is a straightforward family saga of the first half of this century written in a simple and clear style, and it is well worth reading.

The book is published by the author, whose uncle was the painter, Phillips Fox, and the model for Maurice, one of the characters in the novel.

Ray Verrills edited the Sydney Realist Writer *from 1962 until its demise in 1970.*

Four Books, Five Poets

Pam Brown

S. K. Kelen: *Trans-Sumatran Highway and other poems* (polonius press, $17.95).
Ouyang Yu: *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet* (Wild Peony, $15).
John Kinsella: *The Hunt* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, $16.95).
Miriel Lenore: *travelling alone together* & Louise Crisp: *Ruby Camp* (Spinifex Press, $19.95).

FOUR YEARS AGO, as a memo to my IT-obsessed library co-workers, I pinned S. K. Kelen's poem 'The Information Superhighway' to the office wall. Maybe, one day, we would all work from on-line homes – and heed the poem's warning:

My house is a city state.
Outdoors there's a weird fog
I don't want to go out in.
Forests are flattened to fuel
computer factories,
the trees are routed once & for all.
When the last tiger in the wild died
the tigers in the zoo just vanished.

There's a drawing of a tiger on the cover of *Trans-Sumatran Highway* – a reminder of its probable imminent extinction. Various other animals, reptiles and birds traverse backyards, paddocks and jungles in this book.

Steve Kelen is an enthusiastic traveller and applies wry, analytic acumen to travel-experiences as in the final stanza of 'The Ramayana':

Blood rivers run into the sea.
Turtle soup dreams of revenge.
Dragons champ at their leashes,
crazed buffaloes stampede.
But everyone is forgiven. Volcanoes chuckle.
Frogs roar louder and louder kick starting a generator.
Eternity's green terraces: geckoes' laughter.
A golden frog sitting on a door frame
means storms of fortune.
I order another drink at the Jungle Inn
to celebrate Freedom Day
and the good luck gods fly to Timor Timur.

These poems generously open up numinous and real galactic worlds, enrich suburban domesticities (*"They began as each other's armchair/in endless rapt embrace/evolving to a sofa & a desk, afar/ but in the same room"*), revise poetic history ('Shelley in Heaven'), fire political concern (Koori ghosts at the Coorong, nuclear fission at Hiroshima, Russian destruction of Chechnya), all with pungent humorous insight. S. K. Kelen ranges through these expansive realms and sometimes enters the more quietly profound as in the clear pathos of 'Goodbye', which farewells a friend who has died:

Everyone's responsible for everything
now there are only feathers left
so kiss the lightning, a ticket to the stars.
The sunbeams have arrived

Expatriate Chinese poet Ouyang Yu's discursive monologues from *"a sick man from asia"*, disgruntled, disappointed and deracinated by the 'west', are a chronicle of despair. Ouyang Yu has high expectations of himself and of poetry in a country that places scant value on poetry. It's the wrong place – making the subject doubly displaced. He identifies some backward aspects of materialist Australian culture – *"probably I should start playing tattslotto/or buying raffle tickets/like the stupid australians or australian–chinese"* and the way bullying is an unchallenged norm – *"that australian boys or girls sang ching chong chinaman/and say fuck or idiots or nick off or shit or get lost/and never get punished/that chinese boys do that here too."*

As is usual in confessional poetry, this multiple-narrator speaks as a victim involved in a process leading to cathartic self-destruction, rebellion or anger. For Ouyang Yu there's a therapeutic efficacy in these monologues. A rant against literary editors is shrill – *"...poetry/rejected through/the arseholes of lit. mags/ (i mean littered maggots)/in the next century or so/let's kill all the editors/and publish from headtop/now you want minimalism/ you dickhead/that's what you can minimalize yourself into."*

It's an embittered view seeing mostly anomie. Even spring, usually a cliched symbol of renewal, is depressing – *"spring is now deep in its own despair/shaped like a farce"*. And there's not much empathy for the slippage

of history and general dislocation that Aussie dolts endure – it being only 210 years since settlement.

There's a filmic element to John Kinsella's *The Hunt*, suggesting golden-filtered depictions of vast landscape – 'Days of Heaven', maybe, or 'Witness'. But it's Western Australia and it's a period film – the time seems like an age ago. Perhaps it's because in my urbanity I link pastoralists with ABC-TV's 'Landline' or native title discourse and know little of the actual lives of wheat farmers that these poems seem so powerful.

The language of this book is necessarily straightforward (unlike Kinsella's po-mo mode) in order to transport the dark content. As George Steiner says, these poems are "narratives of feeling" comprised of many stories. They are also often metaphoric. In 'Echidna' the poet and a farmer track an echidna but they lose track and wander in amnesiac circles:

> *. . . exhuming*
> *the deeply choric question of rendering*
> *our meanderings into prose,*
> *into idle chatter to accompany*
> *a few beers in the pub that night*

John Kinsella's penchant for the pastoral is brilliantly exercised in this fantastic catalogue of death-filled life in the wheatfields. Its almost-gothic undertone is enhanced by the use of slightly old-fashioned words – 'bier' rather than 'coffin', 'husbandry', 'the plenty'. Here, men are buried alive by falling into wheat silos, mice nests are preserved in superphosphate, packs of wild marauding dogs attack sheep, kangaroos fight off and rip apart domestic dogs, emus are tripped and then brutally slaughtered by semi-automatic rifle fire, rabbits are shot and dragged to trail scent for the capture of larger beasts, entrapped cats chew off their paws to free themselves. Dogs' corpses, stillborn babies, mangy foxes hunted out, snakes decapitated with shovels, a rabbiter's suicide in a tin humpy, the horror of a drunken student prank turning into a lynching at a bush ball, weird religious ceremonies under black moons, lightning striking wandoo trees. The schoolboy poet thinks of Christo when he has to plastic-wrap the hay bales and knows that soon he'll leave these difficult fields. John Kinsella's pastorals of dread, hardship and graphic beauty are written with a deep compassion.

travelling alone together recounts a trip taken in 1993 following John Eyre's expedition from Adelaide, SA to Albany, WA around 150 years ago. Miriel Lenore had wanted to see some particular Nullarbor stone formations – *"seeking landscapes not land"* – and, instead, ended up examining comparative responses to the contemporary journey taken by eight older women and two bus drivers retracing the route of the twenty-five-year-old explorer.

Miriel Lenore avoids any pursuit of imagined authenticity and is knowingly critical in relation to history and so doesn't speak as John Eyre. Quotations from Eyre's journals are linchpins throughout the book along with the complexities of the womens' life-stories.

The poems are direct and often droll when encountering some of the lackadaisical junkyardish places that are the outback – abandoned, peeling bits and pieces contained in majestic landscapes. In 'Israelite Bay' the travellers *"arrive at last to discover/ few human imprints/if you except a weightlifting machine/beside the road"*. Lenore is also adept at disappointment:

> *easy to miss the sculpture on the plain*
> *under Mt Arden:*
> *a train wheel fixed on a tilted rail*
> *to honour Eyre*
> *who led the way*
>
> *this most unlikely of his monuments*
> *was a Bicentennial project*
> *of the local primary school*
> *where the Aboriginal pupils*
> *could not compete in races*
> *unless they wore shoes*
> *they did not own*

and at the same place – 'under Mt Arden (i)'

> *the wild sad cry of swans*
> *brings Eyre from his tent*
> *their northward flight*
> *promising that inland sea*
> *whose glitter would be salt*

These poems are multi-layered but never dense or affected, the language being so intelligible and precise.

In just sixty pages Louise Crisp renders an intensity which is sometimes obscurely personal yet al-

ways accessible in terms of poetics. This is a non-linear, womanly, spiritual, mystical set of poems where meaning is deliberately restrained and elusive – *"but if I am fish can I ever/be rainbow?"* The bush (in the Snowy Mountains) is mysterious. The recurring symbols are flat oval stones from a meandering river, blood, masks and bones. Here is sensuality – *"you suck on my tongue/like a pink-red stone"* – and mythical allegory –

I splash in the shallows
going past the cleft
the hood widens
opening like renewal
the four men camped there
wake next morning
feeling transformed overnight
into female

Crisp is respectful of nature, of ghosts, of indigenous people and she records their massacre in the region. She has a flair for devising moments of heightened poetics that produce an originality via extreme simplicity:

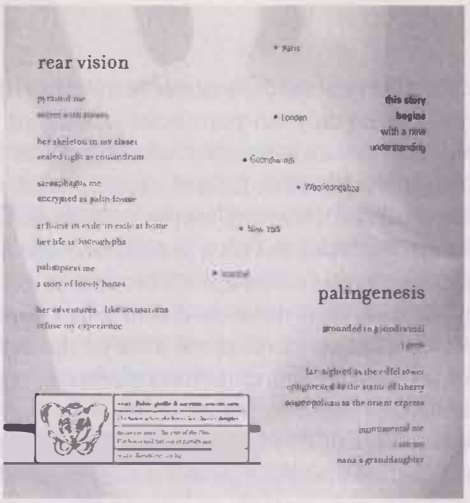
the weather glides out
of my bones
growing shorter & shorter
the sun folds me up
for winter
no thought
no memory

Pam Brown is overland*'s poetry editor.*

A Story of Lonely Bones

Julie Hunt

Shane Rowlands and Susi Blackwell: *Rear Vision* (Spindrift Press, $40 plus $5 postage, PO Box 600 Toowong 4066).



SMALL FORMAT AND LIMITED EDITION, *Rear Vision* is an intriguing collaboration between a poet and a graphic designer. It is an experimental 'picture book', a visual poem about the texture of memory. If it was a less expensive production I'd be tempted to add another layer by making my own notes and drawings on the pages.

Using text, photos, overlaid images and a variety of actual surfaces Shane Rowlands and Susi Blackwell imagine the life of Susi's grandmother Berthe Lina, who came from France and left traces of her story in the family house in Goondiwindi. Letters, a hat feather in a travelling trunk, a photo of herself as a young man with a moustache, a photo of herself as a mature woman in Egyptian head dress; Berthe Lina left material for speculation.

The book is also about Susi herself, and her relationship to Berthe – *"her skeleton in my closet,/sealed tight as conundrum"*. In 'fork-tongue', Susi/Susa is a child:

come into my parlour
says the spider to her pet
nana's spinning stories
susa feels exotic and all grown up
nana teaches her french
muffets got the quickest 1–10 this side of
boggabilla

The voice in *Rear Vision* is as surprising and inconsistent as memory:

milky-eyed berthe lina
does not want to be left
unclaimed she whispers:
read me like a flipped coin
send me like a swoon

Each page has a 'bone box' in the corner – Nana's metatarsal, Susa's patella – neatly catalogued and defined. "This is the story of lonely bones" we are told

on the inside of the cover. Move through the collection. Reconstruct a body from diverse fragments. The creators describe the book as a "puzzle of word-painting and photographic masquerades . . . a ticket to travel". The reader is invited to explore the collage, to move over actual surfaces – embossed paper, gloss card, stock of different weights and thicknesses, figures scratched into x-ray film. Reading becomes a journey. "*There are no fully annotated/colour plated/ just add water and stir/answers.*" You make your own way and put together your own picture. Or perhaps it's a map these two are making, a map of their own friendship and collaboration, and a guide to others who would venture into the territory where design and poetry meet. *Rear Vision* is both a voyage and the collector's item brought back. A beautiful little book. I celebrate its arrival.

Julie Hunt is a Melbourne poet and book designer.

Health and Diversity

Nathan Hollier

Rhyll McMaster: *Chemical Bodies* (Brandl & Schlesinger, $16.95).
David P. Reiter: *Hemingway in Spain and Selected Poems* (Interactive Publications, $17.95).
Fay Zwicky: *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (Brandl & Schlesinger, $16.95).
Kieran Carroll: *Summer Ode to the Sporting Seventies* (Banana Arcade Records, $10).

IT IS DIFFICULT TO SUGGEST briefly the depth and quality of *Chemical Bodies*. McMaster unveils a new and generally less overtly biographical style of poetic narrative, asking:

> *what if I play*
> *by myself*
> *in isolation's*
> *great extreme*
>
> *or what if I suggest*
> *the world is bluff*
> *and we are blindmen?*
> ('Rules of the Game with Variants')

These ontological meditations hint at existential anxieties which have perhaps increased in the face of empiricism's sweeping back of 'ignorance'. For McMaster however, this process brings freedom: "*There are no immutable laws. / Nothing is known but desire*" ('The Particular'). Here, and elsewhere, the language and the sentiment brings to mind the romantic poet Blake. This collection, informed by awareness of philosophy, history and psychology, may be seen as seeking, with Blake, to absolve fears engendered by an oft-perceived incommensurability between internal belief and knowledge of the external world. As 'Reverence' puts it ("*As the wasp is easily fooled, / quickly comforted, / so are our presumptions found. / Do not be afraid*"), and as Blake understood perhaps better than anyone, our most valued human qualities have always emanated from inside of ourselves, as part of our own emotional needs and desires:

> *What's out there, star-pushing,*
> *was here all the time,*
> *one more aspect,*
> *wanting to be looked at,*
> *breathing beneath the panic,*
> *loved if not liked*
> ('Bluebeard in the Cracked Mirror')

Hemingway in Spain and Selected Poems is a substantial and accomplished piece of writing which, often in the persona of Hemingway, retraces poetically many of that man's preoccupations, as part of David Reiter's aesthetic response to his experience of Spain (photography is also included). History and its lessons, the blood shed in its making, suffering and stoicism, religion and belief, the mystery of beauty and sex, the nature of modern life and the primal 'truth' (as Hemingway might put it) of ancient cultures and rituals. Pithy observations which in the confidence of their assertion carry a ring of truth evoke the big American's style: "*Infidelity / was a squall for some, an anchor for others – / candles against the uncertainties of night . . . Some believe it's science / others just good luck – that we fall in love / is a superstition; that we stay together is default*" ('Contrasts at Cuenca').

The curious merging and juxtaposing of voices and historical moments bespeaks a longing, within all of this, for the past, or rather an antiquarian fondness for the nostalgia of Hemingway, one of the last

great believers in, and exponents of, an idealized, heroic philosophy of living. Reiter's 'hero' however, is art itself, that through which profound experience is, for him, always mediated and recovered: "*If one man's fiction / is another man's reality, why can't we repair / our mistakes with a splice or two of imagination?*" ('Clint Eastwood at Tabernas').

In reference to the poetics of A. D. Hope a few years ago, Kevin Hart wrote that "without a principle of recurrence, however subtle, to counterpoint the prose rhythms of speech those rhythms would lose their freshness and vitality".[1] Though hardly an adherent of strict metrical form, Fay Zwicky seems particularly aware of a necessary relationship between poetic language and structure. It is the rhythmic quality of her verse which most appealed to me when I heard her reading at the National Poetry Festival in Melbourne last April. Her use of alliteration in particular made the poetry *sound* good. Take this example from 'Groundswell for Ginsberg', a poem she read that evening: "*Sing out supercilious William Buckley junior / flashing ferrety fangs on his own telly spot, / priming his acolytes to mock the compelling voice . . .*" That Zwicky barracks unselfconsciously in this poem for the "old courage teacher", Ginsberg, against the Republican figure, Buckley, the "fogs of unseeing nineties America", as well as against a genteel poetic tradition, indicates something of the complexity of her artistic and intellectual motivations:

> *Take Wordsworth's emotion recollected in tranquillity.*
> *I'm feverish with what's not tranquil, what's been settled for. What's a word's worth?*
>
> *Pretending to be selfless mouthpiece, pottering*
> *lake and fen unfurrowed, closed, serene, pitying*
> *luckless leech gatherers, ditch dwellers,*
>
> *mourning industrial mayhem unstoppable.*
> *Man speaking to men meaning bush-whacker extraordinaire*
> *meaning Himself – which men*
>
> *had he in mind? Not Blake*
> *or Ginsberg or me for sure.*

In recent years, publishers have begun to increase their range of books, particularly 'classics', available in cassette tape and CD form. Yet with the exception of the odd initiative by, for instance, the National Library in Canberra, marketed towards a similar, 'quality' readership, this rarely, to my knowledge, takes place. *Summer Odes to the Sporting Seventies, and other poems* suggests that such a venture is worthwhile. I would much rather listen to Kieran Carroll recite his poems than read them on the page. This is not to detract from him as a writer, but to note that his expressive voice greatly contributes to the success of often humorous poetry. Carroll has an original turn of phrase, wit ("*Who wants to be melanoma's whipping boy? / Who wants to be a timeless parody of a Big M ad?*"), imaginative similes and most of all a memory capable of recalling images and voices which evoke the feeling of a specific time and place: "*My grandfather trained professional foot runners . . . Often, he'd drolly hand me and my brother a twenty cent piece and say / 'There you go boys, have a silver medal'* " ('Portrait from Mordialloc').

In closing, three cheers for Brandl & Schlesinger. This new publishing firm's commitment to Australian poetry admits a not ill-founded faith in its health and diversity.

ENDNOTE

1. Kevin Hart, *A. D. Hope*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p.83.

Nathan Hollier is researching Australian poetry at Monash University.

Variety, surprise and sheer pleasure

Michael Sharkey

Geoff Goodfellow: *Semi Madness* (Goodline Press, PO Box 1740, Adelaide SA 5001, $11.95).
The Sex Poems Unleashed (Goodline Press, $7.95).

GEOFF GOODFELLOW'S *Semi Madness* brings together poems we've seen before in print, and a mob which we've heard from one end of the country to the other. Some are short, snappy

lyrics, others dramatic monologues, and a number short or lengthy prose poems ('Out of the Shadows', 'Me and Eddy', 'The Eyes Have It' . . .). Several themes hold the collection together: the madness or sanity of contemporary Australian society; the vulnerability of ordinary people; optimism in the face of personal or institutional brutalization; and abiding affection of the observer for all his neighbours, whether they are scattered around the globe ('Emma in London, Ulla in Aachen, Theo in Athens'): all one-time sojourners in Semaphore, the aptly-named suburb which provides Goodfellow with a world of experiences to draw on. A handful of poems have appeared in earlier books, but they are aptly located in this book which gathers the Semaphore-inspired poems at a blow.

'The Lemonade Kid and His Brothers' is an extended yarn about Goodfellow's experience of collecting his brothers to take them to work after their nightly binges at the local, at home, and with the Hell's Angels who have moved in across the street. There are moments of comedy in this narrative: Geoff arrives home after an afternoon with the brothers and the Angels: "The dog barked when I walked in. Then the wife started". To hell with political correctness: the fascination with urban pirates and their notion of a work-ethic offers stark contrast with the storyteller's wife's ethic, and whatever brought this couple together isn't in it anymore.

Goodfellow has a near-perfect pitch when it comes to recording dialogue. His poems capture voices of Semaphore residents: mad Eddy, Dorothy, Bobby, an anonymous "old bloke" (of twenty-eight), Melanie and others who live on the fringe, in the middle of the suburb celebrated in the book's first poem. Goodfellow doesn't simply 'take off' the voices he hears, he invests them with understanding and sympathy. Sometimes he 'reads' the characters from outside: 'De-Tox Blues', 'Home Ground', 'Semaphore Sandra' (a rare 'rhymer', as Charles Bukowski called such poems), 'Unsteady Eddy', 'Grace'. These poems steer away from sentimentalizing their subjects.

There are some accomplished technical effects in many of the Semaphore poems – as we've come to see in most of Goodfellow's writing. The clipped lines, the cannily placed line-breaks, the mix of vernacular snippets and commentary (rumination, really), make for variety, surprise and sheer pleasure. In 'Semaphore', after a catalogue of the fashionable and the unfashionable types who make up the population, Goodfellow comments "chances are –/ Semaphore/ is not yet ready for you". Another, 'Which Bank', kicking off with a description of overheard conversation between two girls at a handy bank, typifies Goodfellow's placement of a telling line at the end:

> i turned & faced them when i
> heard the girl with the most
> skin blemishes speak
>
> *they keep you fucken waiting*
> *at the counter for half a fucken*
> *hour* she said
>
> *girls girls* i said
> attracting their attention
> *that's no way for a Semaphore*
> *girl to speak*
>
> *we're not from fucken Semaphore*
> the tallest girl snarled
>
> *that's fucken obvious* i replied

Goodfellow's poems are like musical scores: to hear him read (or recite) his work is to listen to a performer with a gift for the value of pauses, and for switches between modes and registers. Sometimes he plays it for comic effect, but something besides comedy comes through, loud and clear, in poems like 'Unsteady Eddy', 'Me and Eddy', 'A Handful' and others. The 'victims' of Goodfellow's humour are the exploiters and the hypocrites in society: 'Out of the Shadows' characteristically sends up the stock-market junkies. And all through these poems, Goodfellow portrays a society in which the behaviour of the marginalized and mad often appears more sane than the behaviour and routines of the certified straight.

The Sex Poems Unleashed is a terrific bunch of new works (new, at least to this reviewer). It shows a side of Goodfellow that everyone who has heard him knows – the public hard case jokester who wants to get in first with a crack at himself, before anyone else twigs that a lot of the bluff is a pose and that he's secretly as soft as putty. The first two poems in the collection are clever putdowns of himself as sexual performer. 'Small Town Talk' and 'Anti Climax' bring us back to the Semaphore ethos: a small town, where everything is known.

While the comedy of sex is clear in these and in 'Qualifying the Theory', 'The Songbird', another mood emerges from 'The Heat', 'Reminders', and 'Perished'. Here, the traditional traps for every player of the game appear: indulging the luxury of thinking a relationship might actually last, or that, once the contact has ended, one can drive a stake through the heart of its corpse. Nice tries; and, I think, a poem like 'Reminders' is as fine an example of this genre as anyone can offer. This is a small collection, but it's one of Goodfellow's most memorable. So is the cover: Goodfellow, naked except for swimming goggles, holding a plastic snorkel in place of his own. My copy came wrapped in glapwrap, with a condom inside: I did say he has a sense of humour. The poems are much more interesting, and likely to last, than the packaging.

Michael Sharkey is the coordinating editor of Ulitarra *literary magazine.*

Waiting for the Lights to Change

John Foulcher

Jennifer Strauss: *Tierra del Fuego, New and Selected Poems* (Pariah Press, $14).
Graeme Kinross-Smith: *If I Abscond, New Poetry and Short Fiction* (Spectrum, $15).
Andrew Sant: *Album of Domestic Exiles* (Black Pepper Press, $15.95).
Connie Barber: *Enter Your House with Care* (Delynne Publications, $15).
Joyce Lee: *The Whispering Ear* (Pariah Press, $15).

IN HIS BOOK *The Great Divorce* C. S. Lewis tells of a dying man sitting under a tree in a meadow: he is becoming impatient to die, knowing that he will soon be in paradise. Finally, death comes, and he wakes excitedly, only to find he is sitting under the same tree in the same meadow. Just as disappointment is starting to descend, he touches the grass and finds that it feels and looks more like grass, like the essence of grass, than he has ever known. It's the same with the tree, the sky, the clouds. Looking around, he realizes that he is indeed in paradise; in fact, he always had been there, but he had simply failed to notice.

The point of the story is obvious: paradise is in the detail that constantly surrounds us, but we don't see the eternities in our grains of sand. It's not surprising the aim of a great deal of poetry is to explore the daily detail which catches life's meaning and delight. Each of these books, in its own way, deals with this concern, and each provides moments where the mundane is elevated and transcended.

It's pleasing to see so many good poems resurrected in Jennifer Strauss's *Tierra del Fuego, New and Selected Poems*, as well as a healthy collection of new ones. Strauss's concerns seem to have changed little since the publication of her first book, *Children and Other Strangers*, in 1975. Indeed, this book almost seems designed to demonstrate this: it opens with new poetry written to the point of publication (whenever that may be – Pariah has not included a year of publication in either of its books reviewed here), then immediately returns to a selection of poems from Strauss's first book. While it appears that Strauss has 'loosened up' stylistically, the substance of the later poems is closely in keeping with the earlier ones. They are the concerns of a mother, a woman: in the volume's second poem, 'Son and Moon: Scenes from a Maternal Life', the mother/narrator is both anguished by and proud of her adult son's socially activist lifestyle, while in the first poem of the earlier volume, 'There Were Three Brothers' (a lovely poem) a similar persona reflects on the strange, consuming character of her children:

> *I see them strange among the other strangers*
> *And, waiting for the lights to change, I muse*
> *On archetypal mothers who knew best*
> *And pottered at the stove – or died*
> *Warm in the fiction of being necessary,*
> *With all their youth and beauty on them still.*

How to live a fulfilled life among the consuming rituals of motherhood – this quest underlies much of Strauss's poetry, and it is approached with poise, insight and often with an engaging lightness of tone.

Strauss's poetry is distinguished by her painting of scenes such as these on a larger political backdrop of human suffering. The possible interruption of our ordinary lives by those with nastier objectives is always circling these poems – only accidents of time and place prevent it. In the best examples of this type of poem, such as the volume's title poem or 'Snapshots of the Innocent Tourist', the effect is un-

settling, sinister. However, evil always exists 'out there' in Strauss's poetry, and, for me, a lack of deference to the poet/narrator's capacity for evil occasionally imbues the poetry with a self-righteous, conspiratory tone; things studied from a distance often fail to engage. This is a quibble, though: *Tierra del Fuego: New and Selected Poems* is a satisfying collection from a talented poet.

Graeme Kinross-Smith hasn't published a book of poetry since he shared *Turn Left at Any Time with Care* with Jamie Grant in 1975; *If I Abscond, New Poetry and Short Fiction* is long overdue. The blending of fiction and poetry in this volume doesn't seem entirely convincing to me – are these prose poems? stories? what is the relationship between the poetry and the prose? Taken alone, though, the poems are stylish and effective. Kinross-Smith doesn't vary his form much – free verse, erratic line lengths – but this seems wholly appropriate for his intimate, spontaneous voice. The poems are marked by vivid detail and crisp imagery; these lines from 'Oyster Farmer' are typical:

He draws at evening
on the lake's accepting face.

Like water,
he is slow to win, moving
down his silent nursery.

Kinross-Smith knows how a single word can lift a line out of mere detail. How bland these opening lines from 'Daughter' could have looked in lesser hands:

Sitting in the parked car,
astounded by radio, I see
my daughter
at the bottom of the street.

That word 'astounded' makes all the difference: this is a moment that sets itself up for significance through a combination of an evocative participle and thoughtful line division. Kinross-Smith describes human behaviour with the same sleight of hand. In 'Nocturne', for example, a perfunctory episode of love-making is followed by:

The darkness
swims
in their mouths.
Wet leaves
brush
their bellies.

Wordless,
they lie back.
On the horizon
his watch's
luminous face
glimmers,
the lights
of another city.

What is so impressive in these lines is the mingling of the imaginative and the real, as the poet positions himself both inside and outside the lovers' episode. In a sense, the poem poses as a re-creation, but it is so much more – it is richly interpretative without grandstanding. This relationship of the poet to his poems is deftly handled throughout the volume.

It's been almost a decade since Andrew Sant's last collection, *Brushing the Dark*. His new volume, *Album of Domestic Exiles*, shows the meticulousness of poetry a long time in the making. From the opening lines of the book's first poem, 'Climate', Sant's impressive sense of language and line is clear:

A jasmine spreads its scent into the humid air,
the white flowers whirr like propellers for a few days
and there are more and more, and a clamour of bees
that have sped beyond winter: everything is
leaving.

Unlike Kinross-Smith, Sant handles a variety of forms with ease, poems either tumbling down the page in short lines ('LPs') or spreading elegantly in long rhythmical units ('Willows'). More than the other poets reviewed here, Sant finely observes the small detail of individual lives. He lives in a paradise of ordinary things: garden rituals, domestic procedures, furniture, umbrellas, old records and so on are all explored with excitement and so are lifted into themselves.

Occasionally, though, I'm left with the impression that Sant's facility with language disguises a lack of substance, that the weaker poems don't transcend their detail – the title sequence may be a case in point. Sometimes, an urgency is lacking in them. Sant is a better craftsman than Kinross-Smith, but occasionally could do with the latter's intensity, his economy. Overall, though, both poets' collections demonstrate the virtues of infrequent publication.

Connie Barber and Joyce Lee in their respective

volumes, *Enter Your House with Care* and *The Whispering Ear* , demonstrate lively, accurate sensibilities. Both write with care and precision about the familiarities of everyday life, though both also make gestures towards more dramatic moments. Barber blends both in her moving poem 'My Father on Paper', in which she examines her late father's scrapbook filled with war memorabilia. Many more 'stylish' poets could learn something about the effectiveness of unadorned language from the moving simplicity of these lines:

At his age safe grandsons read
fantasies, graduate, make love,
celebrate twenty-firsts in glittering
discos. He composed lines
on death; opened the green book and wrote:
"A lovely day after the rain; the sort of day
in which you could not kill a fly,
much less men."

Similarly, in this small moving poem, 'Psychiatric Ward', Lee doesn't imprison experience in language; simplicity and directness impress upon the reader that poetry is important for its substance, not its style:

Everybody knows I'm his mother,
No one asks questions, no one
Wants to answer them. It's simply
A smiling 'hello', or a handshake.___©
One played for Collingwood, another
Hasn't used his science Honours. A girl,
Charmed by my shining necklace, kisses me.

Lee has a tendency, though, to go one line too far: too often she doesn't trust her considerable flair with language and defines too closely the significance of an observation. In doing so, she tends to narrow the range of response her poetry evokes.

If C. S. Lewis's heaven did exist, I don't think these five poets would be terribly surprised at its texture. Each of them leaves the reader with a greater awareness of life's ordinary, tingling brilliance. Finally, these volumes don't posture: they humbly invite you in, and they treat you with care.

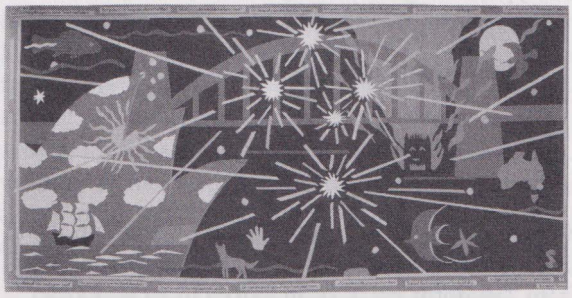
John Foulcher lives in Canberra. He has published five volumes of poetry, the most recent being New and Selected Poems *(HarperCollins, 1993) and* The Honeymoon Snaps *(HarperCollins, 1996).*

This rather postmodern web

Robert Pascoe

Hugh Anderson: *'Australia' to 'Oz?': the making of the tapestry* (Red Rooster Press, PO Box 2129, Hotham Hill 3051, $25 paper $40 bound, numbered and signed).

THIS ATTRACTIVE LANDSCAPE book (twenty-four pages) is an interesting example of the transmission of cultural heritage from one generation to the next. The subject of the book is the glorious tapestry executed for the State Library of New South Wales, now positioned in its foyer in pride of place. The tapestry is a kind of up-market Ken Done, traversed by the Sydney Harbour Bridge, containing elements of local history, woven by Martin Sharp. One of Sharp's obsessions has always been Luna Park, so it is not surprising that the fire which ravaged Luna Park back in 1979 appears in the tapestry.



The 'Oz' Tapestry, designed by Martin Sharp

But the unifying theme of the tapestry is the poem by Bernard O'Dowd, which begins: "Last seathing dredged by sailor Time from Space,/Are you a drift Sargasso, where the west/In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?" As an old man, O'Dowd explained this complex poem ('Australia') to a young Hugh Anderson, and this rather postmodern web of meanings, symbols and interpretations is explained in this book.

Professor Robert Pascoe is Dean of Arts at Victoria University of Technology.

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ISSN 0030-7416

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print post approved pp 328858/0003