

# EUREKA STREET

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## A new face of economics



### Living in the real world

Mark Cully reviews Hugh Stretton





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*One American survey of wannabe professional economists at graduate school level showed that just three per cent thought it 'very important' to know anything about the way the ... economy functioned.*

—see our cover story, 'A New Face of Economics', p18.



Mark Cully's cover story on Hugh Stretton has been assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

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## CONTENTS

4

### COMMENT

With Morag Fraser, Peter Mares and John Ferguson.

8

### CAPITAL LETTER

9

### LETTERS

10

### THE MONTH'S TRAFFIC

With Peter Craven, June Factor and Nick Smith.

12

### SUMMA THEOLOGIAE

15

### ARCHIMEDES

16

### HOLDING THE KEYS

Dan Madigan reports from Rome on rallying youth, popes and sundry saints.

17

### PLACING WOMEN

Maryanne Confoy dissects the Australian bishops' response to research on the participation of women in the church.

18

### A NEW FACE OF ECONOMICS

Hugh Stretton mints a whole new set of ideas. Mark Cully assays them.

23

### SORRY

Brian McCoy sets the contentious word into context.

24

### CHANGING IDENTITIES

Robin Gerster in Taiwan.

26

### UN-DOING

What is behind Australia's move away from international treaties? asks Moira Rayner.

27

### BUSH LAWYER

28

### WE, THE PEOPLE

Anthony Ham on the unsatisfied stirrings of democracy in the rogue states of Islam.

30

### SPRING INTO READING

With Peter Pierce, Jim Davidson, Andrew Hamilton, Kate Llewellyn and Juliette Hughes.



40

### THEATRE

Geoffrey Milne on *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Peter Craven on *Troilus and Cressida*.

44

### FLASH IN THE PAN

Reviews of the films *Up at the Villa*, *The Diplomat*, *Centre Stage*, *Scary Movie* and *Jesus' Son*.

46

### WATCHING BRIEF

47

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## At issue

THERE WAS NOT MUCH TIME for silent pondering during the week that saw the conclusion of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Melbourne and the opening of the Olympic Games in Sydney.

Here are two quiet moments that did not make it into the daily media—not violent enough, not strident, and not a burnt effigy to be seen.

This month we look at some of the social, economic and ethical issues raised during the Forum, both inside and outside the Crown Casino. But not via a high-powered conference or demonstration. Instead our medium is a comprehensive new textbook (yes, a textbook!) on economics, written by an original and persistent Australian thinker, Hugh Stretton. For Mark Cully's provocative, illuminating review of what could



become a new way of accounting for the world, see page 18.

The WEF did focus attention on what is called the 'digital divide'. On *Eureka Street's* new website this is an equity issue that we will pursue in coming months. Meanwhile do check out our site, and note that we now include articles not just from our current magazine but also background pieces on the issues that will not go away. This month it is Peter Mares' July/August analysis of Woomera and Australia's policy on asylum seekers.

—Morag Fraser

Photographs by Stephen Rooke (top) and Christopher Deere.

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# The ones that don't get away

**A**T THE END OF AUGUST the federal government announced the results of its review into the UN treaty committees. It was the day after riots had been quelled at the Woomera detention centre in South Australia. The timing was coincidental, but apposite, and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock seized the moment to throw out a challenge to his critics.

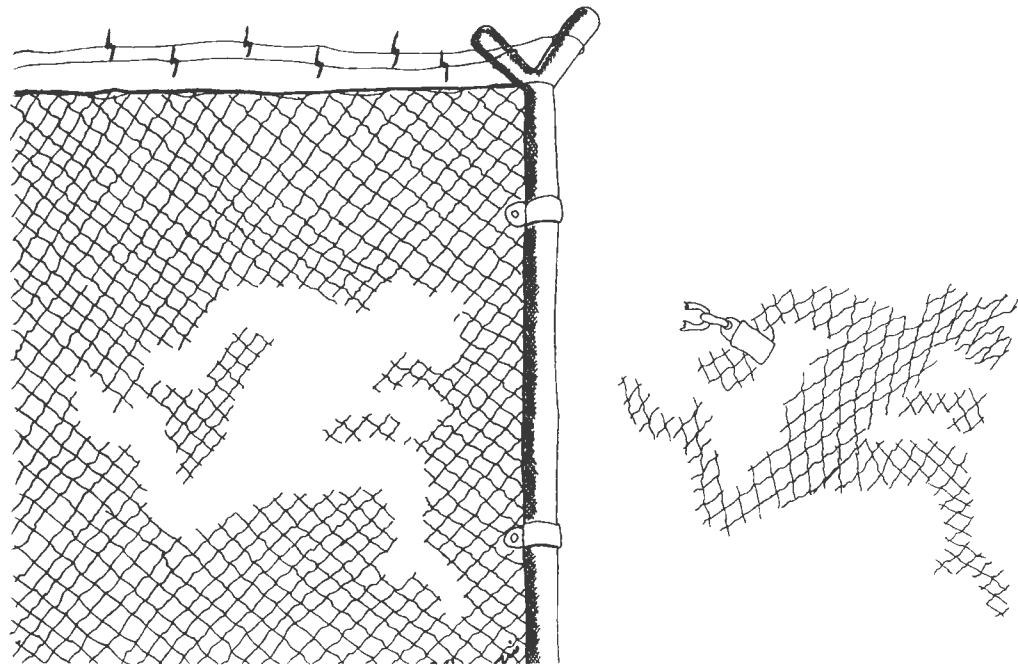
'There has been an absolute distortion of priorities,' he said, in reference to the 1951 Refugee Convention. 'We spend, along with other developed countries, something like ten billion dollars a year dealing with half a million asylum seekers, most of whom will not sustain refugee claims. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has one billion dollars to look after the world's 21.7 million people who are refugees and people of concern. In any other circumstance, serious commentators would be writing about how obscene that is, they would be focusing on the privileged with money who exploit our systems and the needy who are left behind.'

Of course the minister neglected to point out that developed nations do not spend those 10 billion dollars to advance the welfare of asylum seekers. In fact most of the money is spent trying to keep asylum seekers out: screening, rejecting and removing those who do not measure up to the Convention's definition of a refugee. In Australia, unlike most other nations, we also spend a lot of money locking asylum seekers up in desert camps while their claims are assessed. In the 1998-99 financial year, the cost of locating, removing and detaining people who had arrived in Australia illegally was \$128 million. The cost of assessing refugee applications (not including court costs) was around \$35 million. This compares with Australia's annual contribution of about \$20 million to the humanitarian endeavours of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Nevertheless the minister has a point. The 1951 Convention has no worth as an international instrument of protection unless it does discriminate

between refugees and other migrants. In order to comply with the Convention, Australia and other Western nations require a sophisticated (and therefore expensive) refugee determination mechanism. Otherwise the Convention simply becomes a backdoor to migration.

But there is another, larger problem at the heart of the system. It is one identified by British Home Secretary Jack Straw at a public forum in London in June, around the time that 58 Chinese migrants suffocated in the back of a lorry while crossing the English Channel. As Mr Straw pointed out, the



Convention gives people facing persecution the right to claim asylum, but does not oblige any nation to admit them through its borders in order to make that claim. The consequence of this ambiguity, as Jack Straw admitted, is that refugees are forced to break the law in order to escape the threat of persecution in their home country.

'There is a need for us to develop a more rational system for how we entertain asylum seekers,' said Mr Straw 'so that those fleeing from countries from which asylum seekers are likely to come would apply "outside country" without having to go through the hurdles they face at present.'

Above: The cartoon, entitled 'Still in Chains', was drawn by a person while in Australian immigration detention.



In other words we need an international system which offers protection to refugees at their point of departure, without driving them into the arms of people smugglers. Much as Mr Ruddock likes to portray asylum seekers arriving in Australia unlawfully as 'queue jumpers', the reality is that there is no queue. As his British colleague Mr Straw is obviously aware, the current international system of refugee protection offers no realistic alternative to the people smugglers.

A refugee who spent more than two years in jail in Afghanistan said to me recently: 'Why would people pay so much money and come in a dangerous way if they believed that they had a chance to come the legal way? Everyone wants to come the legal way.'

The government's response to the Woomera riot and its review of the UN treaty system signal a tougher approach to asylum seekers. For example, in future the government may ignore UN requests to delay the removal of 'failed' asylum seekers from Australia pending the outcome of inquiries by bodies such as the Committee Against Torture. In this, the government not only thumbs its nose at the UN, it also flaunts the recent recommendation of the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee. After a year of detailed inquiry, the Committee called for the government to 'examine the most appropriate means by which Australia's laws could be amended so as to explicitly incorporate the non-refoulement [non-return] obligations of the CAT [Convention Against Torture] and ICCPR [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights] into domestic law'.

Australia has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, but successive governments have been irritated

by its obligations and reluctant to provide sanctuary to those who knock on our door uninvited. The bipartisan policy of mandatory detention for asylum seekers who arrive unlawfully is cruel and expensive and sets the conditions that lead to events such as the Woomera riot.

Toughening our response even further will only increase the level of conflict within the system; it will require higher, stronger fences, more tear gas, more water cannons and a harder heart. In short, the more we seek to deter refugees through harsh treatment, the more Australia will come to resemble the repressive nations from which they fled in the first place.

The Refugee Convention is an imperfect document. Born out of World War II to address a specific European situation, and later massaged to suit the ideological requirements of the Cold War, it was never a blanket declaration of protection for those fleeing persecution. Nevertheless, it is the best embodiment that currently exists of the humanitarian impulse to offer aid to those in need and to nurture human dignity and decency.

I would like to believe that Messrs Straw and Ruddock were serious about building an alternative system of international protection for refugees. The first step should not be to undermine the one instrument that currently exists. ■

**Peter Mares** presents the *Asia Pacific* program on Radio Australia and Radio National. He is completing a book on asylum seekers, to be published by UNSW Press.

COMMENT: 3

JOHN FERGUSON

# Chewing over welfare

**T**HE SUGGESTION THAT Australia faces a growing and entrenched culture of welfare dependence has been so strongly promoted that the average hard-working taxpayer may now be feeling aggrieved at having to underwrite what Minister Jocelyn Newman describes as a 'self-indulgent welfare mentality'.

In public debate, there is a perception that welfare recipients are slack and dependent. There is also a popular, but mistaken, belief that individuals can, in all situations, achieve economic stability and personal fulfilment. This juxtaposition of perceptions has generated support for the 'tough love' variety of

welfare reform. This variety increases individual responsibility through more onerous terms and conditions on benefits.

While the processes of welfare reform in all advanced democracies over the past decade have displayed this common feature—what in Australia is called 'mutual obligation'—there are significant differences in the reforms introduced in each country.

In the United States, 'Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity' legislation was introduced in 1996 to combat unemployment, 'children being born out of wedlock', family breakdown and prolonged

dependence—all regarded as consequences of unconditional entitlements. The punitive initiatives introduced under this legislation include time-limited benefits, compulsory participation in 'workfare' programs, and the right to deny benefits to unmarried teenage mothers and assign them to the care of government-appointed guardians.

In contrast, the United Kingdom 'New Deal' reforms place greater emphasis on job creation, wage subsidies and the provision of education and training. These policies have a strong regional development focus and encourage the private sector to assist the most disadvantaged in return for business investment provided by the state. The activity requirements on young job-seekers have now been increased and extended to all income-support recipients of workforce age, but they are underpinned by programs and services that enhance individuals' long-term prospects.

If the US approach is focused on eradicating dependence by clearing recipients off the welfare rolls, then the UK reforms recognise that unemployment and social exclusion are often beyond the control of the individual. They require the additional efforts of government and business to create the opportunities for increased participation. The difference between these approaches establishes the parameters of welfare reform to be adopted in Australia.

**U**Ntil the recent release of the McClure Report (named after Patrick McClure, Chair of the Welfare Reform References Group), there was every indication that Australia would follow the US in adopting the 'big stick' approach to reform. The concept of mutual obligation has been skewed against the individual and backed up by anti-welfare rhetoric. People have been faced with the increasing threat of penalties and a significant expansion of low-cost compliance-based programs like Work for the Dole.

The McClure Report has restored some balance to the debate.

It asks that government and business take responsibility for their side of the mutual obligation equation. If they provide a level of resources, jobs and opportunities, then individuals will be more able to meet their side of the bargain. But some questions remain. For example, McClure recommends extending activity test requirements to all income

support recipients—including single parents and disability support recipients, but it is not clear what justification there would be for this move. Also, while on the one hand the McClure recommendations for increasing activity requirements for individuals are concrete and specific, on the other hand most of the suggested obligations on government and business are less sharply defined. Government and business obligations remain within the realm of discretionary philanthropy.



Promising McClure proposals include:

- service delivery arrangements geared to individual need;
- some support for the transition from welfare to work; and
- the introduction of financial incentives and 'in work' benefits to reduce effective marginal tax rates on some payments.

There is also some recognition that initiatives to increase social and economic participation will require additional revenue.

But the Report can

be challenged on three counts.

First, its analysis of the past decade's high unemployment rates and reliance on income support can be read as an adverse reflection on the welfare system. This diverts attention from broader inequities in the operation of the economy. It may also allow the government to take the easy option of dealing with the consequences rather than the real causes of need.

Second, the general lack of detail in proposals for reform (other than suggestions of a new service structure and increased requirements for all recipients) may still pave the way for the government to adopt a US style of reform. Such reform would focus largely on the compliance and monitoring of individuals.

Finally, too little attention is paid to encouraging the corporate community to generate jobs and there is no recommendation for increases in public investment. The lack of initiatives in these areas suggests that employment creation is not as high a priority as is warranted, given the current emphasis on reducing welfare dependence.

The McClure Report leaves Australia at a fork in the welfare reform road. The government's formal response, to be delivered later this year, will give a clearer indication of the path we are to take. ■

**John Ferguson** is Acting National Director of the Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission.

## Experience no advantage

**B**OB McMULLAN HAS TAKEN UP Labor's responsibility for Aboriginal affairs—a task one of his colleagues has likened to cleaning the toilets on the Titanic. One would have to look back to 1975 to find a minister as well fitted for the job. McMullan lacks close knowledge of Aboriginal politics and programs and has no background in the area. It might seem ironic to suggest that broad ignorance is a positive virtue, but the history of Labor's relations with Aborigines illustrates the point.

The truth is that Labor has been letting down Australians, particularly Aboriginal Australians, for a long time. Two decades ago, for example, Labor conceived the notion that all problems could be resolved by national uniform land rights legislation and that it could and would deliver this. In fact, the range of Aboriginal living conditions made that delivery highly unlikely. In any event, Labor had no policy or programs for the conversion of land into a base for Aboriginal economic development.

Architects of that policy, such as Susan Ryan, but particularly Clyde Holding, had established reputations for sympathy with Aboriginal affairs. When Labor came to power in 1983, almost every worthwhile program went on hold for several years while Holding struggled to get political consent to national land legislation. He failed, primarily because of Labor opposition in Western Australia and also because of Prime Minister Bob Hawke's unwillingness to use his political capital to push the issue.

There was an earlier model for Clyde Holding in Gordon Bryant, a decent man with a long background in the Aboriginal struggle, particularly as a result of his 1960s involvement with the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. His relationships compromised him, as did his compassion when told of emergencies in communities whose poverty he knew at first hand.

Of Bryant's Labor successors, Les Johnson was most in the mould of Bob McMullan—he was calm, focused on getting order back into increasingly chaotic service delivery, and he kept a weather eye on public opinion. He developed relationships with Aboriginal political leaders based on respect and give-and-take, rather than on any repressive tolerances.

Ian Viner, the first Fraser Aboriginal affairs minister and, probably, the best, had no background in Aboriginal affairs. There was ample reason to be suspicious of him and of the Fraser Government, not least its Country Party rump. At that stage, Malcolm Fraser wanted to have the Aboriginal issue neutralised and to have the portfolio deliver its share of the general government cost cuts he was promising. Viner, economically and socially conservative, but a lawyer, took the job as a brief, but progressively became a convert. But the detachment, and the high suspicion with which Aborigines treated Fraser (at least

as great as the distrust between their successors and John Howard), meant that Viner made his own relationships, ones untrammelled by guilt or old histories.

Most of Viner's Liberal successors, such as Fred Chaney and Peter Baume, went into the portfolio with backgrounds of identification with Aboriginal issues. But by the end of the Fraser era, there was not only a reasonable bipartisan approach on most Aboriginal issues (though one would never have guessed it from Labor propaganda) but some solid progress on the health and housing front, and some hopes in the education and employment field.

**D**URING HOLDING'S PERIOD the bipartisan consensus began to collapse, primarily because Labor did not hesitate to use Aborigines as a stick with which to belt the Coalition. At the same time, Holding's incapacity to deliver was creating a critical Aboriginal constituency. The caravans parked around the offices of backbenchers such as Gerry Hand contained many who had fallen out with Holding (often for reasons to his credit). When Hand became minister, there was a new, but not necessarily more legitimate, ascendancy in Aboriginal affairs too.

After Holding and Hand, Bob Tickner, another minister with a long background in Aboriginal affairs, put all in the reconciliation basket. Had it been more than fine feelings, it would have been wonderful. But the vacuum within is nicely demonstrated by the fact that the most pressing issues of recent years—native title legislation and the question of saying sorry to the stolen generations—were not even issues at the time.

John Howard has insisted that real progress means work on the ground in material things—though his refusal to get the symbols right has made most of his work useless. Achievements, so far as they go, have come from David Kemp in education and Michael Wooldridge in health.

The Labor style of opposition in this area—passion without policy or progress, from decent but marginalised Left spokesmen such as Daryl Melham—has meant that Howard has increasingly seen inaction and mean-mindedness as a workable strategy. Kim Beazley seems to respond by running for cover whenever Aboriginal issues surface.

Bob McMullan knows his Labor mythology and knows where Labor's instinctive sympathies lie in Aboriginal affairs. But as one whose focus has been economic, and who is unencumbered by much of the rhetoric which passes for policy, he might find it better to regard his ministerial vista as an Augean stables, rather than the sewerage system on a ship. ■

**Jack Waterford** is editor of the *Canberra Times*.



## Premature raptures

From Ken O'Hara, *Unemployment Networking*  
Before we get carried away with Howard and Costello's hyperbole on the recent .03 per cent fall in unemployment, most to only part-time jobs, we should not forget that the statistics still record a massive 610,000 without any paid work at all, and some researchers say the number is nearer double that.

So about 1,000,000 people are sidelined, with the government's main response being tightening their shabby little gospel of 'mutual obligation' against the victims!

But what about society's obligation towards brothers and sisters in distress?

And it's not, nor has it ever been 'Government Money' that's involved, for the government has no money at all, except that which society entrusts to it to be used for the good of the people, including those trapped in the terrible impasse of modern unemployment, that is, operating real 'mutual obligation'.

When will our government and people start to act decisively on this fundamental requirement?

Ken O'Hara  
Gerrington, NSW

## Stacks on the Mill

From Dr John Howes

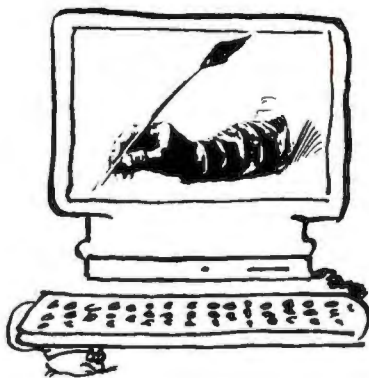
I agree with John Honner (*Eureka Street*, June 2000) that the kind of liberalism which has characterised the Howard Government is seriously defective, and that government policies ought to promote participation in and for the common good. (Isn't that a better term than 'social capital'?)

I agree, too, that those who discuss Australian social policy 'need to reconsider its roots'. When we do so, however, let us be fair to one writer, learn from him, and learn also from another who complements him in liberal theory.

Honner tears four words from Chapter One of Mill's *Liberty* out of their context when he writes 'His conclusion, though not without nuance: "the individual is sovereign"'. It is a mere sop to one's conscience to slip in the word 'nuance' when Mill's sentence is, 'Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.' Nor is even that, as Honner's reader might be led to think, Mill's 'one very simple principle' concerning 'the dealings of society with the individual', but a corollary of it.

Mill's *Liberty* deserves to be read as a whole, and in its mid-Victorian context of a stultifying tendency to conformity, against which he is protesting. His emphasis on freedom of

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thought and expression and individual development is always relevant, and compatible with a strong communitarianism.

There is an explicitly communitarian liberal, T.H. Green (1836-82), whose emphasis on positive freedom (for which he was unjustly slighted by Berlin) is very similar to that of feminists on empowerment. A central theme of his political philosophy is that 'it is the business of state ... to maintain the conditions without which a free exercise of the human faculties is impossible'. It is characteristic of him to include within a lecture on an abstract theme the sharp question, 'Are not [all modern states] allowing their ostensible members to grow up under conditions which render the development of social capacity practically impossible?'

Anyone who wishes to read and know more of Green may like to consult my article in L.C. Becker's *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, which has the first quotation above and a reference to the notable public lecture from which it comes. The second, and Green's typical phrase, 'the removal of obstacles', belong to Part M of the *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation*.

John Howes  
Brunswick, VIC

### July/August 2000 Book Offer Winners

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# The Month's Traffic



## Festive writes

**T**HE MELBOURNE Writers' Festival was something of an artificial construct when a group under the chairmanship of Mark Rubbo put together the first tentative offering in 1987. I suppose it was part of that general movement for every city to do its own thing. Now it is some kind of institution, though aspects of it leave one wondering.

The price to hear the keynote speaker, Patrick Dodson, on opening night was steep. Indeed, much on opening night seemed contrived to confound the audience—and the organisers. When John Button came on stage to introduce Dodson it took minutes for the lighting person to find a spot for him. Having finally found one (and therefore mercifully for Dodson, who was appropriately illuminated throughout the course of an impressive political speech) he then lost it for Margaret Scott, who was chairing *The Age* literary awards. I don't know what pacemaker of theatricality thought that smoke would be an appropriate stage effect after an Aboriginal speaker but the upshot was that we had haze battling with invisibility. Scott was driven to say, 'Here I am'—where?—'hovering through the fog and filthy air'. She said she had never had to do anything like this before, but added that she had once had to launch National Incontinence Week, a stray thought that might have indicated her mood at that moment.

Scott, it should be said, was a marvellous chair of *The Age* awards and it was a marvellous thing to see Amy Witting receive not only the fiction but the general award. She was there, like the old trouper she is, cracking jokes and drinking wine and muttering with regret about giving up smoking at the age of 80.

As to the Festival proper: this year's program included one young writer at the

first height of her fame. Zadie Smith, the English novelist who seems to show the influence of Rushdie and Martin Amis, was an unpretentious young woman with a down-to-earth respect for her peers, including the younger postmodern Americans such as David Foster Wallace. I think Smith was precisely the right sort of person to invite here—someone empowering, by virtue of her very ordinariness, for any young literary people who had the price of admission.

I was awed by the professionalism of Michael Cathcart as the chair of the 'How Australian is it?' session and charmed by the agnosticism of my co-panelist Robin Wallace-Crabbe. It was also very impressive to hear Ihab Hassan, an academic heavy-weight, talk with a genuine erudition and range about this literature of ours with which he has fallen in love.

Hassan, the man who invented the workable definition of postmodernism, took part in a session on the subject with Marshall Berman and Dennis Altman, which was most notable for the fact that none of the speakers were sympathetic to post-modernism in that newer sense of academic post-structuralism.

Berman, the man who wrote *Everything Solid Melts in Air*, and has written a book about the continuing validity of Marxism, turned out to be something like a wonderful teacher. I'll not forget what he made of that old rock-song line, 'different strokes for different folks', or the fact that Rodney King had quoted it after the riots that followed the exoneration of the policemen who had so savagely beaten him. Berman said you have to have an idea of 'folks' before you can talk about 'different strokes'. It was somehow so much clearer and wiser than if he had said pluralism and cultural difference depend for their coherence on the idea of a unitary polity.

Among the other sessions, I was impressed by Henry Reynolds and Stuart Macintyre, looking like a tiger of moderation, discussing the plight of the

universities, under the again reliable chairmanship of Michael Cathcart.

Before that I'd had to discuss Proust with Alain de Botton, who is easy and graceful, and Gerald Murnane, who, against all predictions, did not perform in his elaborately cadenced fictional persona, but instead spoke off the top of his head like a man from Bendigo who had an impassioned and luminous sense of why a great writer mattered.

One possible moral from the whole experience was that we might try letting young writers and readers into the Writers' Festival for nothing, or at any rate at a significant discount. We should also get rid of the absurdity of a festival that runs over two weekends. Thursday to Monday makes a good deal more sense in anybody's book.

—Peter Craven

### Museums are us

Or so it seems.

Last month *Eureka Street* introduced readers to Dawn Casey, director of Canberra's new National Museum of Australia. This month, we take a look at the new Melbourne Museum.

But with a difference.

Visiting the new site, photographer Bill Thomas was struck by a chance fusion of old and new Victorian architecture. The photograph (right) shows what he saw: the dome of Melbourne's grand Exhibition Building, built for the International Exhibition of 1888, reflected in the 21st century steel and glass structure of the new Melbourne Museum.

Overleaf, he has captured another piece of inspired blending—the profile of the Exhibition Building joined to the signature blade of the new Museum by the great trunk and canopy of a sugar gum that has been there for longer than any of us. You see it all best at dusk. I recommend a slow walk past.

The Museum, designed by architects Denton Corker Marshall, will be opened on 21 October.

—Morag Fraser









## Not listening

**S**T AUGUSTINE ONCE REMARKED that in any conversation, we would all tacitly ask our partner, 'Why do you speak to me unless you make me better?' In any serious conversation, both parties will be open to change, however slightly, their opinions, perspective on the world and way of living. Conversation threatens a tight control over our world.

This is true especially of conversations about faith. In Asia, Christian interest in dialogue with the great religions has grown in recent years. An already tiny proportion of Christians has grown ever smaller in predominantly Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim countries. It bears witness to the failure of one-sided talking about faith. If Christianity is not to be the religion of a Westernised minority, Christians need to enter into conversation with those of other faiths to find at what points Jesus Christ will bless them. In this conversation Christians have also found themselves made better. They have been challenged to understand and live their faith in Jesus Christ in deeper and new ways.

This conversation provides the context for understanding an interesting recent document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*. It states the presuppositions which Catholics must share when they enter such conversations. The document, like most of its kind, is Eurocentric, in that the relativist positions which it condemns are caricatures of those Western attitudes that hold one religious view to be as good as another. Those committed to good conversation do not espouse this kind of relativism, because it avoids in principle any risk of having to change one's own views or life.

The Congregation declares that God has one plan for humanity, and in that plan all salvation is through Jesus Christ, whether we know it or not. Faith in Christ is a divine gift; other religious beliefs are fallible fruits of the human striving for God. While God may save people ascribing to other religions, and they may find help in these religions, the revelation of Jesus Christ is the one way which God has shown. Furthermore, faith in Jesus Christ is that handed down by the Apostles, guarded by the magisterium, and lived fully only in the Catholic Church. Other Christian bodies have elements of church, but only through their relationship to the Catholic Church.

Now, while all the statements of this document can be correctly understood, their rhetoric and the repeated insistence that each thesis is to be firmly believed, ensure that it will be read as dismissive of the value of other religions, churches and non-Christians. It reads as a claim to possess all truth and an effort to control all believers. Faith here is not a journey but a fortress.

How would you advise a Buddhist monk, say, to respond to a Christian partner who adopted, not only the positions, but the rhetorical stance of this document? Most likely we would advise him politely to decline conversation, as we tend to do with those door-to-door evangelists who are preoccupied with telling us what they believe and are too insecure to listen. In this conversation, neither partner would be made better.

That would be a pity, of course, because in open conversation both the monk and the Christian might find the Gospel to be uncontrollable good news. ■

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## Sold over and out

**T**HERE IS SOMETHING shameful about the deliberate destruction of a national treasure. That is no doubt the reason why most federal government ministers have said as little as possible about the sale of Australia's short-wave transmitters to the private British evangelical company, *Christian Vision*. For an unknown amount of money, the government has sold off a state-of-the-art broadcasting facility, designed and constructed to serve Australia's renowned overseas radio service and paid for over decades by Australian taxpayers.

The government should also be ashamed of its hypocrisy. For this is the Liberal-National Coalition which declared, in the election campaign of 1996:

Radio Australia has a proud place in the ABC. It has been providing overseas services for half a century benefiting not only Australian expatriates but also the nationals of many countries, particularly those in our region. The Coalition is strongly supportive of Radio Australia's existing services and will ensure that they are not prejudiced or downgraded in any way. (*Better Communications: Liberal & National Parties' Policy 1996*).

The story of the Coalition's betrayal of this and all other promises regarding the well-being of the ABC is widely known in the community. The 12 per cent budget cut, the loss of 20 per cent of staff, the refusal adequately to fund the move to digital broadcasting, the appointment of political friends to the ABC Board—all these onslaughts directly or implicitly negate the Coalition's solemn commitments. But for many people there remains a puzzled fury about the government's treatment of Radio Australia.

This is the international voice of Australia, established by Robert Menzies, the man who also founded the Liberal Party and who declared on his 80th birthday in 1974:

I am confident that Radio Australia will go from strength to strength, and that Australia will be the better for it, and that the knowledge that other people have of us, and of events in our country, will be singularly enriched.

This is the overseas broadcaster publicly supported by everyone from Jeff Kennett

and Bruce Ruxton to the ACTU, from leading business figures to the prime ministers of Papua New Guinea and Cambodia. Whatever the colour of its politics, why would a responsible Australian government cripple the single most effective diplomatic, trade and cultural bridge between Australia and the countries of Asia and the Pacific?

To understand the government's actions it is necessary to consider the congruence of the views of 'dry' right-wing thinkers (who regard Malcolm Fraser's years in office as a wasted opportunity to reduce public-sector spending and increase privatisation) and the concerns of powerful regimes in Indonesia and China.

A representative sampling of these thinkers presented their views about the role of government in Australia—including its relationship to the ABC and Radio Australia—in a book published in 1987. *Mandate to Govern: A Handbook for the Next Australian Government* is refreshingly frank. Those who contributed to *Mandate*, by writing sections or volunteering ideas and comments, included David and Rod Kemp, John Hyde, Ray Evans and John Stone.

The unattributed authors of the section on Radio Australia acknowledge that 'the respect accorded to ... the BBC World Service and Radio Australia was earned by years of steadfast honesty and independence and could be lost by comparatively little government interference.' But that independence from government 'includes freedom to act in ways that embarrass the Government ... [and contribute] to the difficulties in Australia's relationship with Indonesia in recent years.'

Solution?

The Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Minister for Communications should have a cosy chat with the senior management of Radio Australia about matters of freedom, responsibility, the national interest, and budget problems. If this does not work (and the first test will be the manner in which Radio Australia reports the discussion), the Government should close Radio Australia and save the taxpayers' money.

There we have the game plan, clearly set out in 1987: Radio Australia must submit to (covert) government direction or suffer demolition. And government policy since the 1970s has included a placatory, even submissive relationship to both Indonesia and China. There was never any doubt that

the autocratic rulers of both countries were profoundly opposed to their citizens hearing independent views via the cheap and therefore ubiquitous transistor radio.

So in 1997 the Australian government obliged its own ideologues and the unhappy neighbourhood despots by shutting down the short-wave transmitters on the Cox Peninsula. Immediately, Radio Australia fell silent in most of Asia. Senator Alston's much-trumpeted 'alternative' use of satellite and the internet by Radio Australia allows access only to that tiny segment of the population of Asian countries who can afford a satellite dish or a computer. Broadcasting through local Asian stations—another supposed remedy—is a grace-and-



favour operation, depending on the good will of the particular regime and its preparedness to host an independent broadcaster. It is no surprise to learn that Radio Australia is not available on local radio in most of Asia, from India and Pakistan through western and central China to Thailand and Laos, and that those countries which do permit some access generally exclude Radio Australia's news and current affairs programs.

But the best laid schemes of mice and men—and governments—gang aft agley. Having crippled Australia's most powerful and effective means of communicating with its neighbours, the government found itself scrambling and ill-prepared as the Asian economic downturn helped trigger social unrest from Cambodia to Kashmir and then, most seriously, in Indonesia and East Timor.

No-one in government wanted publicity given to the humiliating circumstance whereby endangered Australians in Cambodia had to rely on the BBC World Service to relay Australian government advice, nor to Radio Australia's costly renting of two hours a day of short-wave transmission in Taiwan in order to communicate with Australian citizens in East Timor. In Foreign Affairs there were red faces and angry words. Business, farming and military leaders who had previously lobbied unsuccessfully now found some government members more receptive to their arguments for the restoration of Radio Australia's short-wave reach into Asia. Coalition MPs holding marginal seats

nervously remembered the sackfuls of letters received about the funding cuts to the ABC and to Radio Australia in particular.

We must wait for 30 years, or a fortuitous Cabinet leak, before we can find out exactly what persuaded the government to announce, on 8 August this year, that it would provide \$8.4m over three years for Radio Australia to be able to pay for short-wave and satellite transmission into Asia. The weight of public opinion, and the replacement of the Suharto regime in Indonesia with a more open and democratic government, are certainly likely reasons.

However, this belated funding, though welcome, should not obscure the continuing difficulties which beset Radio Australia. This money will not re-establish Radio Australia's pre-1997 annual budget of \$13.5m, now barely half that amount; it



will not reinstate the 68 specialist staff lost as a result of the funding cuts; and it will not restore the programs in Cantonese, Thai and French which once drew tens of thousands of listeners. Compared with the funding provided to its international competitors broadcasting into Asia, Radio Australia continues to look anorexic.

Staff at Radio Australia are confident that the ABC will be able to negotiate an agreement with the new owners of the Cox transmitters, and continue to broadcast on the same short-wave frequencies as before. They may also broadcast from transmitters in Asia. For the first time since July 1997, the ABC will be going some way towards fulfilling its Charter obligations 'to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment'.

But there remains the embarrassment—at best—of a Christian evangelical company owning Australia's most powerful short-wave transmitters and broadcasting to Indonesia and other religiously fraught Asian nations evangelical sermons in order to 'promote Christianity' and 'bring about a measurable change within [these nations]', in the words of *Christian Vision's* website. According to *The Australian's* religious affairs editor, James Murray, this company 'is so convinced of its righteousness that it consigns those who do not accept Jesus Christ to what it calls "everlasting conscious punishment", and says their "names are not written in the Book of Life".' (*The Australian*, 6 June 2000)

It is reasonable to assume that our neighbours will not be pleased.

—June Factor

## Netting the net

RECENTLY, a US diplomat stated:

If IBM had simply counterfeited the DOS operating system, we might be in a different world today and Bill Gates might not have been a household name. But in that case as well, we would all still be writing DOS commands on our 286 machines and have never heard of email, much less the internet.

This kind of statement suggests that we owe the digital revolution entirely to large mega-profit-driven corporations backed by strong intellectual property laws. In international discussion about the growth of the

Information Economy, this kind of thinking is common. This is how we get *new stuff*, the argument goes, and anyone who questions this model is a luddite or worse.

But is this really true? The underlying assumption in the quoted statement is that the money which flowed from IBM to Bill Gates when Gates licensed DOS to IBM allowed Gates to make great leaps in software development. He built the early clunky DOS into better versions of itself, later developing a Graphical User Interface (GUI) in the form of Windows. Somehow this dragged us on to the internet and into the future. (Oh, and the computer hardware all this ran on made great strides too, prodded forward perhaps by the new things that Microsoft could make it do.)

But let's take a closer look at what actually happened. The creative leap from a Command Line Interface (CLI) to a GUI owed little to Gates. (A CLI is an interface requiring users to type in commands at a prompt; DOS, perhaps the most well-known CLI, is difficult to master and, in the tactful language of IT teachers, is 'unforgiving'.) The first GUI was invented by Xerox at their Palo Alto Research Center in the '70s. However, Xerox was unable to market its product successfully.

The first commercially successful GUI was the now-famous Macintosh, released by Apple in 1984. Microsoft's competing GUI, Windows 1.0, did not find its way to the marketplace until 1985. Apple sued Microsoft upon the release of Windows 2.03 for copyright infringement. It was alleged that Microsoft had copied the Macintosh's 'look and feel'. Happily, Apple lost.

Ironically, Apple was later sued by Xerox. According to Xerox, because of its earlier copyright registration of its GUI-based workstation, it had 'the right to control the future of graphic user interfaces in the 1990s and beyond'. A victory here might have given one company a monopoly on representations of data as pictures. Had intellectual property laws been 'stronger' (intellectual property laws must always be 'stronger', it seems), Microsoft's growth might have been significantly curtailed (no comment).

As for the fact that we might have been typing DOS commands 'on our 286 machines', this is also highly questionable. Intel, the creator of the x86 microprocessor chips (later developed into the Pentium line when the penny dropped that you couldn't trademark a number), sued competing chip-making companies,

including AMD (Advanced Micro Devices), for infringing its 'microcode'. Microcode is a very low-level set of instructions that makes a chip function. Intel's competitors' microcode was very similar to its own for the simple reason that *it had to be* in order to make a compatible chip. You'll have a hard time competing in any IT market if your new product isn't compatible with the dominant product.

Intel lost the case and today is competing fiercely with AMD, with each having about 40 per cent of the microprocessor market. Chip speed has undoubtedly benefited as these two companies race to outpace each



other. Had Intel won, it would have wound up with a virtual monopoly over the computer chip market, hardly a guarantee of faster and better computing power.

Finally, however, the attribution of email and the internet generally to the good works of Microsoft Inc. is perhaps the biggest stretch of all. The internet was originally developed by the US military as a network that might survive nuclear warfare (even if many of the taxpayers who funded it would not). Major US universities were the first to be connected, along with a number of government agencies such as NASA. The early internet was used by computer experts, engineers, scientists and librarians.

The backbone of the internet, even today, is the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP, which also includes the main email standard, Simple Mail Transfer Protocol). The source code for TCP/IP was freely and widely distributed so that everyone would be speaking the same language, as it were, thus making it easy for the US Department of Defense.

In 1983, the military functions of the internet were hived off to another network and the net grew as a community of academics and researchers. In 1986, the US National Science Foundation beefed up the net's infrastructure still further and



expanded the 'acceptable use' policy, allowing the network to be used for anything *except* commerce.

But the internet only really exploded into most people's consciousness after 1989, when Tim Berners-Lee of the European Particle Physics Laboratory created the ingenious Hyper Text Mark-up Language (HTML). This new protocol (which sits on top of TCP/IP) was given away freely and then built upon by others, resulting in the birth of the world wide web. Suddenly the world flocked to be part of this new kind of internet.

In 1994, 25 years after the internet was created, businesses finally began to move on to the net in force and 'e-commerce' suddenly somehow became its reason for existence.

Many of these businesses have since clamoured for ever stronger intellectual property protection in the online environment, suggesting that the internet will wither and die without it. As Edgar Bronfman Jr (Vice-Chair of the newly merged US\$100 billion content giant, Vivendi Universal) put it:

If intellectual property is not protected—across the board, in every case, with no exceptions and no sophistry about a changing world—what will happen? Intellectual property will suffer the fate of the buffalo.

My central belief [is] that the protection of intellectual property rights is vital to the prosperity of the internet ... The internet does not exist, and cannot prosper in a world that is separate from our civilized society and the fundamental laws upon which it is based.

This is increasingly the view of many governments and large corporations around the world. Without ever stronger intellectual property laws, without new ideas chained securely to their 'owners', the internet will 'crack, crumble and collapse'.

But perhaps someone should break this news to the internet? It's being doing very nicely for 30 years by avoiding just this very approach ...  
—Nick Smith

*This month's contributor's:* **Peter Craven** is currently editing *Best Australian Essays 2000*; **June Factor** is a writer and was national spokesperson for Friends of the ABC from 1996 to 1999; **Nick Smith** is Executive Officer of the Australian Digital Alliance and Copyright Advisor for the Australian Libraries Copyright Committee ([www.digital.org.au](http://www.digital.org.au)).



## Pay for it or *pay* for it

**I**N late August and early September, the Federal Government received two commissioned reports on research and development. The first is a review of science capability, *The Chance to Change*, from the Chief Scientist, Robin Batterham. The second is a report on how to foster innovation, *Unlocking the Future*, from the Innovation Summit Implementation Group (ISIG).

The two reports have been carefully interwoven and form a concerted thrust from the science and industry constituents of Senator Nick Minchin's portfolio. Both reports argue that the right culture is required to generate ideas which can be commercialised as innovation. They both draw attention to the poor state of Australia's education in science and mathematics, call for a doubling in the funds provided to the Australian Research Council, and argue for the provision of a system of 'incubators' to assist fledgling technology companies.

The science review set the scene by pointing out how little Australia is currently spending on science, engineering and technology compared with other countries: 'In the latter half of the 1990s, many countries, including the US, Japan, Germany, the UK, Canada, Singapore, South Korea and other Asian economies, have all provided extra funding for R&D, despite competing budget priorities. The nations that are excelling in innovation are the nations that are building a globally competitive knowledge-based economy.'

As if on cue, between the release of these words and the ISIG report, out popped embarrassing figures from the OECD, showing Australia to be one of only two or three countries where the spending on R&D as a proportion of GDP has fallen in recent years. To reverse this trend, Robin Batterham calls for 500 scholarships for students of science and science education, double the number of post-doctoral research fellowships, an increase in spending on national research infrastructure and expansion of the Co-operative Research Centre program.

Taking up the baton, the ISIG report argues for a national education program on business, innovation and entrepreneurship, an increase in the R&D tax concession from 125 to 130 per cent, with a bonus for those businesses which increase their R&D by more than 10 per cent, and an increase in government encouragement and co-ordination of industry start-ups. Without these measures, the report argues, Australia will rapidly become a 'branch office' economy.

The ISIG report estimates that its recommendations alone would cost more than \$2.5 billion to implement. As next year's election Budget is put together over the next couple of months, Senator Minchin must develop a policy that will guide Australia into the growing international 'knowledge economy', while competing for funding with other government concerns.

Batterham has made it clear that he believes the current drop in the Australian dollar is more than a little to do with the fact that investors think of the Australian economy as resource-based, not knowledge-based. He argues that the upshot of doing nothing about research and innovation will be a dollar worth something like 30 US cents within two or three election cycles. Perhaps those are terms which this government, dominated as it is by considerations of finance and economics, can understand. ■

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# Holding the keys

*In Rome, it's dance one day and declarations the next.*

**I**F YOU TURNED DOWN the sound during the coverage of World Youth Day in Rome recently, you were more likely to get the point of it all. The occasion provided endless footage of personable young people singing, dancing, praying, weeping, embracing, going to confession, receiving communion, being tenderly embraced as they wept on the Pope's shoulder.



It was not so much all the photogenic faces that were the point, but rather the gestures, the expressions, the symbols. It was the very fact of more than two million people gathered together from all around the world—making do with what was available, getting along as best they could in straitened circumstances, struggling to find a common language, opening a space for one another, making a home together. They were celebrating the possibility of something new.

Nor was it the over-long homilies and sometimes ill-judged catecheses that provided the essential eloquence of these days. The chanting millions repeatedly interrupted the Pope's preaching, and the point was not lost on him. 'You're doing that because I've talked too much,' he told them at one point with a wry smile, but then went on to belabour the point for another four pages. At the end he thanked them for having made this 'a true dialogue'. Whether he was being ironic was hard to tell, but for anyone really listening to this 'dialogue' the message from the crowds was clear: turn down the sound. Cut down the words. We want you to be a gathering point for us; bring us together; welcome us. Embrace us when

we're in distress; encourage us when we lose heart. Offer us hope; give us a vision. Dance with us.

Even if they were too many, the pontiff's words were nonetheless well chosen. Here was the Christian message pared down to its core, without the theological hairsplitting or the moral carping we so often associate with Rome.

Unless I am much mistaken, the large majority of the millions enthusiastically cheering this frail but indomitable man had not come to him looking for authoritative statements on morals and dogma. They had little intention of letting him

determine the more intimate aspects of their lives. They looked to him for something only he could offer, both because of the office he holds as well as because of his personal history. It had to be something universal in its scope, yet also grounded in his own experience of the struggles of a human life. And it had to speak to people young enough, some of them at least, to be his great-grandchildren. What they heard was indeed the Good News: the call to establish a new civilisation of peace based on love and human solidarity. It was the challenge to be ready to commit life itself as Jesus had to the project of God's Kingdom. Stirring stuff, and it certainly resonated with the hearers.

What I found most moving was that here for all the world to see was the Petrine office exercised as it could be always. A relatively simple ministry in service of unity and community, a ministry of hope and vision, of encouragement and gentle care. If what took place in those days was 'a true dialogue', then Rome had an opportunity to hear answered by wild acclamation the question John Paul put to the world in his letter *Ut Unum Sint*: how best to exercise the

office of Peter so that it may be a more positive force in the church and less of an obstacle to our unity?

No-one gave much thought in those heady days of August to the salvo of Roman pronouncements that was about to be fired off in September. Rome's old style, it seems, was not about to change substantially. Both barrels were already loaded: the beatification of Pius IX had been scheduled for 3 September, and *Dominus Jesus*, a rather blunt declaration from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) on questions of the uniqueness of Christ and the status of other religions, was already in the hands of the bishops, embargoed till 5 September. The faithful stayed away from the beatification ceremony in droves—even the local dignitaries who could have been relied upon to turn up for three sons of the soil were pointedly absent.

Some who would gladly have celebrated the qualities of John XXIII were not about to be co-opted into applauding the claimed virtues of Pius IX, whose beatification has caused such scandal around the world. It is difficult to see it as anything but the old Rome striking back. The assertions of his saintliness sound hollow in face of the damning evidence of his disastrous choices. It is said that declaring him 'blessed' was intended to undo the injustices meted out to him in his lifetime. If he is indeed a saint, Pope Pius would surely just as soon pass misunderstood into oblivion than be a cause of scandal to so many.

The CDF declaration deals with complex issues that are among the most pressing in contemporary theology. Such interventions in the theological debate can sometimes be helpful in focusing the question more precisely, but they are phrased in a way that seems unaware that they are being read anywhere but in the theological academy and the episcopal chancery. The CDF knows very well—and it uses press conferences and



websites to make sure of it—that its ideas on this hot-button issue will be discussed all around the world. If it wants to have a constructive voice in such a broad forum, it needs to find more sensitive ways of expressing its concerns. Perhaps again the message is: turn down the sound. If you want people to accept, for example, the unique salvific importance of the church, then you need more than an assertion accompanied by a pastiche

THE CHURCH: 2

MARYANNE CONFOY

## Placing women

THOSE WHO ARE wondering what happened to the 1999 research project into the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia, *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*, will be heartened to read *The Australian Bishops' Social Justice Statement for the Year of Jubilee*.

A major part of the bishops' *Statement* is the contextualising of that project. It also serves to remind those who may have forgotten the origins of the five-year *Woman and Man* initiative, or who were not part of it, of the background and history.

What becomes clear from the *Statement* is that *Woman and Man* met the concerns of the Catholic bishops for 'a sound information base for theological reflection, pastoral planning and further dialogue with women and women's groups on particular issues'. To read about the volume of 'contextual papers, written submissions, public hearings' and large-scale sampling of church attenders, Catholic organisations as well as targeted groups, is to realise the great size of the project and the interest that it generated.

The background to the four key questions integral to the *Woman and Man* research is spelt out in the bishops' *Statement*. These questions were designed to elicit responses about possibilities for, and barriers to women's participation in the Catholic Church, and about the support women receive and ways of increasing their participation.

of scriptural and ecclesiastical authorities. The words need to become flesh. Until they do, the claim merely sounds arrogant.

World Youth Day and the Pope's style there have shown the possibility of a new way forward in Rome. So far it remains the road less travelled. ■

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In the *Statement* the bishops articulate the problem they face in having to be both orthodox and responsive—that is, committed to the teachings of the Church 'on any matter despite the difficulty some respondents have had with some elements of the Church's teaching' while simultaneously responding to the call of Vatican II 'to satisfy the concerns of others'. They 'are willing to dialogue with women about these matters for the sake of mutual understanding and in a spirit of Christian love'. It will be interesting to see if the results of such dialogue, and the practical steps and decisions proposed by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), will increase or decrease the tension expressed here.

The bishops' recommendations encompass a wide range of possible actions. If implemented, at both the macro and micro levels of church life, they will have significant consequences for both parish and diocesan structures. There are nine decisions with subdivisions and 31 more tentative proposals 'which bishops might wish to consider for possible action in their dioceses'—these form the conclusion of the *Statement*. The tenor of these recommendations, including the decision to appoint a Commission for Australian Catholic Women, is an indication of the appropriateness of the choice of Social

Justice Sunday for their promulgation.

Decisions include the setting up of programs addressing the nature of ministry, and particularly women's and lay ministry. There are guidelines to be developed on lay preaching, inclusive language and rituals to be used by the laity in the absence of a priest—important in a church with an ageing and numerically diminishing priesthood. There is also research proposed into liturgical recognition, welcoming and integration of cultural expressions of the Catholic faith, especially that of indigenous people. The concern for the provision of 'pastoral and spiritual support for those suffering the pain of failed marriage or divorce and those who have entered into another marriage' is a welcome one for those who, in the Report, expressed their experience of alienation so poignantly. One visionary decision is to foster research in 'ecclesiologies, and their theological, catechetical and pastoral implications', and in ministry.

Also prominent is commitment by the ACBC to work towards a better balance of 'men and women, clergy, religious and laity on existing councils, organizations and advisory bodies at the national level', and of men and women in leadership and professional roles. At present the number of women in leadership roles in the Australian Catholic

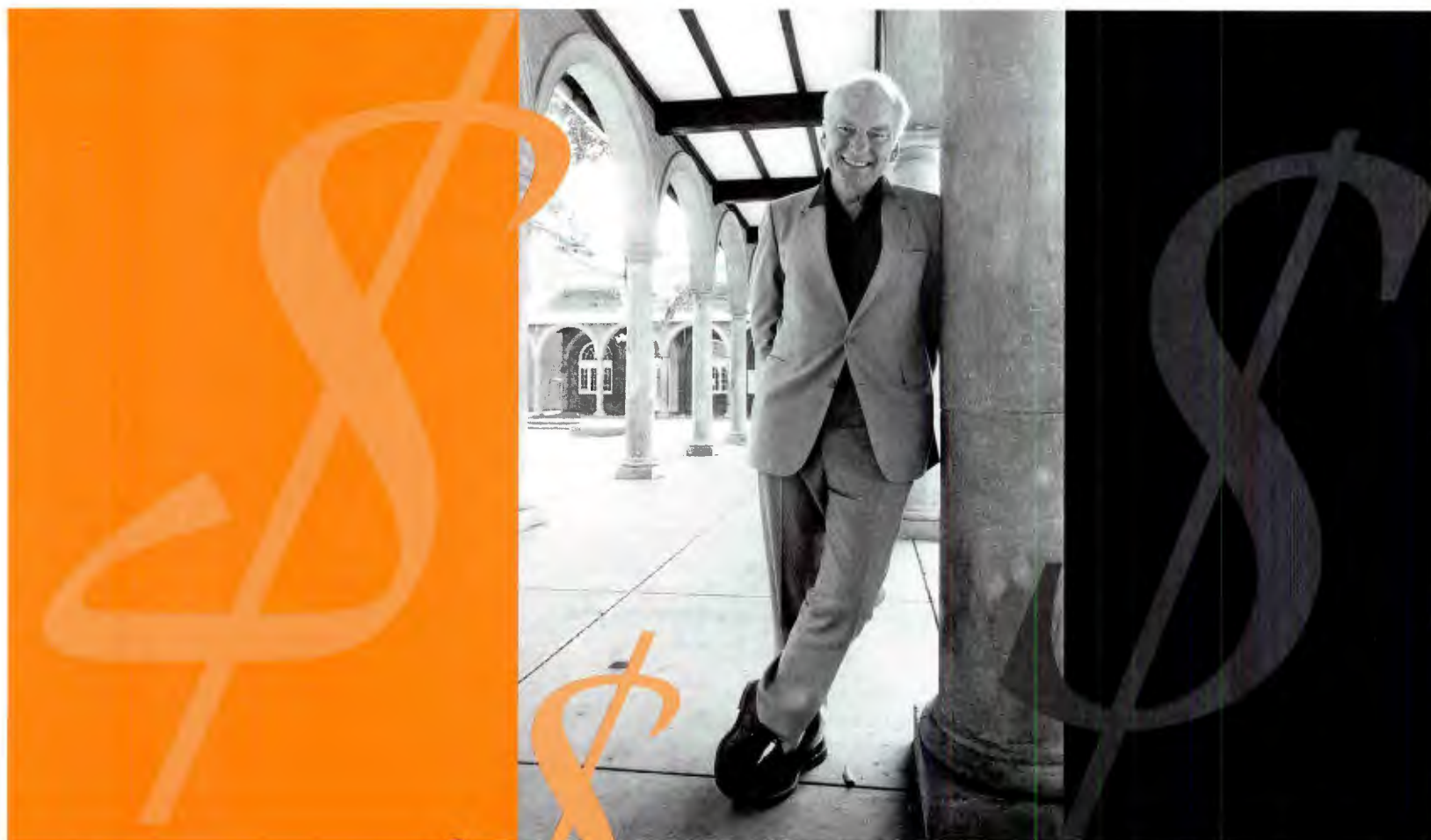


Church is minimal. If this initiative is undertaken seriously both by women in leadership as well as by the various organisations, it will have far-reaching consequences for Catholic community life.

If embraced at all levels, and across the present divisions in the church, the proposed initiatives could help bring about the transformation of the Australian Catholic Church. This is the hope that the *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* project stirred. It is the promise that the bishops' *Statement* holds out. ■

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# A new face of economics

After Samuelson ... Stretton?

**Mark Cully** asks what fresh ideas might be factored into our economic thinking by Hugh Stretton's monumental new textbook.

**Economics: a New Introduction**, Hugh Stretton, University of New South Wales Press, 1999, ISBN 0 868 40498 5, RRP \$50.

**I**T WAS THOMAS CARLYLE, old sourpuss, who first dubbed economics the Dismal Science. Since then he has been mimicked by a host of others, most too feckless to think of anything more precise or useful to say.

Economics is neither dismal, nor a science, according to Hugh Stretton, who has at last realised his—let me call it—'twilight' project of first finishing and, more daunting, finding a publisher game enough to punt on an 852-page introductory textbook for economics students. This by a neophyte in the field. Were they mad? Has Stretton lost the plot?

The book has been 15 years in the making—an early version of the first three chapters appeared in *Political Essays* (1987)—and, remarkably, its defining purpose has in the interim gone unchallenged. No-one

has gazumped Stretton. It is not as if there is no market for a 'new' (read 'alternative') textbook. There are critics aplenty of orthodox economics, from the *recherché* to the goofy. The profession itself also tolerates a fair amount of dissent from within its ranks. The core of the project, however, the tales passed down from elders to initiates, is still, despite some fractures, solid. The introductory economics textbook is the chief means of transmitting these tales.

Paul Samuelson's *Economics*, first published 50 years ago and now in its 16th edition, is the exemplar of introductory texts. According to Stretton, 'it is orderly, clear, lively, engaging, humanely intended, and useable'. Many alternatives already exist, but these differ in much the same way as washing

powders: they all get your clothes white. Samuelson has spawned one diatribe, or antidote, depending upon your view: the four-volume *Der Anti-Samuelson* by two German Marxists in the 1970s, which dissects the original, chapter by chapter. But no-one has done what Stretton has: he has rewritten an introductory textbook from scratch, one which is centred around what for shorthand can be called 'institutional' economics.

In *Economics* (and *Foundations of Economic Analysis*, addressed to his peers) Samuelson redefined the field. Gone were the 'animal spirits' of Keynes and Marshall's folk-spun wisdom; instead we were introduced to economic man and woman, Max U and Minnie C. It could be shown hypothetically, and proven mathematically, that given rational, self-interested agents with ordered preferences and access to full information, unhindered competition would produce a Pareto-optimal level of social welfare—maximum 'utility' at the minimum cost, where no-one could be made better off without another becoming worse off.

The result is blackboard economics. As one progresses through a conventional economics degree, there is less and less of an engagement with institutions and history, and almost no empirical observation of what companies or unions or governments actually do. There is a phased process of inculcating habits of thought. When students begin their degree, the noise and fuzziness of the world we inhabit is the reality they are seeking to understand. In their second phase, these real events become illustrations of the theory applied. By the third stage, they are properly trained to regard reality as the object to be amended to make it better fit the theory. What type of economist does this process churn out? One American survey of wannabe professional economists at graduate school level showed that just three per cent thought it 'very important' to know anything about the way the (American) economy functioned.

At the University of Adelaide, Stretton's place of work for the past 46 years, there are around 500 students annually who take Economics I. Multiply these numbers across the Australian higher education sector, and you begin to see the point. Several thousand people each year have their heads stuffed full of Samuelson. Tens of thousands walking the streets know that scissors drawn on the blackboard represent supply and demand 'curves'. They *know* that tariffs subsidise inefficient firms and raise prices, that payroll taxes cost jobs, that government borrowing crowds out private investment—it's in Samuelson.

This, I guess, is what sociologists mean by hegemony.

**M**ALTHUS GOT ECONOMICS its tag of dismal, at a time when 'wants' could not all be satisfied, when a potato blight could cause famine and death. For the rich democracies this is no longer the case. But if it is

no longer dismal, economics retains the potential to be dangerous: bad economics of the crudely applied Samuelson kind, Stretton says, 'can cause as much suffering and death as bad medicine or engineering can'.

What Stretton is on to, what Samuelson realised 50 years ago, is that battle must be joined at the point of entry and that it begins anew with each generation. If the bright 18 to 20-year-olds studying economics for the first time read Stretton rather than, or even in companion with, Samuelson, there is a reasonable chance that new recruits to Treasury and the departments of Finance and Prime Minister and Cabinet will be intelligent, public-spirited and conscious of their powers and their limitations—in short, a chance they will think seriously about, and take responsibility for, the consequences of their advice.

Like many in my cohort, I served my time in Canberra, my tenure roughly coinciding with Michael Pusey's investigation into the econocrat's *coup d'état*, the takeover of policy advice in the public service. Witless as I was, even I could see the intrusion of bad economics into policy-making. My favourite story from this time is of a Business Regulation Review Unit proposal to wind back occupational licensing. One of its discussion papers on the topic put forward a case for abolishing pilots' licences: passengers could assess for themselves the bona fides of the airline and pilot—'you pays your dues, you takes your chances'. Even the author was gracious enough to concede that this one was obviously not going to fly. After all, those with their feet firmly pinned to the ground had not been factored into the acceptable risk equation. The expected value of a plane landing on these unwitting souls not party to the deal is small, but non-zero.

But I can also recall the debate over whether to impose a minimum one-dollar charge on all prescriptions—to dissuade mostly elderly people from stockpiling expensive drugs on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, the cost of which had risen above one billion dollars. At the time, pensioners, as well as other welfare recipients, got all prescribed drugs for free. This gave them no incentive to, as it were, economise, whereas a small charge meant they could no longer be indifferent about whether to have the drug or a morning out at the bingo hall. The beauty of the proposal was that even if pensioners were fully compensated for the additional cost, the savings to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme would be enormous because of the much-reduced demand.

A Stretton-taught economist would also have inquired about the cost of fretting, discomfort, pain and needlessly premature death suffered by pensioners (which marginal analysis, properly applied, would have predicted). He or she would have looked at who was prescribing the drugs, why cheaper alternatives were not considered by these doctors, the links between pharmaceutical companies and general



practitioners, and who were the beneficiaries of the considerable largesse distributed by those companies.

What went wrong here, and there are countless other examples in Stretton's book—mostly anonymised to protect the guilty—is that policy advisers trained in orthodox economics substitute the rationality of Max U and Minnie C for common sense. What seems to elude them is that Max and Minnie are *fictional*. If only the world was more like them, they say, then it would be a better place. Stretton, on the other hand, says first you must describe the world you want to inhabit, then you must work out how to attain it.

**W**HAT DOES STRETTON MEAN by 'institutional' economics? He describes it thus: 'its focus is on economic life and workable ways of understanding it, rather than any one body of theory'. Despite the fact that I have some misgivings about the length of the book, what most readily distinguishes Stretton's approach from a conventional introductory text is

typical 'firm' are a 'black box' to economists. By contrast then, the household is an utter void. Stretton devotes four chapters to the topic, covering the changing balance of market and non-market work between husband and wife since medieval times, how housing is financed and the capital for it provided. There is a separate chapter on children, which focuses on the household division of labour and child care, and the consequences of our choices as children grow into adulthood. There is also a chapter on people as producers. Orthodox economics declares the consumer to be sovereign, but largely neglects our twin role as producer, except as the provider of the earnings to buy the goods we produce. Work need not be a 'disutility'. It may be trite to say, but this is economics as if people mattered.

Relatedly, the non-market economy is given serious consideration. This gets a token nod in most textbooks, but then it is straight down to business, literally. Stretton succeeds in making it central to the analysis. Here is but one example he discusses: Meals on Wheels, a fantastic illustration of the interdepend-

There are critics aplenty of ortho from the *recherché* to the goofy. The also tolerates a fair amount of disso its ranks. The core of the project, ho passed down from elders to initiates some fractures, solid.

what it includes—or, properly stated, what orthodox economics leaves out. Here are five areas where Stretton's contribution is sufficiently novel and important enough to warrant its use in training economists.

First, we get the by now familiar argument of the social sciences that values inform the choice of facts to be selected, questions to be investigated and theories to be believed. Stretton devoted a whole book to this topic in *The Political Sciences* over 30 years ago, but age has not wearied its force. In my economics degree, such arguments were saved for students in the Honours (fourth) year of study, as if by coming any earlier it would cause too much befuddlement in our delicate minds. It almost goes without saying that this section, the opening seven chapters, should be prescribed reading for all *first*-year students.

The second area is the household. It has long been remarked that the internal workings of the proto-

ence of households, government, market exchange and volunteer labour, which does a power of good to some old folks' well-being and only a fraction of that good is valued in GDP statistics.

A fourth area is how public enterprises work. Most orthodox texts discuss 'firms' as if all goods and services emanate from privately owned, for-profit enterprises. Around one in three Australians in paid employment do *not* work for firms of this kind—they work in charities or hospitals or museums or the like. The concept of efficiency, which can be elegantly shown for commercial enterprises to be the point where the incremental profit of an additional widget falls to zero, does not apply in non-commercial enterprises. The question, Stretton says, needs to be rephrased as 'efficient at what?'. (This is a kernel which statisticians have also been unable to crack: 'output' is measured by the earnings of employees, which means that productivity growth is always zero.



Try running that past a Department of Finance official the next time they seek an 'efficiency dividend'.)

Finally, there is a serious examination, more than 100 pages, on the distribution of wealth and income. This is a topic mostly neglected in standard introductory texts, lest the parting of the veils of positivism be seen to expose too much flesh, be too impolite. There is a chapter, for instance, on taxation which distinguishes between 'squalid' and 'respectable' tax policies. The former are those advocated with self-interest in mind—the government's campaign manager who wants to soak the rich *and* the poor, to buy off middle-income earners in marginal electorates—while the latter pay due regard to where the tax burden ultimately falls and the associated redistributive effects.

**G**IVEN THE BOOK'S gestation period, one might have thought that Stretton would have had the odd quiet moment to stray a bit outside economics and acquire some knowledge of other areas, like graphic design.

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It is rare these days to find a new textbook without colour, but here it is. There are hardly any figures or charts. There are precious few numbers either: the first table is not sighted till Chapter 8, which is then followed by a 189-page gap till the second.

What we get is words, oodles of them, in what looks like Times 10-point on two columns per Crown quarto page (250x190mm). That comes out at roughly 800 words a page, a total book length in excess of 600,000 words. Surely any editor would ask if this were not a trifle indulgent. Elsewhere, Stretton has apologised for this: 'a more practical, historical, institutional text with less simplifying abstraction, less deductive theory, and more detailed treatment of diverse industries and markets and national economies, *has to be longer*' (my emphasis). Ah, it was the unorthodoxy wot did it.

Fortunately, there are saving graces in those words. We are once more treated to Stretton's plain-

speaking style, which some find beguiling, some exasperating; others, like me, hold both views in equal measure. He is intemperate but passionate, rambling but never dull, imprecise but pedantic. There is repetition aplenty, but there is at least one gem per page, where the freshness of perspective causes you to pause ... and *think*.

All lecturers would like to flatter themselves that they connect with their students, that knowledge and understanding was transmitted and the cogs began to turn. Stretton has a better chance of realising this than most. Most of the chapters end with a provocative exercise. Take the crowding-out thesis mentioned earlier, which Stretton says you can hear in any pub or Cabinet room across the country: 'The private sector is the productive sector. Government spending simply diverts resources from productive investment.' If you disagree with that proposition, you are asked to distinguish your real reasons for doing so from the reasons you think might persuade someone who does hold this view to agree with you. This is deft stuff—cloaked in scientism it may be, but economics is ultimately about the art of persuasion.

There are liberal dashes of gentle humour. A section on executive pay is followed by one on income earned from crime—'plunder', lawful or otherwise, being the link. E.H. Carr chose a suitably important historical moment to make his point that all facts are selected, that hundreds of thousands have crossed the Rubicon both before and after Caesar but it is he whom we note. Stretton makes the same point by asking us to consider Mr Gordon Sumner: according to one's tastes, an Englishman in New York, an ex-school teacher, or an environmental activist with a taste for duff jumpers.

Even a lapsed economist like me takes umbrage at points. The references to other works are selective and often idiosyncratic. Take minimum wages as an example of the former. This is standard Economics I territory. If my babysitter will take \$5 an hour for watching TV while my daughters sleep, and the Workers Advocate says, 'No, you must pay \$10' then I stay at home and watch TV instead. Multiply that by whatever halfway plausible number you can find and several thousand young girls can no longer afford to buy the latest 5ive CD, record shops will go broke ... stop, stop, I'm beginning to sound like Bob Ellis. Stretton rightly draws attention to the work of Card and Kreuger, pioneers of the so-called 'new economics of the minimum wage', who examine a series of 'natural experiments' (whoa, scientism) where the minimum wage was raised in New Jersey but not in neighbouring Pennsylvania. Contrary to the predictions of the theory, employment went up by more in New Jersey, including in the places most affected by the change—fast-food outlets. But Stretton doesn't tell us about Card and Kreuger's critics, of whom there are plenty, nor of other studies which come up with opposite conclusions.

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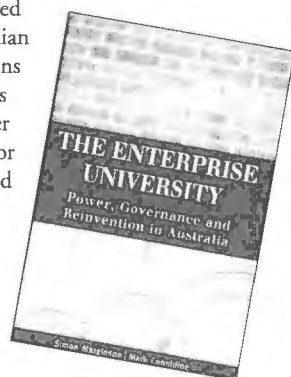
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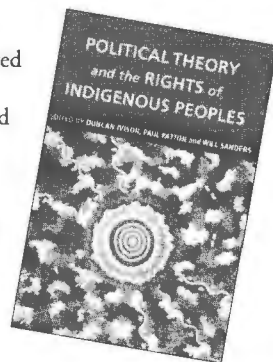
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He is too generous to his colleagues and friends, citing them frequently. References to these and other works are mostly outside economics. This is no bad thing of itself, but one gets the impression that, besides one or two areas where he has a special interest, such as public finance, Stretton is not as up-to-date with developments in economics as he might be. One consequence of this is that he does not do enough to acknowledge the able work of established orthodox 'insiders' who have a wider purview and who chivvy the profession to lift its game—Bob Solow or Deirdre McCloskey in the United States come to mind, or closer to home, Bob Gregory at the ANU's Research School of Social Sciences.

ORTHODOX ECONOMICS has lost its way. Like Ptolemy's wheels within wheels, every critique accepted as valid becomes a further augmentation to the model, to 'save the phenomenon' (to pirate Arthur Koestler's famous phrase). It is beginning to fragment into narrower specialisms as these intrusions come closer to the core. What if, as experiments in game theory show, people are motivated as much by altruism as self-interest? (People trained in economics are one of the exceptions to this finding—they are the outliers of the human panoply.) As the process of fragmentation continues, the orthodoxy will unravel, and so too with it the need for an introductory economics textbook. Stretton's project, first conceived when orthodoxy's star was in the ascendant, may already have passed its use-by date.

To judge this, an orthodox economist would say, the book must meet the market test. If it is any good, it will become prescribed reading and sell. In fact, the prediction is not at all obvious: Max would enjoy it, Minnie would find it too much hard work. More broadly though, if we turn the mirror and reflect the gaze of the market test, it is the economics profession which is itself found wanting. Dwindling numbers now do 'pure' economics degrees, more and more opt for degrees in commerce and business studies instead. Just as there is no single economic theory which fits the facts, there is now no single book which fits the student.

For all that, Stretton's book is long overdue. It is written with wisdom, grace, humour, compassion and a due regard for economics to be applied with prudence. As career preparation for a policy adviser or government minister, a union official or an industry lobbyist—indeed, anywhere where the cut and thrust of economics is played out—it could hardly be bettered. My instinct, and hope, is that there are sufficient 'heroic' economists in university departments who will stipulate a chapter here, a section there, and a money-well-spent recommendation to their students. ■

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# Sorry



**I**T WAS AROUND THE MIDDLE of the day when we heard the news they were coming. We left what we were doing and quietly walked to a large open area in the community. There we sat down and waited.

A few weeks previously, a number of our young people had gone east to a neighbouring Aboriginal community for a sporting weekend. After the weekend some of them had visited relations in another community. There had been a car roll-over on one of the dirt roads and a young girl, one year old, had died. The parents were now bringing her home.

We knew they would come home eventually. There had been an autopsy. Then there were ceremonies to perform back in the community near where the accident had occurred. Now was the time for a 'sorry meeting' with the grandparents and other relations of the family. The funeral could not occur until this had happened.

According to the age-old custom, we gathered as one and prepared to meet the returning party by putting white ochre on our foreheads. Some of the men put it on their chests and some of the women on their breasts. We sat and waited, talking quietly, men and women in separate groups.

Finally they came. The convoy of vehicles entered the community slowly and deliberately. They stopped a few hundred metres from us. There the group disembarked after their trip of several hundred kilometres. They too put ochre on, and divided into men and women groups. The ceremony began with the usual movements of formal recognition. Senior men, armed with boomerangs and shields, approached one another then moved back. Some men and women, *tilitja* or kinship brothers or sisters of the deceased, came forward to lead the ceremony. Then the groups came together. As one group of men met another, so did the women. People would come in their various kinship groups and according to their relationship to the deceased young girl and her family. There was much wailing, hugging and crying and occasionally someone would cut themselves on the head with a rock and then be gently restrained. Forwards and backwards the people moved, certain people directing and guiding the various groups. Tears were shed as the community wailed its loss.

The ceremony took about an hour. After it had finished, the main relations of the young girl gathered and sat and talked about her funeral.

It was important that the 'sorry ceremony' happened first. The community needed time to express sorrow for its loss. It also needed time to show the extended family that it shared in their sorrow. There was no talk of blame about who caused her

death and who should be punished—this might happen at another time. This was 'sorry time'. This was a ceremony to show grief and share sorrow with the family and relations, especially the young father and mother of the child.

I remember this day for two reasons. I was the only non-Aboriginal person present and I felt keenly the absence of other staff from the community on that day. It also showed me so starkly the importance and value of these ceremonies.

**M**ORE RECENTLY, I was at Corroboree 2000 in Sydney with a group of young adults from this same desert community. On the eve of the meeting at the Opera House I asked them about the word 'sorry' and whether they thought the Prime Minister should say 'sorry'. One of them answered: 'He should say sorry to show he cares about Aboriginal people.' For her it was as simple as that.

'Sorry time', 'sorry business', 'sorry ceremonies'—all those English words used to describe elaborate and traditional rituals convey simple and strong realities. They are about sharing sad and tragic times with others to show we care for them but also to allow ourselves to express our own feelings. It is more than using words or telling people we are sorry for them. It is in the showing and sharing with them our feelings that the healing for all begins.

I am not sure what the community or family felt about the absence of other staff that day. Perhaps they have got used to feeling that some white people do not care, or, if they do care, they do not know how to show it.

Surely this is the dilemma in any 'sorry' business. We each have learnt ways of showing we care for others in their grief, but we are often being invited to learn new ways. And, perhaps as we get older, there is a gift in learning new and richer ways of sharing our own feelings and sadness with others. Different communities, different tragedies, different families. But loss, pain and sadness are similar and common to us all.

If we do not learn the ways of showing we are 'sorry', we run the risk of giving the impression that we don't care, even if we do. More seriously, if we don't learn how to show we are 'sorry', we might begin to wonder if we care at all. That would be the greatest tragedy of all, if we were to lose the gift which 'sorry business' offers. ■

**Brian McCoy** sj has lived with indigenous people in the north of Australia for 21 years and in the Western Desert country for the past seven. He is currently studying indigenous health issues.

# Changing identities

Is democracy a natural medium for Taiwan?

Robin Gerster argues that it is.

**‘Y**OU’LL LIKE TAIWAN.’ I was being advised by the huge tattooed Australian who had sauntered into Economy from Business Class shortly before the Cathay Pacific jet began penetrating the toxic skies enshrouding Taipei. We were coming in from Osaka, where the Australian—who introduced himself as ‘Butch’—had been doing a spot of work for his employers, some sort of debt collectors agency. Brave fellow, taking on the hard noses of *yakuza*-infested Osaka. One of the last of the knucklemen, Butch apparently earned his living by putting the frighteners on people—one Australian approach to regional relations. He was not a man to be argued with.

But it is a very old-fashioned notion, this ‘liking’ a country. We live in the age of the jaded, jaundiced traveller, when it is more common to lament than celebrate the act of catapulting oneself into foreign places. We’re all bloody tourists, however we try to dissociate ourselves from that despised breed; all ‘just visitors in other people’s countries’, as a character remarks in one of Inez Baranay’s Bali fictions. Perversely relishing these gloomy notions, I had remembered to pack Keath Fraser’s anthology, *Worst Journeys*, full of emergency plane landings in France and hellish drives through the Australian outback. I was able to justify this indulgence because the reason for this visit to Taiwan was an academic conference on travel writing in the southern city of Kaohsiung. (Another reason to reflect on the good sense of staying at home was the fact that I was travelling with an ebullient two-year-old son.) Travel writing has been picked over, probed and deconstructed to reveal a host of incriminating compulsions and ‘discursive hegemonies’. One can’t go anywhere these days without feeling uneasy or downright guilty.

My own anxiety was compounded by that most tenacious of Australian terrors, fear of getting caught up in an Asian conflict. Chen Shui-bian’s election as President of Taiwan had reignited tensions with the mainland and ‘the cross-strait thing’ was a burning issue once again. ‘Make sure you avoid those Chinese missiles,’ Butch said with a snigger as he moved through the curtain back into Business to belt up for the descent. (*He was en route to Hong Kong.*)

The plane landed safely. Before climbing on to the bus for the long, hot trip into Taipei, I picked up a local paper. One of the lead stories concerned the ‘optimistic’ forecast of a Taiwanese Foreign Affairs official, in an article entitled ‘Conflict Unlikely for at Least a Year’. I made mental preparation for my own ‘worst journey’.

**‘A** PROVINCE OF China or an independent nation—Taiwan is an island in search of its identity.’ Thus Lonely Planet begins its Taiwan edition, revealing at once how the country is rarely taken at face value, as a country to be enjoyed or indeed disliked. Who, after all, goes there except on business? The issue of identity crops up again and again in writing about the renegade island. ‘What is Formosa?’ W.G. Goddard asks in his standard study, published in 1966, when in the West the autocratic Chiang Kai-shek was held up as a paragon of anti-Communist virtue. It is a question that many Taiwanese themselves seem unable to answer. Several of the local academics to whom I spoke at the conference expressed their own confusion on the ‘who are we?’ matter, one or two of them giving vent to a sense of frustration at it never being properly resolved. ‘Don’t worry, we’re in a similar position in Australia,’ I told them, blithely ignoring the fact that

Australia doesn’t have an acquisitive China eyeing it off from a matter of miles away.

Taiwan has long suffered to have others granted the powers of its own representation. The most famous ‘Taiwanese’ in English literature, a man whose *History of Formosa* caused a stir in British Orientalist circles when it was published and widely translated around 1700, was George Psalmanazar, actually a European who pretended to be Formosan and who never ventured anywhere ‘East’ at all.

The Taiwanese are much more assertive these days. The aboriginality of a large number of the population (nearly two per cent of some 22 million) is being emphasised, becoming fashionable in elements of the country’s vigorous popular culture. But the boast of a unique identity for today’s Taiwan is more a matter of ideology than ethnicity. Since Chen’s election, many Taiwanese have gloried in its new image—polished and promoted by the American media as a model of Asian democracy, as a valourous anti-China (‘BRAVE NEW TAIWAN’, screamed the post-election *Newsweek*).

Democracy seems a natural medium for Taiwan. It struck me as a convivial, participatory kind of place. At the Martyrs’ Shrine in northern Taipei, which commemorates those who gave their lives for the Republic, they even allow tourists to march in company with the changing of the guard. It wouldn’t happen at Buckingham Palace. I was able to avoid this temptation, although everywhere we travelled the salutations were warm and seemingly genuine. This is a country that desires friends, not merely clients. Travelling in company with a two-year-old helped. The enthusiasm with which the Taiwanese regard their own children translated easily to the foreign family. Doors were opened,



problems were solved and advice gladly given, along with food, umbrellas and other useful appurtenances. A small child in Taiwan—nature's Amex card.

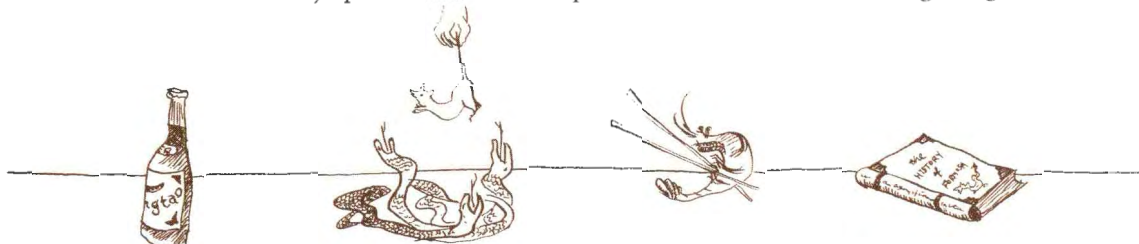
Yet the essential Chineseness of Taiwan is inescapable, especially in its capital city. Paul Theroux has noted the 'nightmarish' qualities of Chinese cities, qualities that hectic, grimy Taipei—a dystopia in grey concrete and bitumen—has in abundance. There is a superb new subway system that goes largely unused. Meanwhile, the streets (and pavements) reverberate with the scream of motor scooters beyond number. Those pedestrians with the temerity to get in their way by darting across the road risk the abuse of outraged traffic attendants. If the motorcyclists don't get you, the poisonous atmosphere will. My hotel provided me with a pamphlet delineating a map of the vicinity for joggers—a suicidal project if ever there was one.

Taiwan may be 'wealthy' in basic economic terms, but the living environment for the average person isn't good. Conditions in its overcrowded cities are much more salubrious than their counterparts in China, but that is not saying much. The terms 'Asian tiger' and 'Asian dragon' are tropes glibly employed by finance journalists who rarely venture outside the extra-territorial bubble of the boardroom or the international hotel, and who measure life in graphs and spreadsheets. As in Japan, the natural beauty of much of Taiwan's landscape has been ruined by the mania for construction, especially down the densely populated west coast. The five-hour train journey from Taipei to Kaohsiung reminded me of the depressing trip from Tokyo to Kyoto. Faraway in the distance were tantalising signs of the voluptuous landscape that apparently awaits those fortunate visitors able to escape the cities. The Taiwanese will tell you their country is still 'La Ihla Formosa', 'the beautiful island', as first appreciated by Portuguese sailors. I will have to take their word for it.

For the visitor, who doesn't have to live there, Taipei is not without enchantment. There is a vivid street life, especially in the night markets located around the city. I naturally gravitated to the notorious, if touristy, 'Snake Alley', located in Wanhua, the oldest surviving part of the city. Here, just around the

corner from a brothel quarter of unparalleled awfulness, are various establishments which dispense the Oriental Viagra—snake blood, snake bile, powdered snake gall bladder. Snake Alley both fascinates and appals. A plump, perspiring spruiker outside a restaurant attracted a growing audience by holding a terrified little white mouse above a seething mass of vipers. (It seemed ironic to me if not to the cheering crowd that Snake Alley lies in the same quarter as Taipei's most popular place of worship, Lungshan Temple, dedicated to Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy in Chinese Buddhism.) Indeed, eating in Taipei seemed to be an especially physical experience. The menu in the window of one eating house attempted to lure the passing visitor with descriptions such as, 'Fried Fry and Peanuts: Good for Gum Exercise', and 'Sauteed Shrimp: Requiring Only a Couple of Chews'.

Like any self-respecting capital city, Taipei has its share of impressive monuments. Perhaps the one building that most obviously proclaims the



Chineseness of Taiwan—as well as its ambiguous relationship to the mainland—is the National Palace Museum, located in the steep green hills of Taipei's well-to-do northern suburbs. Here lie the artistic riches of China's history, the treasures of Imperial Beijing protected first from the rampaging Japanese in the 1930s, and later from the Communists—a collection so vast that much of it at any one time is secreted away in vaults tunnelled into the surrounding slopes. The National Palace Museum makes all but the very greatest museums look like K-Marts. It induced in this visitor a severe case of the Stendhal Syndrome—an urgent need to flee the galleries and catch some fresh air. Admittedly, this state was exacerbated by overhearing one of my countrywomen opining that a gorgeous piece of embroidery 'would make a nice beach bag for Beryl'.

In their museum and their outstanding language schools (to which foreign

students of Mandarin flock), and in their maintenance of traditional arts from calligraphy to kung fu, the Taiwanese see their country as a living repository of Chinese culture. Yet they also suffer their own kind of cultural cringe, a sense of being second-hand and hence second-rate. To an Australian, this can take familiar forms. After the conference dinner at Kaohsiung, a group of us determined to extend the evening's pleasures by exploring the vaunted nightlife of this sultry tropical city. This turned out to be a collection of dodgy bars with names like 'Ooh La La' and 'Bottoms Up'. In the latter, a local scholar muttered to me that the ubiquitous national brew, 'Taiwan Beer', was dishwater compared with Tsingtao, the great beer from the mainland.

**S**TOPPING OVER IN Hong Kong on the way back to Australia, I had time to reflect on the tenuousness of Taiwan. Loud voices in the local legislature had condemned Taiwan's pro-independence push and it was clear that Hong Kong was

having trouble balancing its sympathy for its sister island with its own incorporation into the Motherland. The Vice-President of Taiwan, Annette Lu, has used the 'Monkey King' analogy to illustrate her country's plight—the 'Monkey King' being the fabulous figure of Chinese legend who, despite its ability to perform marvellous feats, is ultimately unable to escape the control of its master. Hong Kong had tried and failed.

In the 'Devil's Advocate', one of the places in the Wanchai district which cater to Old Asia Hands with 'Happy Hours' that seem to go on all day, I noticed a familiar, immense figure standing at the bar. Butch recognised me too. 'How'd'yago in Taiwan?' I had to admit it hadn't been such a bad trip. 'Yeah, liked it,' I said, and unhesitatingly ordered a Tsingtao. ■

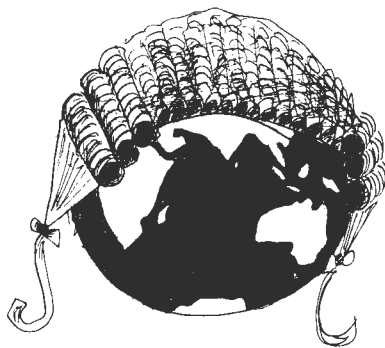
**Robin Gerster** teaches at Monash University.

# UN-doing

**I**NTERNATIONAL LAW became 'real' the moment that Chilean despot Pinochet understood that he could not rely on his own pardon for his crimes against humanity, even if he committed and forgave them while he was 'king'. Civilised nations have standards and people have human rights and there is an international rule of law to protect both.

International human rights treaties can't be enforced unless countries pass laws to implement them. Some do. The Council of Europe demands domestic recognition of its human rights Conventions as a condition of membership. The European Convention on Human Rights becomes part of British law on 2 October. Australia has minimally implemented UN human rights obligation in sex, race and disability discrimination laws.

The UN has six treaty bodies that evaluate government self-reports on their compliance with treaties dealing with civil and political rights; economic, social and cultural rights; race discrimination; discrimination against women; torture; and the rights of the child. Individuals cannot approach these committees unless there is a protocol attached to the particular treaty, which their country has signed, and after they have exhausted all domestic remedies. Then they can ask for a declaration that their nation is in breach. There was no such protocol for the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) until 1999. There are (and Australia has adopted them) protocols to the race discrimination convention and the covenant on civil and political rights (ICCPR). Seven years ago, two Tasmanian gay men successfully sought a declaration that a law criminalising their consensual homosexual activities at home was a breach of the ICCPR. The Commonwealth then used its constitutional power to override the offending provisions.



That was a different age.

On 28 August, the Howard Government announced it was withdrawing from co-operation with the UN committees; that no UN human rights investigators would be permitted to enter the country, and that we would also not sign the optional protocol to CEDAW. On that day, Saudi Arabia signed the CEDAW protocol, as has Indonesia (despite Timor) and, a few days later, 90 other countries.

The announcement came three days before an expected damning report on indigenous health and migrants. The government had already smarted under UN committee criticism of its treatment of Aborigines, native title, asylum seekers and mandatory sentencing. The latter triggered a sour review of Australia's participation in the UN committee system in March. In August, Attorney-General Daryl Williams' hasty and flawed amendments to the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* were (domestically) condemned as a breach of our treaty obligations (the SDA was enacted to implement CEDAW).

At the press conference, Daryl Williams, Alexander Downer and Philip Ruddock performed. Foreign Minister Downer suggested women would not miss an optional protocol they never had, and sang the virtues of the Common Law. Ruddock, Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, unfortunately then described a full Federal Court decision on a refugee determination as made by 'people who have no responsibility in

relation to these matters in one-off cases'. Williams, straight-faced, said Australia was withdrawing from UN committees, to strengthen them.

**T**HESSE ARE THE government's six 'good reasons' for the announcement. You judge.

The first is democracy. '*Treaty committees are unelected, unrepresentative bodies.*' They are nominated and elected by governments, including Australia.

The second is a whinge. '*Australia has been unfairly singled out for criticism.*' UN committee criticisms of other countries just don't get reported in Australia. The only reason UN committees considered three Australian reports this year is because our reports were late.

The third is bias. '*Serious abuses by other countries are ignored.*' This isn't true. UN committees have investigated East Timor atrocities, outrages in Bosnia, Rwandan genocide and torture in China.

The fourth is *de minimis*: '*Criticisms of Australia are trivial.*' Williams claimed that thanks to 'well-resourced NGOs in democratically elected countries, the focus seems to be on minor, marginal issues in those countries, and not on major human rights breaches in countries that don't have democratically elected governments.' Asked to define which of Australia's human rights deficiencies he considered 'minor' he said: 'Well, if you are comparing it with arbitrary arrest, detention and execution, and having your arms chopped off for belonging to the wrong political party, then almost every issue in Australia seems to pale into insignificance.' So stolen generations, dispossession, deaths in custody and asylum seekers aren't serious?

The fifth was chauvinism. '*They are intruding into our domestic affairs.*' Williams argued in favour of 'the primary role of democratically elected govern-



ments'. In Hanson-speak this is, 'telling foreigners to stop telling us what to do'.

As Geoffrey Robertson pointed out in *Crimes Against Humanity*, the whole history of human rights is about the struggle of principle against 'sovereignty'. Pinochet/Saddam Hussein/Slobodan Milosevic/SORC/Pol Pot/Taliban will always demand that we not intervene in the internal affairs of nation states.

Anyway, all these committees do is assess whether treaty obligations are met, and make non-binding recommendations. The fulfilment of these obligations is a legitimate international concern.

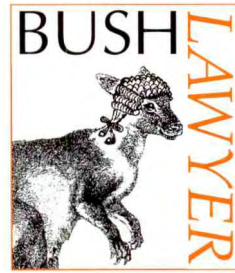
The last was a lie. '*NGOs have been given a favoured position.*' Williams claimed that because of staff shortages, the UN committees 'tend to deal with the highly contentious issues on which they receive representations from active NGOs. We don't see the principal role of the United Nations treaty body committee system to pick up the domestic agendas of NGOs and run with them at the international level.' Iraq, China and the former Soviet Union have also been keen that NGOs not challenge the official version.

In fact, the committees *can* only act on the written government report and their answers to oral questions. NGOs can only brief on questions to be put to government representatives. They have no right to speak or take part in those formal proceedings.

Beryl Beaufort, *femme formidable* of the Liberal Party, came out swinging against the failure to ratify the CEDAW protocol. HREOC President, Professor Alice Tay, and Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Susan Halliday, were not consulted and condemned the SDA amendments, the government's failure to consult its own human rights watchdog, and the Cabinet decision. If, as Williams claims, our human rights protection is so good, why has it been sidelined, and the courts excluded?

A country which does not protect its own citizens' rights is unlikely to respect the 'sovereignty' or rights of others. How bitter that, in the millennium year, Australia and Burma agree that when it comes to their citizens' human rights they are the best and only judge, and the rest of the world can mind its own business. ■

**Moirá Rayner** is Director, Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner for London.



## None so blind ...

**R**EGULAR READERS OF THIS COLUMN may have the impression that I wallow in tragedy. Not so. Courts are not fun-houses, but they have their lighter moments.

A doctor was being sued in a medical negligence case. He was representing himself against a very experienced QC. Both were small, fiery men. Annoyed by the asperity of the QC's cross-examination, the doctor began to reply in kind. The judge was about to check him when the QC asked, 'And what charm school did you go to, doctor?' The doctor was quick: 'The one you dropped out of, Mr H ...'

Late one afternoon, I was sitting in court hearing bail applications. Prisoners came and went. In the lull between applicants I let my gaze fix on the dock and daydreamed. I was still staring at the dock when my reverie was shattered by the prisoner calling out, 'And what are *you* lookin' at, Pinocchio?' You had to laugh.

As a law student, I came across a life of English barrister, F.E. Smith (later Lord Birkenhead). He is still hated by some in Ireland for the manner in which, as Attorney-General, he prosecuted Sir Roger Casement for treason. (Casement had attempted to run German guns into Ireland in support of the 1916 Uprising.) He was an unpleasant man, but fast on his feet.

On one occasion, a judge told Smith that he had read the papers in the case and was no wiser than when he had started. 'Possibly not, my Lord, but far better informed,' Smith retorted. On another occasion he appeared in a personal injury case for the defendant tram company. The plaintiff was a boy who alleged he had been injured because of the company's negligence. At one point the judge suggested that the boy be placed on a chair so that the jury could see him.

*Smith:* Perhaps Your Honour would like to have him passed around the jury box?

*Judge:* That is a most improper suggestion.

*Smith:* It was provoked by a most improper suggestion.

*Judge:* Mr Smith, have you ever heard of a saying by Bacon—the great Bacon—that youth and discretion are ill-wed companions?

*Smith:* Has Your Honour ever heard of the saying by Bacon—the great Bacon—that a much talking judge is like an ill-tuned cymbal?

*Judge:* You are extremely offensive, young man.

*Smith:* As a matter of fact we both are. The only difference between us is that I am trying to be and you can't help it.

To lighten up the lunchtimes at court, I sometimes read an American email newsletter on 'Weird Law', from the Findlaw website. Here is one find: in Egypt, a lawyer sued President Clinton for libel. He said his last name, Babby, sounded so much like Clinton's dog, 'Buddy', that he'd become the butt of jokes. He wanted five million dollars in compensation. The court threw out the suit, holding that the alleged infringement of Babby's rights took place outside the country and was therefore beyond the court's jurisdiction.

Finally, my lucky door prize goes to the deaf man who, when being questioned in court one day, said he couldn't hear anything much. He asked for his glasses to be passed to him. 'How will they help you hear?' asked the cross-examining barrister. 'They won't—but I'll be able to see who it is I can't hear.' ■

**Séamus O'Shaughnessy** is a country magistrate.

# We, the people

'Governments ... sit in delusional splendour, the only ones believing their own propaganda, certain that they represent the will of the people from whom they are as separate as they are from reality. They have not walked the streets I have.'

**I**N THE ROGUE STATES of Islam, all is not as it appears.

Iran, Sudan and Syria are among those who remain firmly entrenched on the list of states supporting or sponsoring terrorism. Despite a process of creeping liberalisation under way in each country, their reputations for militant anti-Western sentiment at a government level are well-earned.

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1978–79, Iran has provided a focal point for Western fears of an aggrieved Islam. It has offered compelling—if decontextualised—evidence for such fears: the sponsoring of armed opposition movements aimed at exporting revolutionary Islam; the fatwa against Salman Rushdie; the oft-heard refrain of 'Marg Bar Amrika' (Death to America).

In Sudan, the imposition of the strictest dictates of sharia law and unflinching support for the Iraqi Government of President Saddam Hussein have earned it the hostility of the West and moderate Islamic states alike. Syria has thus far been unwilling to make any public concessions in the name of peace with Israel, taking pride in its isolation as a badge of honourable righteousness.

I have spent significant periods in each of these 'rogue states' in the past two years. As a former refugee lawyer who has represented asylum seekers from each of these countries, I can understand—and sometimes share—the hostility towards these states. They have silenced all

opposition, tortured real and perceived opponents, left indelible scars upon ordinary people with names like Mohammed, Maryam and Ali. At the same time though, as a student of Middle Eastern politics, I understand the call by analysts such as Edward Said to denounce the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims.

On the surface, what seems to be required is a fundamental distinction between governments and the people over whom they rule.

Nowhere is this distinction more evident than in another rogue state, Iraq. The Iraqi people are punished terribly for even minor indiscretions by what is arguably the most repressive state

apparatus in the world. But the international community, in an attempt to punish the Ba'ath Party regime, has ended up punishing the same Iraqi people. In the meantime, the elite build palaces.

In Iran, Sudan and Syria, you are confronted daily with evidence of this divide. In all three countries, official mouthpieces expound successes: the revolution (Iran); the struggle against the enemies of Islam (Iran and Sudan); or steadfastness against the Zionist enemies of the Arab nation (Syria). Ordinary citizens strain under the repressive states in charge of such 'successes'—supposedly won in their names. The same governments proclaim Islam to be a religion of jihad or perpetual holy war. Meanwhile anything-but-ordinary citizens demonstrate Islam to be a religion of religious tolerance and hospitality to strangers.

Much of the encounter with this street-level society of rogue states is intensely rewarding.

It is also moving and depressing. For brief moments, it is possible to understand impotence in the face of state power and the almost incomprehensible disenfranchisement this entails.





The litanies of sad stories and hapless entreaty are as frequent as the offers of a meal or a bed for the night. While I write, a hotel worker in the southern Iranian port city of Bandar-e Abbas has knocked hesitantly on my door and asked how he can get a visa for Australia. It clearly hurts his sense of dignity to be asking, but his desperation is patent: 'Iran is my prison.'

In tea houses and public parks, from the banks of the River Nile to Imam Khomeini Square in Isfahan, individual Sudanese, Syrians and Iranians whisper their silent protests. Their increasingly bold statements are a release valve for frustrations they dare not yet act upon. Some speak as if gripped with a nostalgia for a life they have never known and probably never will know. Others seem wearied by terrible knowledge. Some stoic souls refuse to admit defeat, carrying their documented requests for a new life around in old plastic bags, attaching themselves to Westerners as to a flimsy talisman of belonging. They want solutions yet simultaneously they want to hide from themselves the certainty that their lives are a tapestry of loose ends. Old women sit on street corners waiting to die.

In the meantime, governments, the self-appointed guardians against freedom, sit in delusional splendour, the only ones believing their own propaganda, certain that they represent the will of the people from whom they are as separate as they are from reality. They have not walked the streets I have.

Articulating this separation between governments and their people may assist in analysis of a region we know only through media soundbites. It may even foster a deeper level of local understanding. But when the social contract between individuals and their states is damaged on such a scale, the implications are global, and manifested most obviously in significant movements of asylum seekers. Clearly, democracy does not exist in any formal sense in these countries, with the limited exception of Iran. In a country like Australia, it is difficult to understand how an overwhelming majority of a country's inhabitants can be kept under the control of an elite few so clearly acting contrary to the will of the people.

The first pillar of oppression is often the manipulation of icons. In Iran, the

definition of orthodox Shi'a Islam has been under the strict interpretative control of conservative clerics convinced of their divine right to rule. So powerful and so certain have they been of their own infallibility that alternative, liberal interpretations have been deemed blasphemy. Their governing rationale is simple: our edicts come from God; oppose us and you oppose God.

Allied to this highly effective strait-jacket of control is the uniting of a country behind a government fighting a common enemy. Western states have not themselves been averse to such patriotic urging, as evidenced in the United States during the Cold War or Gulf War. In Syria, the questionable legitimacy of the authoritarian President Hafez al-Assad was founded on the bedrock of historical conflict with Israel and the need to remain strong and united in a decades-long battle of wills. President Assad's regime thrived on the assertion that unity was essential to national strength. That the majority of the population may not share any actual hostility towards the 'enemy' is immaterial. Nationalist demands for unity are often as 'sacred' as adherence to officially defined religious orthodoxy. Both are based on the cultivated purity of the elite and demand absolute loyalty. Opposition is treason, tantamount to supporting the enemy. Thus do the people endure, lest they themselves become the enemy.

In Sudan, a country consumed by a war against its own people, the government routinely imprisons and tortures perceived opponents without trial as a warning against dissent. In that sense, they are worthy allies of the Iraqi Government.

**A** GAINST THE BACKDROP of this oppression, however, you can trace an informal democratic process at work. Ordinary Sudanese, Iranians and Syrians find meaning in the triumphs of survival, in petty daily subversions masked by public loyalty. Governments are too blinded by their own rhetoric to read the clenched-teeth smiles of subservience. Individuals take refuge, and often great delight, in the community of solidarity which operates in the negative space of government control.

These communities have often reinterpreted the nature of an 'Islam of

the people'. From their Friday pulpits, ageing mullahs pronounce Islam to be a religion of asceticism, vigilance against enemies and anger against the world. The shadow societies of Islam yearn for moderation and engagement with the world, and practise the Quranic imperative of hospitality to the strangers in their midst.

On the day of my first arrival in the Middle East, I was overwhelmed on the streets of the Syrian capital with cries of 'Welcome to Damascus!' My first evening was spent sharing a meal with the al-Ghiyab family for whom Islam was a community in which all were welcome.

Theirs is not a democracy of the ballot box, but of the people. On one of the occasions I was in Syria, Richard Butler was reviled throughout the Islamic world as the public face of an international effort to punish the Iraqi people. Whenever I told people, initially with some nervousness, that I was an Australian, the first response was, 'Ah, Richard Butler', rapidly followed by, 'You are welcome in my country.' When I asked Tariq, a Syrian friend, about this response, his answer was simple: 'It's all right. We Syrians know better than anyone that you are not the same as your government.'

The democracy of the rogue states' communities of solidarity may not be formalised in electoral processes. But they do lack the insularity of our own, and they can chasten us with their hard-won lesson that it is 'undemocratic' to stereotype peoples on the basis of their governments or the actions of a militant few.

When communist regimes across Eastern Europe began to collapse under the weight of people power, German democracy activists coined an all-encompassing slogan which became a simple anthem of freedom: 'We are the people'.

In the Islamic World, that cry is still a whisper. But it is unmistakable, defiant and strong. On my own tentative pilgrimage through Islam's rogue states, I've reached one conclusion: we will not build a new relationship with the people of Islam until our response mirrors that other German rallying cry, 'We are one people.' ■

**Anthony Ham** writes on the politics and culture of the Middle East.

# 'This Sodom of misery and epitome of vice'

*Painters have rendered it heroic. Writers have branded it gothic. And history has called it hell. Tasmanian Peter Pierce takes issue with some recent—and not so recent—impositions on the Island.*

English Passengers, Matthew Kneale, Hamish Hamilton, 2000. ISBN 0 241 14068 4, RRP \$35  
Wainewright the Poisoner, Andrew Motion, Faber and Faber, 2000. ISBN 0 571 19401 X, RRP \$45

**I**N THE RECENT, special Australian issue of *Granta*, Peter Conrad writes of 'The New New World', that is, of this country as the place of allure and promise that England had once been for Australians like him.

For Conrad, this is another stage in the (always partial and temporary) return of the native. Execrated by many in Tasmania after the publication of his Romantic autobiography, *Down Home* (1988), Conrad would later receive an honorary doctorate from his old university. In July he was in Hobart to give the keynote address at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. While the *Granta* essay was primarily autobiographical, it also asserted a wider interest, among some British authors, in revisiting and in some ways reclaiming the Australian part of the old, lost empire. This year two of them went to Tasmania, on literary missions at once revisionist and reversionary.

Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* tells of how the Reverend Geoffrey Wilson, agitated by the challenges of science to his Christian faith, forms the belief that somewhere near the heart of the prison island of Van Diemen's Land may be found the Garden of Eden.

He journeys there on the chartered vessel *Sincerity*, which is crewed by Manx smugglers on the run from customs. Wilson and his companions arrive at that time in the history of the penal colony which has always seemed ripest for historical novelists:



the Lieutenant-Governorship of George Arthur, who ran Van Diemen's Land from 1824 to 1836.

If readers, not least Tasmanians, may be enchanted as well as surprised to find Paradise within those shores (no relation to the place with postcode 7306), they will be familiar, the Australians among them at least, with the representation of the colonial history of the island as a gloomy, blood-stained pageant. Here are the prison hells of Macquarie Harbour and its successor, Port Arthur, most memorably evoked by Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* (1870–72); here the doomed mission to save the Aboriginal peoples of Van Diemen's Land by their self-styled Protector, George Augustus Robinson (whom Kneale calls Robson).

In his first novel, *The Savage Crows* (1976), Robert Drewe wrote of Robinson. The governorship of Arthur, and the coincident, difficult formation of a civil society, was central to Roy Bridges' distinguished series

of historical novels that appeared steadily through most of the first half of the 20th century.

Kneale's novel moves backwards and forwards between the 1820s to the 1860s, so that he is able to record the dwindling of Aborigines almost to the point of what would soon be called extinction. They are driven relentlessly beyond what they know as the boundaries of 'the world'. He includes the notorious episode in which the corpse of the last Tasmanian male, Woureddy (who

died in his room in the Dog and Partridge Hotel in Hobart in March 1869), was dismembered in the name of science by Dr William Crowther. That and other tales have been retold in Tasmania so often that they have the patina of legend more than the shock of history. But for Kneale, they are imbued with novelty. He is beguiled by episodes of colonial history that the former imperial power had long forgotten.

Respectfully, with a near antiquarian diligence, he seeks to re-imagine mental worlds similarly long lost: Aboriginal apprehension of whites; the Manxmen's recoil into their own language and superstitions in wary defence against the hostility of the rest of the world; Wilson's dream of proving the truth of Genesis in the Tasmanian Highlands; and the more sinister designs of Dr Thomas Porter, the eugenicist, the classifier of races and their hierarchies, who accompanies him. Linking these strands of the novel is a threnody for what



has been lost and a sense of the futility of all these people's endeavours, however ingeniously and earnestly they strive. In *English Passengers*, the vital life of Tasmania is felt to be all to do with the past.

**W**AINEWRIGHT *THE POISONER*, by Andrew Motion, the biographer of Larkin and Keats, and more recently Poet Laureate, is trenchantly titled. His subject is a man now little remembered, an artist who painted Byron's portrait and was an art critic for the *London Magazine*. He enjoyed a wide circle of artistic and literary acquaintance, which included Henry Fuseli, William Blake and Charles Lamb, John Clare, William Hazlitt, Thomas de Quincey and—briefly—John Keats. A dandy who lived (as the euphemism used to go) beyond his means, Wainwright ran through his inheritance, obtained large sums by forgery and insurance fraud and had the good fortune to see three of his relatives die in suspicious circumstances (another euphemism briskly dealt with in Motion's title). In 1837 he was sentenced to transportation for life to Van Diemen's Land, for forgery, rather than murder. He died in Hobart ten years later.

Motion's narrative method is to complement and complicate Wainwright's self-serving story of his adventures, his purported 'Confession', with lengthy interpretative notes. This was a character who 'lived half his life close to the centre of the Romantic revolution, half in exile and disgrace'. He combined 'a life in culture with a life in crime'. Obscured at times by legend, Wainwright also 'falls out of the historical record so often' that much of this 'experiment' in biography is necessarily conjectural. For Motion, this is the chance to debate and rehearse 'questions of biographical forms' which he had not permitted to surface in, or influence his work on other writers 'who lived more importantly than Wainwright in the public mind'—Larkin, that is, and Keats.

What the Foreword does not address is the Tasmanian burden of the book. For it was there that the poisoner ended his days in infamy, then oblivion; there that purportedly he wrote his 'Confession'. *Wainwright the Poisoner* is, implicitly then, to do with the peopling of Tasmania, with the impact upon it of the strange birds who found their way there, willingly or otherwise, and of the ways in which succeeding generations have remembered them. What else was Bryce Courtenay doing in *The Potato Factory* (1995) in which a

number of characters arrive in Van Diemen's Land as convict transportees, there to continue English feuds? One of them is the infamous fence Ikey Solomon, whom Courtenay would like to think—as others have—was the model for Fagin in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837–38). Others are Mary Abacus, Sperm Whale Sally, the decidedly unidentical twins Tommo and Hawk. They soon supplant the 'real' historical figures whom Courtenay also brings on stage. Arthur appears once, on a black stallion, to be mocked for his rigid formality and shortness of leg. There is a cameo for William Lanney, or Woureddy, called Billygonequeer in the eccentric idiom that Courtenay confects at will for his fiction. But they are bit players beside Courtenay's own crew.

In Motion's book, Wainwright floridly seeks to write himself out of possible obscurity, with solipsistic conviction. His language has notable stylistic likenesses to that of Hal Porter, whose novel, *The Tilted Cross* (1961), told the story of Judas Griffin Vaneleigh, thus enlisting Wainwright for fiction and Van Diemen's Land for mannered Gothic. Wainwright's project, in Motion's reckoning, will be the remaking of his own history, out of the tatters of the public record of his shame. The Tasmanian setting—site of Wainwright's punishment—will also be the place where his rehabilitation will be effected through literature. This is a perversely benign version of the possibilities which the prison island might afford. While Motion carefully evokes Wainwright's material circumstances in Hobart—his hard labour on a road gang, the easier work as a hospital orderly, the conditional re-admission to bourgeois society as a portrait painter—his interest is in an ego to which they are essentially irrelevant. And, one also feels, the Tasmanian setting, indeed his subject's lives, are perhaps less important than the experiment in constructing them to which Motion is committed.

Nonetheless, Wainwright's initial response to the landscape of the island is significantly ambivalent. As he nears Van Diemen's Land, on the convict transport *Susan*, Wainwright apprehensively recalls 'how often my blood had frozen at rumours' so that he could not suppose 'Van Diemen's Land to be a real and palpable place before I had seen it with my own eyes'. The ship passes the Tasman Peninsula (and, hidden from view, Port Arthur) and enters Storm Bay. Mount Wellington's 'shaggy slopes' rear up and then—close to shore—men are

## Spring into reading



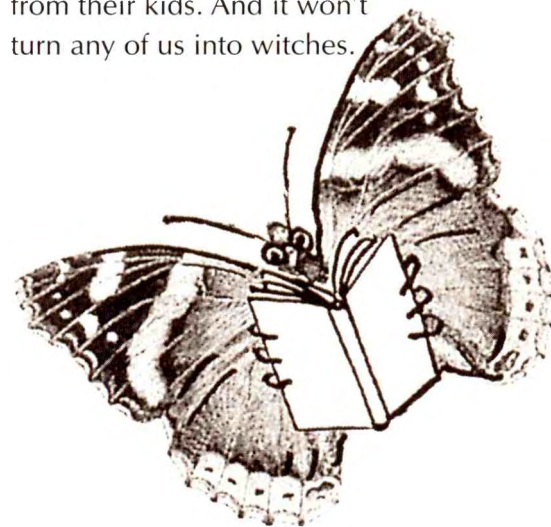
— with Peter Pierce, whose home island is in grave danger of becoming a literary site

— with Jim Davidson and Graeme Davison keening for history

— with Andrew Hamilton writing on fellow-Jesuit Roger Haight's controversial *Jesus: Symbol of God*

— with Kate Llewellyn, who gives hearty cheers for Kim Mahood's non-fiction prize-winner, *Craft for a Dry Lake*

— and with Juliette Hughes, who is confident that reading *Harry Potter* won't harm the parents who have pinched it from their kids. And it won't turn any of us into witches.



at work while chimney fires smoke as at home. Wainwright's disconcertment is complete. Soon he is assailed by 'another and differently disturbing notion', for 'This island, this Sodom of misery and epitome of vice, this satellite of humanity, where inhumanity flourished: it was beautiful! He has found in the netherworld a prospect for painters and poets, a landscape that could be assimilated within the tenets and the art of Romanticism. Yet he has come there as a felon, exiled forever.

**T**HE SAME AMBIVALENCE was discernible in a prisoner who arrived in Van Diemen's Land a few years later than Wainwright. This was John Mitchel, one of the leaders of the Young Ireland rebellion in 1848, who was transported—together with several of his colleagues—as a political prisoner. Their story has recently been the subject of Thomas Keneally's monumental *The Great Shame* (1998), while Mitchel is the basis for the political exile, Michael Devereux, hero of Christopher Koch's *Out of Ireland* (1999). The book is constantly aware of Mitchel's narrative, which anticipates Devereux's fulminations against 'British gentility, British hypocrisy!', the poignancy of his separation 'away from all that was civilised, known and loved' and his reluctant, but steadily deepening enchantment with the landscape of the Tasmanian Highlands.

Hobart is given the same bad name that Motion's Wainwright had heard used of it—'Sodom', 'that college of crime and abominations'—but Devereux comes to believe that somewhere in the island's heart lies Bœotia, 'the country of [Hesiod's] *Works and Days*'. One thinks of the dream of Kneale's Reverend Wilson. With a pardonable vulgarity, Koch has Devereux wonder what Rousseau or Wordsworth would have thought of these Antarctic landscapes:

Suppose your Wordsworth had wandered on this roof of Van Diemen's Land—among mountains whose dead craters are like entrances to Hades? Would he have found here those 'huge and mighty forms' that gave him such consolation at Grasmere? Is Lake Sorell another Windermere?

What had Mitchel himself said, posing and answering similar questions to Devereux's as, incidentally, in doing so, he prepared for the romanticisation of Tasmania, a project that would have more peculiar consequences than he might have wished for, or expected?

If at first he felt himself cast into 'regions of outer darkness', exiled to 'an island of the

unblessed', Mitchel's responses to the physical features of the place became increasingly sympathetic. He loathed what man had made there, snobbishly recoiling from common felons and wishing to breathe 'air untainted by the lungs of lags'; demonising 'a small, misshapen, transported, bastard England; and the legitimate England is not so dear to me that I can love the convict copy'. Yet he could write, again by analogy, of a Highland river, that 'not cooler or fresher was the Thracian Hebrus; nor purer were Abana and Phaspar; not more ancient and venerable is Father Nilus'. More than 20 years before Clarke's apprehension of the 'Weird Melancholy' instinct in the Australian bush, Mitchel had begun a late Romantic appropriation of those parts of it which he knew, and in particular the Highlands region. As he declared Lake Sorell more beautiful than any other on earth, Mitchel also noted the good fortune of the locality for what it lacked: 'Not so berhymed as Windermere is this Antarctic lake; neither does the Cockney tourist infest its waters, as he infests Loch Lomond or Killarney'. Mitchel promised that 'Some sweet singer shall berhyme thee yet ... every bay will have its romance ... the glancing of thy sunlit, moon-beloved ripples shall flash through the dreams of poets yet unborn.' In this harmonious, Romantic vision of Tasmanian poets-to-be inspired by wild Nature, Mitchel has spirited the present political order of Van Diemen's Land away.

For about the convicts, Mitchel's ambivalence is palpable. At times, when engaged in rural labour, they can resemble Devereux's longed-for Bœotians, 'like human husbandmen and simple Arcadian shepherds'. Yet when Mitchel gazes on them without benefit of analogy, it is 'with horror, as unclean and inhuman monsters, doomed long ago to the gallows-tree and oblivion'. Breaking his parole, Mitchel escaped in the brig *Emma*, from whose deck he had a last glimpse of the island, the Bay of Fires. He reached for a magisterial, even-handed farewell:

Adieu, then, beauteous island, full of sorrow and gnashing teeth—Island of fragrant forests, and bright rivers, and fair women!—Island of chains and scourges, and blind, brutal rage and passion!

Leaving Van Diemen's Land, Frank McNamara ('Frank the Poet') had been more terse, if also of mixed feelings:

Farmers' glory, prisoners' hell!  
Land of buggers, fare thee well!

Mitchel understood to a degree his Romantic role as discoverer of the potential artistic riches of Van Diemen's Land. Yet he had been in exile in an Arcadia which was sullied by the presence of felons and the operations of the British system which had consigned them there, together with the likes of him and his fellow political prisoners. The dark historical contours of Van Diemen's Land were antipathetic to the beauties of the landscape. This was the fruitful incongruity on which Clarke would insist in *His Natural Life*.

**T**HE CASE OF THE PAINTER William Pigenit is also instructive. Writing of the Highlands, his prose was respectful and orotund—'wild it is true, but of such variety of outline and of such wealth of colour as to make the Western Highlands one of the most charming of the many beautiful landscapes to be found in Tasmania'. This is the language of the tourist brochure, in this century one of the most familiar expressions of the impositions on, and interpretations of the scenery of the island.

Pigenit's distinctively Romantic use of Highland and Lake Country landscapes is to be found in his painting, not his prose. In a series of monochrome oils on cardboard, he portrayed vertiginous rocks, domineering mountainsides, the movement of clouds over water, scenes washed in a pale blue Antarctic light which eerily transports them from the mundane specifications of place in their titles. The paintings purport to be views of the Arthur and King William Ranges, of Mount Gell and Mount Olympus, based on sketches Pigenit had made on visits to the Western Highlands in 1871, 1873, 1874 and finally 1887.

In his remarkable oil (held in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart), 'A Mountain Top, Tasmania 1880s', Pigenit's standing rocks constitute an antipodean Stonehenge. The impulses, conscious or otherwise, to find historical traces where they cannot have been and to establish continuities with a European past in the new land, were evidently irresistible. And they suggest something of the essence of an Australian Romanticism focused with special clarity in such appropriations of Highland vistas as Mitchel's and Pigenit's.

Their heirs are harder to find. Mitchel had looked to future poets to celebrate Tasmania and may have applauded Les Murray for 'Bent Water in the Tasmanian Highlands'. Later generations of prose



writers, whether British or Australian, who have made Tasmania their subject, have almost all turned to the past. Rolf Boldrewood's *The Ghost Camp* (1902) foreshadowed the development of the West Coast as a tourist region and provided a silver mine whose riches enable the hero to buy back the lost ancestral acres in the old country (in the colonial wish-fulfilment pattern established by Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*, 1859). William Gosse Hay, Bridges and 'G.B. Lancaster' wrote historical fictions of old Tasmania in the first half of the century: the first two were committed to a revisionist reading of colonial history, 'Lancaster' to the costume drama suggested by the title of her best known novel, *Pageant* (1933).

In the last few years the literary returns to the Tasmanian past have been more problematic. Kneale and Motion seem exercised by the possibilities of what they discerned as a 'brave new world' in the past. They explored the nature of the country from which the Australian colonies were settled as well as responding to what are,

for them, the unexpected treasures that the history of Van Diemen's Land in particular affords. Three local works of fiction, all published in 1999, treated the island's past. Heather Rose's *White Heart* and Julia Leigh's *The Hunter* imagined the rediscovery of the Tasmanian tiger. The third, Tom Gilling's *The Sooterkin*, described how—in a dank Hobart winter in the 1820s—a woman could give birth to a seal pup.

Various assumptions can be teased from these works—most direly, that what is of peculiar interest in the Tasmanian experience has already been lost, because it belongs irrevocably to the past. The last Tasmanian tiger in captivity died in the Hobart zoo in 1936. None has been definitely sighted since. There have been no road kills. The Tasmanian past—in Christopher Koch's extravagant formulation, the 'wound scarring the whole inner life of Tasmanians', caused by its origins as a penal colony—is full of Gothic resonances and frissons. Lost worlds, lost species evidently have more promise and certainly afford more literary opportunities than the

depressed Tasmanian present. This has been regarded as exploitation, for instance when Leigh (a mainlander) came under attack at the Melbourne Writers' Festival in August 1999 for presuming to write of Tasmania. Worse, she had revived the Tasmanian tiger only to kill it off before her book's end. The caprice of this fictional manoeuvre—the retrieval of an essential (because lost) part of the Tasmanian identity only to dispose of it again—gave particular offence to some. Leigh and Gilling, besides Motion and Kneale, have had international notice for their books. Evidently the Tasmanian exotic has commercial as well as literary currency, but not, perhaps, for the struggling and exploited native Tasmanians. For them, every literary appropriation, indeed every Tasmanian joke, might be thought to speak the doom of a place where everything of value is assumed already to be extinct, of the past, gone. ■

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#### BOOKS: 2

JIM DAVIDSON

# Total recoil

*The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Graeme Davison, Allen & Unwin, 2000.

ISBN 1 86448 720 8, RRP \$33

**T**HE TITLE HAS A familiar ring, but the ideas in Graeme Davison's book are remarkably fresh. It argues that history in Australia is in a state of crisis. Looking beyond the proliferation of preserved buildings, local history societies, the work of genealogists and other ways in which there appear to have been increased anchorings to the past, history as an academic discipline or a neo-scientific mode of investigation has become much weaker. One indication has been the dramatic decline in enrolments in the final school year. As has been pointed out on more than one occasion, whereas in 1972 one in every three people who sat for Matriculation in Victoria did history, the comparable figure in 1995 was one in ten.

As Davison notes, such figures may be a manifestation of a seismic shift in the



culture. For one thing, the powerful force of managerialism is generally hostile to the past, which it sees as irrelevant, and is often bent on destroying institutional memory, which it finds obstructive. Rather—whether running an opera house or a fowl house—it seeks to impose universalist principles. If interested in history at all, it is history of the broadest, validating kind, rather than the analysis of the particularities of any given situation. Then there is the impact of the computer and the internet, with information overload and laterality, of multiple options rather than traditional linearity. Knowledge is being organised—and assimilated—in new ways, more amenable perhaps to rearrangement, but more susceptible also to closure. There is less room for reflection. No wonder then that tenses are disappearing, and that many



students seem to have a very flattened view of the past.

People now feel less and less connected with it. (Certain Christians are not alone in wanting to be born again.) Until a generation ago, history was often seen as providing the best training for people bent on a career in administration or politics. Traditionally it had allied itself with the liberal outlook, with its somewhat patrician belief that social problems were, after suitably rigorous analysis, capable of amelioration. Implicit in this was a sense of continuity with the past, for one of the effects of the long European hegemony in the world was to induce considerable respect for traditional modes of procedure.

Since connection with the past is no longer assumed, and cherished only in particular contexts such as family or local history, the authentic is now less important to many people than the experience. Last year it was revealed that Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London had both dropped out of the list of the ten top British tourist attractions: whereas their historic function would once have sufficed to validate them, now they are seen to be not entertaining enough. As Davison notes, 'In a television

age, the primary signifiers of historical authenticity may not be intrinsic—the antiquity of the objects on display—but experiential—the success of the museum in evoking for its patrons the look and feel of the past.' Museums have in fact been gutting their displays, streamlining them, replacing them with more interactive installations. The initiative now lies with historical theme parks such as Sovereign Hill.

**C**ULTURE, AS DEFINED by culture practitioners, is no longer about memory: how could it be, when even the British Library has taken to turfing out books—some of them possibly the only copies left in the world?

Yet, in what is probably the most interesting chapter in the book, Davison discusses the contradictory attachment that many Australians have to a local church. He points to the case of Healesville, where a timber church hall was earmarked for replacement, but when plans became known for its demolition, there was a public campaign to save it. Apparently it had once been the first church in the district. In this way the immediate interests of a Christian congregation and the broader ones of the general community can sometimes be opposed. For believers, the church is primarily the people, not the fabric. But for the locals the building is the thing, a symbol of community and continuity. The spectre which haunts many is an empty church with overturned pulpit and smashed windows, a parable for other losses and injuries sustained by declining communities. The result may be a muddled piety or a form of ancestor-worship, but it is real nonetheless.

Heritage, on the other hand, has come ever more sharply into focus. Davison—having served on the Victorian Historic Buildings Council—has a great deal to say about it, and how the word has gradually shifted in meaning. Once it indicated the intangible elements of a continuing culture, whereas now it denotes not only relics of the past, but their replication: ads can be found for a 'two-year-old colonial home-stead', or a 'brand-new Victorian townhouse'. He points out, too,

how the word 'historic' has been subject to a certain amount of disputation between architects, who perceive buildings essentially in terms of their particular style, and historians, who are more concerned with their social context. But something might also have been said about the way the same materialism has become evident here: partly because our sense of history has become so broadened, or democratised, the word 'historic' has come to be applied simply to things that are old, rather than to places where something significant happened. When a newspaper recently referred to 'the historic dance floor' of the Richmond Town Hall, it must have been referring to its age, or restored condition. Presumably no future prime minister was conceived immediately after a canter on it.

This book sounds a number of alarm bells. One piece, written as a response to the rise of Hansonism, points to the false nature of the claim that it is a basic Australian right to have a gun (by which is really meant a semi-automatic rifle). While quite sympathetic to country people's feelings about the everyday importance of guns to them, Davison nonetheless shows that this spurious claim is yet another example of the raging Americanisation of our lives. It is made possible, of course, by the declining hold that history (as distinct from the historic) has on our imaginations, impoverishing a sense of citizenship. Hence the concern even of the Liberal government to restore a measure of history to the school curriculum—even if this is prompted by something of the old conservative notion of seeing it as a way of intensifying patriotism.

A sense of history may not even be much in evidence at the centenary of federation—since all such celebrations are becoming increasingly carnivalesque. As we become creatures with less and less collective memory, we also become more manipulable: Marquez demonstrated in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that it was their communal amnesia which made the citizens of Makondo so exploitable. Hence the sinister twist implicit in Davison's reflection on 2001: 'The symbolic void at the heart of liberal democracy is an ever-increasing one, and history is not the only force bidding to fill it.' ■

**Jim Davidson** is co-author with Peter Spearritt of *Holiday Business: Tourism in Australia Since 1870*, to be published by Melbourne University Press in November.

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# Brought to book

*Jesus: Symbol of God*, Roger Haight, New York, Orbis, 1999. ISBN 1 57075 247 8, RRP \$55

**A**FTER PUBLISHING *Jesus: Symbol of God* in 1999, Roger Haight, a United States Jesuit, has been suspended from teaching while his case is investigated by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The event poses two questions: the first about Haight's theology, and the second about the procedures instituted against him. *Jesus: Symbol of God* is a comprehensive treatment of the significance of Jesus Christ, offering sustained reflection on theological method. The book is clearly written and argued, and reveals Haight to be a good and genial teacher.

As the title suggests, Haight describes Jesus Christ as the symbol through which Christians find God. Haight argues that we cannot know God directly, but only through the objects of our experience which function as symbols. So, his discussion of Jesus Christ concentrates on those aspects of Jesus Christ which we can experience and on the qualities of our experience.

Haight also accentuates the difference between our experience and the ways in which we think and speak about it. Our words will always be provisional and shaped by our historical and cultural context. His theological interest is to reflect on Jesus Christ within the cultural categories of our day.

The aspects of contemporary culture that most engage Haight are those identified with postmodernism, and particularly the pluralism which is instinctive to it. It is axiomatic for Haight in his engagement with postmodernist culture that no single approach to reality will be uniquely privileged.

Together, these emphases lead Haight to make a strong separation between what can be known historically of Jesus Christ and the way we respond to him, on the one hand, and the mystery of God and God's action on the other. So, in treating the Resurrection, he grounds the belief in Jesus Christ's life and the impact that he made on the disciples, to the extent that they discovered the living God in remembering him. He hesitates to describe the Resurrection as God's action in raising Jesus. This kind of analysis needs to deal with the



tradition that speaks of Jesus' words and actions as those of the Son of God. Haight registers such a description as one among many strands of New Testament interpretation, and locates it in a limited historical culture. He understands that doctrines, such as the divinity of the Jesus Christ and the Trinity, illuminate the nature, not of Jesus Christ or of God, but of our access to God through Jesus Christ. Thus, when we say that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man, we mean that it is really God whom we reach in Jesus Christ, and that it is through the truly human Jesus that we find God.

What is to be said of Haight's argument? There is much to admire: his modesty in speaking about God and his respect for the poetry of faith. But ultimately, in my judgment, his method dissolves what is distinctive and powerful in Christian faith: the conviction that God has joined our world in an extraordinary way. This conviction finds expression in paradox: that God has shared our suffering and misery and that we are taken into God's life. Such paradoxical convictions do not easily find reasonable explanation, but they resist easy resolutions that keep God and Jesus in their separate compartments. They also insist that in Jesus Christ we know God, and therefore that Trinitarian language says something more about God than the formal and faceless figure which Haight's method

leaves to us. For all the writer's geniality and genuine devotion, this method which makes strong divisions between the human Jesus, God and doctrine, is a dead end because it sucks Christian faith dry of its distinctive energies.

I am not convinced, however, that the procedures directed against Haight are appropriate. While I take for granted that in the church we have the responsibility to ensure that faith is proclaimed and communicated in its integrity, I wonder if suspension from teaching and shaming within the church community are necessary or justifiable ways of exercising this responsibility.

**T**HOSE WHO SUPPORT such treatment argue that theologians have always been disciplined by the church, and that strong discipline is necessary if the church is to remain faithful and ordered. They say that it is right, therefore, for errant theologians to be pursued, shamed, and withdrawn from positions of influence.

Within the contemporary church, however, so much is published and it is received so critically, that prompt local scholarly and pastoral response to books which cause concern can normally be trusted to vindicate faith. Books from 1999 are 2000 land-fill, unless popular interest in them is fanned by controversy. Drawn-out attacks on their writers usually disseminates their ideas.

Nor am I persuaded by the argument that without punitive discipline the faith and order of the church will be threatened. This case has also been argued for jailing adolescents, beating schoolchildren and putting villagers in the stocks. In those contexts, the practices themselves seemed to foster a climate of control in which any order based on trust seemed inconceivable. People were genuinely surprised that schools could be orderly without strap or cane. Might not the same be true of the church? ■

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# Living at the centre

*Craft for a Dry Lake: A Memoir*, Kim Mahood, Anchor, 2000.

ISBN 1 86359 139 7, RRP \$21.90

**E**VERY NOW AND THEN—and not very often at that—there comes a work that changes forever our understanding, alters the way we see ourselves and our country. For example, Patrick White's *The Tree of Man*, Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*, *The Summer of the 17th Doll* by Ray Lawler, and the poetry of Judith Wright. Here is another.

This is a big claim, and while no review that I've seen so far has given any hint of the importance and impact this book can have, I'll lay money that, if it weren't non-fiction, it would join the others. (Even though non-fiction is beginning to be taken as serious literature, it's probably too late for this book.)\*

This is why I think so. First, it deals with black/white relationships in a way that eschews romance or cynicism and takes a square look at how the two races lived together in the writer's desert childhood, and at how they live now. It has insights only available to one who has lived close to both, while being 'skin' (kinship group) to one and belonging to the other. Second, the book delves deep into a daughter's love for her father, her grief at his death, and it uses her willingness to die for him as a starting point. Her attempt to make a life as an artist in the city, away from all that the man values and approves, contrasts with her life as favoured daughter working beside her father on his cattle station. At one point, when the girl sees her first Van Goghs, overcome with their greatness she thinks, knowing her father's reaction to modern art, 'I can never tell him.'

The family, with the landscape they named after themselves—Mt Tracey, for the writer's sister, Kim's Bore for the author



and so on—have an emotional life on a scale to match. The writer is Antigone, her sister Tracey Ismene to the father's Oedipus. Then, when the writer takes his ashes for scattering in the desert, the father becomes Polynices to the girl's Antigone, buried and grieved for in a scorching scene.

While *Coonardoo* by Katharine Susannah Prichard and *We of the Never Never* by Mrs Aeneas (Jeannie) Gunn enter the country this text stalks, neither comes anywhere near it in insight.

Nor could they, given the time in which they were written and the way the races lived with each other then. It is wrong to say Europeans can't have a spiritual relationship with this country. They can and do, but Aborigines have thousands of years of spiritual history in this place. Those who don't agree might change their mind after this book. It can make your hair stand on end just as spirits made Sam, the writer's dog, howl.

The explorer Arthur Davidson, who surveyed the country this journey follows, is quoted from time to time, as are the journals of both the father and the writer. This adds a depth and scope, plaiting the present and the past, as each surveys the country through his or her own eyes and expertise. It would have been good to see

acknowledgment of the source of this idea.

The book is a description of a journey to the Tanami desert and to the people of the writer's childhood. Alone in her truck with her dog, Mahood goes on pilgrimage to pay homage to her father, Joe Mahood, who died in a cattle mustering helicopter accident. She goes to lay his ghost.

She uses, cleverly, the device of the third person when describing her own childhood. Mahood grew up on the—at that time—most remote cattle station in the world, Mongrel Downs. Later she trained as a visual artist. Earlier, the family lived at Finke, on the edge of the Simpson Desert, where her father was a stock inspector. If you cut out a piece of cardboard in the shape of Australia and balance it on a nail at Finke, it will not fall.

I went like a fugitive among my father's papers, finding the maps and journals which were used on that first trip he made through the Tanami.

Among them I found a scrap of paper on which he had drawn an early map of the station ... Holding the fragment of paper in my hand, I could feel myself disappear into a wilderness of spinifex and claypan and mulga. My father's voice reached out and took hold of me as it had always done. The place and its story seemed to blot out my life, as if nothing had happened to me before or since. And the irony of it was that so little of it was my story.

Describing her childhood, the author says of her third-person self:

She had two mothers, the white one who had borne her and the black one who named her and dreamed for her. The one who dreamed for her, her skin mother, gave to



the child the dreaming of Pinta-Pinta the Butterfly and named her for her own child which was never born. The child imagined the intensity of the light on the rust-coloured slabs of stone, the heat radiating out, butterflies clogging the hot air and covering the shallow edges of the tea-coloured water. She remembered nothing of the black woman's words, she had no idea what this totem conferred on her. All she had of it later was a sense of loss, especially piercing at the sight of butterflies, which blundered out of the scented gardens in the heavy summer air and settled on her.

**W**HEN A 'big women's business ceremony' begins across the border in WA, the writer, reluctantly, shyly, claims the rights and privileges entailed by being 'skin', and attends. Afterwards, one of the elders gives permission for the ceremony to be described. The book gives insight into women's lives in the outback, where black and white meet—with all the joy they sometimes bring, and the painful complexity. This is possible because of a searing self-examination and (one feels it) a longing for honesty. Truth is hard. All societies have taboo subjects: sometimes they are so deep they are not even visible or known. Almost everybody has a plaster over their mouths and a bandage over their eyes. The interface of Aboriginal lives and those of whites, especially in the outback, is full of silences. Few can see and few dare to. As a result, the taboos grow fetid, flourish and cause bizarre behaviour which prevent the truth from being seen or spoken. Here is a book that enters this territory with a courteous scalpel.

During the pilgrimage through the Tanami desert, the day comes when the father's ashes are released into the bed of the dry lake.

Suddenly it is first light and I am sharply awake. The smoke from the fire has spread across the lake and waves into the ti-tree on the far shore, more than a kilometre away. I collect the container with my father's ashes and am up and following the path of smoke onto the lake bed before I have had time to think. This is the time and place. I walk far out onto the lake

surface, the smoke curling and drifting around my knees. I am wading knee-deep in smoke. On the lake bed bizarre small succulent flowers grow ... towards the middle of the lake I open the container and shake the ashes into my palm ...

My father's spirit departed a long time ago. This is a symbol for me to use for my own purpose. I scatter the ash carefully in a circle around me and then step outside it.

Afterwards, there is an event describing rage, grief, honour, despair and sexuality that I cannot think of anything in our literature to match. Scouring herself in ash and red ochre, the woman covers her naked body and, in a dance of death, imprints her body on to her square groundsheet within a circle of his ash.

Her father represented the country, its spirit and its holiness. The woman loving him *and* the country, becomes—in this exhausting act of self-abnegation, art and grief—part of him, part of the country. Paradoxically, in doing so she releases herself from some of the clamp of grief. Afterwards she writes:

Today I fell down on the lake, and did not wake for many hours. I dreamed that it stretched to the horizon in all directions. I was alone, and the surface on which



I walked was made up of the bones and feathers and fur of creatures. Across this blighted landscape a figure approached, and as it came nearer I was afraid, for I recognised myself, walking inwards from the blind horizon. I turned to avoid this meeting, gripped in the helpless lethargy of dreams, and saw the same figure approaching from the way I had come. I turned and turned, and from every direction the figure came inexorably on, a crowding apparition from which there was no escape.

She has stepped once again, as she did in childhood with her brother, into a boat on

a lake, now dry, then full of water. This is the brilliant image on the cover, where she salutes, almost in a worshipping attitude, the horizon, the space, the eternal spirit of the great dry lake. (If *only* the title had been *Boat for a Dry Lake*. *Craft* gives quite the wrong image.)

What is water but life, and what is aridity but grief and death? What is love but the paying of attention? The woman on the once-filled lake attends to her father in life and death by paying the fullest attention imaginable. She creates a work of art of and for him (literally with his ashes) using her own body and her deepest imagination and creativity. No father ever had a more beautiful, original tribute.

**T**HE FACT THAT THE women in this book are largely shadowy figures while the father and the country are the focus, deserves comment. But if it were any other way the book would not have been written nor the journey undertaken.

Few girls sweeping the stairway to heaven towards their father don't airbrush their mother away into a vague wisp at the edge of consciousness and history. And who can blame the girl for choosing a life as little like her mother's as she can or for her panic when she sees (unless she is able to make the most scalding of choices) how like her mother's her own life has grown?

The author's obsession with her father, whose faults she can see as she matures, the struggle she has with grief, and the courage she shows in facing it—her willingness to lie in mud and ash—are homage to her love of her father, her country and her art.

Books like this knock back the boundaries of who we are and what we are allowed to become. A great book wreaks havoc. They should not be taken up, reviewed mildly and tucked under the long wide skirts of polite society. This book, if translated, will alter the way the world sees us, our country, our spirituality, our dilemmas, ambivalence and riches. ■

Kate Llewellyn's latest books include *Burning: A Journal* and *Sofala & Other Poems*. \*This review was filed only a few days before *Craft for a Dry Lake* won The Age non-fiction award for 2000.

# The uses of enchantment

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, J. K. Rowling, Bloomsbury Press, 2000.

ISBN 0 7475 4624 X, RRP \$35

**E**VEN NOW, every so often you come across someone who hasn't heard of the Harry Potter books. They've probably just come out of a coma, or perhaps they've been yachting solo around the Equator for a twelvemonth. Or perhaps they are just not readers. Harry Potter frenzy has subsided to a lively simmer in the months following the extraordinary scenes that accompanied the launch of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the fourth book in the series, but is set to bubble up again next year when the film is released. In the meantime the backlash has been gathering force. There had to be one; some critics are suspicious of joy and distrust delight.

In the weeks leading up to *Goblet of Fire's* July release, there was some tutting from commentators on Bloomsbury's nefariousness. Their sins were venial, and consisted of being mysterious about the title and refusing to give out review copies to leak the plot before the embargo date. All we were told was that Harry would be experiencing the first twinges of adolescence, that the book was to be twice as long as, and more dark and complex than the previous one (each book in the series has been longer and more complex than its predecessors, reflecting the protagonist's own growth in years and understanding) and that a friend would die. There was resentment, but Bloomsbury could hardly be blamed for hyping its salvation.

For a long time Joanne Rowling had been given a dream run in the media as the underdog who had made good. The legends abounded: how, like the Brontës, she had had to hide the fact that she was female. (She did it behind initials as did the brilliant American writer S.E. Hinton, author of *The Outsiders* and *That Was Then, This Is Now*.) Rowling even had to borrow the 'K' from her grandmother's name, as the publishers felt that not only would boys not buy the book if it were obviously written by a



woman, but that a double initial would look more convincing. It is also part of legend that the first book was written while she was very poor, supporting a small baby on her own. She says that she did, as the stories have it, write for a couple of hours at a time in cafés, using the light and warmth to get away from her drab, chilly flat in the Edinburgh gloom. One article I read recently waxed rather expansively on that snippet, having Rowling scribbling her story on paper napkins. And now that the backlash from such glorification has started, the inaccuracies in commentary do not stop with Rowling's life-story; the books are now frequently criticised for having a male protagonist, for being monocultural and for being escapist and unrealistic.

All these criticisms seem to me to be fatuous or just wrong-headed: Harry is a genuine creation, as full of life and interest as any character who has become real to author and reader. The creature of Rowling's imagination happens to be male: why don't those discontented by this write their own books, with female protagonists? And Harry's friend Hermione (a whole generation is going to grow up able to spell and pronounce that name) is such a strong and attractive character that it's merely silly to complain that the book title isn't *Hermione Potter*. In a recent interview in *The Times*,

Rowling said that Hermione was based on herself, and that she hated to make characters to order:

'What irritates me is that I am constantly, increasingly, being asked, "Can we have a strong female character, please?" Like they are ordering a side order of chips. I am thinking, "Isn't Hermione strong enough for you?" She is the most brilliant of the three and they need her. Harry needs her badly.

'But my hero is a boy and at the age he has been girls simply do not figure that much. Increasingly, they do. But, at 11, I think it would be extremely contrived to throw in a couple of feisty, gorgeous, brilliant-at-maths and great-at-fixing-cars girls.'

And an Australian commentator who praised the book faintly before deploring its lack of black characters had perhaps forgotten Angelina Johnson, a senior student and excellent Quidditch player, cause of some rivalry among Harry and his friends as they cast around for partners in the school ball. (Harry and his best friend Ron end up double dating with twins Parvati and Padma Patil, although Harry has heartburnings about the girl he really wants to go with, Cho Chang.) In other words, Hogwarts, the wizards' boarding school, has about the same admixture of cultures as any average British school, and Rowling's inclusion of foreign-sounding names never looks clunky or token.

**A**ND AS FOR THE books' being considered shallow or escapist, to read any one of them, particularly the last two, is to be exposed to a mind of refreshing, often humorous honesty, that creates a world very like the 'real world' that some librarians seem to want to rub children's noses in but that also happens to contain enchantment, both of the wizarding and of the joyous kind. Rowling's witty takes on government bureaucracy, media, education and class are politically very literate and genially



sceptical. And her moral centre (unlike Roald Dahl's, with whom she is often compared) is firm: the evil characters in her books are mainly characterised by racism, cruelty and lust for dominance. Her creation of Rita Skeeter, the tabloid journalist, will immunise millions of young minds against the kind of lying rubbish that gets written in magazines and newspapers about the unfortunate famous.

As for escapism, Tolkien wrote half a century ago in his lecture 'On Fairy Stories' that escape was not such a bad thing after all—if you are a prisoner of war it is the right thing to do. He went on to argue for the acceptance of mythic reality, the deep dreaming that underpins our being. The Gradgrinds were around then too, demanding their brand of dreary faux-realism as the standard fodder for young minds.

The problem with it all seems to me to come down to the traditional librarians' hatred of books that people actually want to read. Rowling's books are this generation's Narnia, its Faraway Tree, almost its Middle Earth. There was a void and she has begun to fill it. But the 2000 Carnegie Medal (awarded by the British Library Association), in what was for the reading public around the world the year of Harry Potter, was awarded to Aidan Chambers' latest, *Postcards From No-Man's Land*, a book 'for 14-year-olds and over' with a 17-year-old protagonist, that deals with adultery, euthanasia and sexual confusion. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* was not even commended. It was a fairly hefty rebuff, not only to Rowling, but to the millions of people who had bought the book and pronounced it good. The Carnegie judging

panel of 13 librarians said of *Postcards* that it was 'the kind of book that gives you hope for the future of literature for children and young people, the kind of book we all wished we had been able to read in adolescence.' For me, that seemed less of a comment on the Chambers book than a snipe at the Potter phenomenon.

When there is such a serious rift in judgment between such a body as the Library Association and the reading public, it gives cause for wondering exactly how that body perceives itself. Not to have awarded Rowling the medal may have been understandable since the third Potter book won it the previous year. But to exclude *Goblet of Fire* from any form of commendation whatsoever argues that the Library Association is at best somewhat out of touch with what young people really want to read, and with what might actually get them—bored and overstimulated as they are with television's nightly dose of sleaze, violence and greed—to learn the joy that can be had when you are so deeply involved in a book that you literally cannot put it down.

**S**NIPPET: In the early '80s, when I lived in an inner suburb of Melbourne that has since become too expensive for me to move back to, I suddenly had a yen to reread some of the old favourites of my youth, so I went to the local municipal library, ensconced in late Victorian stone beside the town hall. I searched for *Anne of Green Gables* or any other L. M. Montgomery books; there were a few in the catalogue but they were not on the shelves. Thinking that they must be lent out, I went to the librarian's desk to reserve them. I was asked to wait. After

about 15 minutes a fresh-faced young woman arrived, not to take down my details, but to ask me why I wanted the books.

'I just want to read them again,' I said. She replied something to the general effect that, seeing I was a mature thirtyish sort of woman, she'd get them for me from their closed storage, whence they had been banished along with the Susan Coolidge *Katy* books. I was too surprised to reply, and she went on to say that such books were no longer kept on the open shelves because they were very bad for young girls who might feel they had to become housewives or some such thing if they read them. I asked if she'd read them. She suddenly looked cagey and said yes, but she'd been younger and had been very bored by them. I told her that L. M. Montgomery books had lots of heroines who were writers, not housewives at all. She looked at me pityingly and went away to extract me my filth from the forbidden stack. Montgomery had joined Enid Blyton and Richmal Crompton on the Librarians' Index Librorum Prohibitorum.

A few years later the *Anne of Green Gables* film came out and the resulting demand for Montgomery books has made its substantial contribution to keeping librarians in work and bookshops in business. The Harry Potter books have kept them even busier. I bought my copy from the little local shop. They couldn't afford to discount it to \$19.99 as had KMart and Target, but loyal customers gave them a welcome mid-year boost that would probably cushion them from the GST and get them through till the Christmas rush. ■

Juliette Hughes is a freelance reviewer.



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# The importance of being on TV

**A**CCORDING TO Currency Press's *Entertaining Australia: An Illustrated History* (edited by Katharine Brisbane, 1991), Oscar Wilde's plays met with mixed success when they were first performed in Australia. The Brough-Boucicault Company gave the Australian première of Wilde's 1892 hit, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, in 1894 in Sydney. The first of his plays to appear in this country, it encountered hostility for its 'faint odour of tired-out cynicism'.

By the time Brough and Boucicault introduced *An Ideal Husband* to Sydney in April 1895, Wilde had already been convicted of homosexual offences and Sydney newspapers refused to print his name in advertisements. The public stayed away. In August of the same year, Brough and Boucicault staked their fortunes on *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Princess Theatre in Melbourne—only six months after its London première—and even the colonial governor thought it safe to attend, with his wife. *The Age* approved of its 'innocently amusing satire upon London fashionable life' and found it as difficult to describe 'as to bottle a sunbeam'. Notwithstanding these propitious omens, the play was a flop.

In the century or so since then, Wilde has become a staple in Australian repertoire. He is now 'safe' and generally very bankable. Since World War II, and especially since the network of Australian state theatre companies began to take shape, Wilde has vied with Noël Coward for the position of leading exponent of British wit on Australian mainstream stages.

A revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1990 made it the most frequently produced play in the then 37-year history of the MTC.

That memorable 1990 production was directed by Simon Phillips and was striking



in many respects, not least for Tony Tripp's ingenious design—a large backdrop inspired by Aubrey Beardsley's *Yellow Book*. For the change of acts its pages were turned by Frank Thring, who played both butlers, Lane and Merriman, and almost upstaged the rest of the production. Not only did the set evoke something of the raffish era of the play, but Thring (replaced by Gordon Chater for the remount) was dressed and made up to resemble Oscar Wilde himself in the first act and a rather lugubrious, broken-down portrait of Dorian Gray thereafter.

But the most striking presence was Ruth Cracknell as the most domineering and acidulous Lady Bracknell I've seen on the Australian stage.

The production toured widely and was a wild success. What endeared it to many people at that time (if not to Anglophile purists) was its high theatrical energy and irreverence as well as its outstanding ensemble playing. The 1990 remount opened in Sydney in September and featured in all of the state theatre companies' seasons for the next year. No doubt, a year of playing for easily anticipated laughs had softened its cutting edge. But it was still a production rich in ideas and inventiveness.

Another curious production going by the name of *The Importance of Being Earnest* also did the rounds in 1989. This was an English show starring the then well-known female impersonators Hinge and Bracket. The conceit of this play was that Dame Hilda Bracket is trying to produce a performance of *Earnest* in her country estate drawing-room but she is let down by the actresses who are to play Gwendolen and Cecily, who don't turn up until the third act. So Dame Hilda enlists the support of her friend Dr Evadne Hinge and, between them, they manage to play the girls as well as Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism. The gardener is pressed into service as an

unlikely Dr Chasuble. Again, fun, in a theatrically energised and irreverent kind of way.

**W**HICH BRINGS US to the present. Almost exactly 105 years to the day after the Australian première of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the Princess Theatre in Melbourne was home to another new production: an Anglo/Australian remount of a Chichester Festival production first seen in 1999, co-produced by Duncan C. Weldon (UK) and International Concert Attractions (Australia).

The concept of the Anglo/Australian co-production is interesting (one of the most interesting things about the production)



and I suspect it will do very well, especially given its principal drawcard and selling-point.

This, of course, is the distinguished British television (and stage) actress, Patricia Routledge, who plays Lady Bracknell. Weldon (who has more than 250 West End productions to his credit) makes no bones about his rationale: 'My productions are usually driven by the star, otherwise there is too much risk.' (*The Age*, 23 August.) In other words, if the star Routledge couldn't do the show, there would presumably be no show. Obviously, then, the whole project (from its Chichester Festival origins to its current revival and enterprising tour) depends on its potential appeal to viewers of British TV shows like *Keeping Up Appearances* and *Hetty Wainthropp Investigates* as much as it does to anything Oscar Wilde might bring to it in the centenary year of his death.

What we have got here, then, is a perfectly competent, but also rather staid, orthodox and even old-fashioned production. Few if any new ideas about the play, English society or production styles are brought to bear on what is essentially a museum-style reading. Admittedly, there isn't a standard trio of box sets, but the flown-in back wall and side-stage entrance-and-exit structures are essentially reduced versions of the Victorian box set for touring. Act 2, for example, is set in John Worthing's Woolton garden, where an outdoor furniture setting is surrounded by boxed flowers and benches with croquet mallets leaning against them. On the floor are croquet hoops. At the rear is a latticed garden wall with climbing roses and to one side is the entrance to the manor house itself. Once Miss Prism has gone and Algernon arrives, Cecily amuses herself by playing croquet—only with a mimed ball and off-stage clicks. It is all a shade twee, recalling Hinge and Bracket more than any other recent version.

The four young male actors are generally sound enough, although the Australian girls run rings around their Anglo beaux. Essie Davis' Gwendolen, in particular, manages to tread very confidently the delicate line between her 'butter wouldn't melt in my mouth' behaviour and her none-too-carefully-concealed sexual desire when only she and Jack are on stage together. By contrast, Theo Fraser Steele and Alistair Petric seem to be conceived according to narrower and more strait-jacketed English Rep models. But there are a couple of fascinating performances from Melbourne stalwart Beverley Dunn (Miss Prism) and

NZ émigré Jonathan Elsom (Canon Chasuble). The butlers are adequate and self-effacing—as they should be in this kind of reverent production. None of the brash, scene-stealing antics of a Thring or a Chater here, thank you!

So what, then, of Duncan C. Weldon's star, Patricia Routledge? Well, not terribly much, really. She's a rather diminutive presence: physically and vocally. That everyone else in the cast (bar Beverley Dunn) towers over her in height is no great problem; when she first enters, everyone else imperceptibly shrinks down a couple of inches and back a couple of feet in deference to Lady Bracknell's *force majeure* and an impression of *stage* presence is thus deftly created by one of the older tricks in the director's book. But no tricks can disguise the fact that we really have to strain at times to hear the whole of her circumloquacious speeches, many of which are also unusually attenuated in their delivery. Lovers of Wilde's wit around me in the audience had finished mouthing Bracknell's inimitable lines under their breaths long

before Routledge. This is a performance with its energy tempered by, or geared to, television.

There is a frisson of cross-textual interest—social climber Hyacinth Bucket pronouncing on the vagaries of upper-class London society—that transcends the theatrical shortcomings of the performance to some extent. But I did sense, at the end of the night—and a slow, long and tame night it is—a 'faint odour of tired-out cynicism' about the project. Selling live theatre as an adjunct to the televisual experience—whether using Routledge or Ruth Cracknell as the selling point (remember the 'Cracknell is Bracknell' commercials associated with the MTC's production?)—seems to me to be selling the theatre, and Oscar Wilde, a bit short. ■

**Geoffrey Milne** is head of theatre and drama at La Trobe University.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* can be seen in Auckland until 14 October) and then in Sydney's Theatre Royal (18 October–12 November). Following the Australian tour, the show is slated for a London season.

THEATRE: 2

PETER CRAVEN

## Bare-board Bard

**T**ROILUS AND CRESSIDA is one Shakespeare play which almost justifies that old category, the problem play. It represents Shakespeare in quasi-historical mode (going over the ground he knew from Chapman's *Iliad*), but it does so with a depth of verbal complexity and a remorselessly cold-eyed perspective. The steeliness is all the more surprising given the presence of two young lovers, and the play's combination of what sounds like a relentless negativity in the midst of famously heroic combat. The latter is represented in something like the ensemble style of the histories (i.e. with maximum realism and absence of stylisation) and makes for an unusually tough piece of Shakespearean dramaturgy, one that resists obvious verbal splendours and much in the way of anthologisable poetic realisation.

The main exceptions to this are Ulysses' speeches, which seem all the more serenely philosophical in their discussions of degree and time because this—for once in Shakespeare—is the sort of state of war Hobbes would have acknowledged.

It's not the most characteristic move in Shakespeare's career that he should have made this plague-bed of antiheroism out of the shadow of Homer—the *Iliad* is more 'Shakespearean' than *Troilus and Cressida* if by that we mean tragic or magnanimous. But there is something very Shakespearean about the way *Troilus and Cressida* tears up any charter of expectations and presents a vision which is raw, scarifying and unconsolated.

It's a play in which typologies walk through the dust of history—Thersites the railer, Pandarus the bawd, Ulysses the sage—

only for the dramatist to individualise the itch of particularity that drives a personality to reduce itself to a type. Shakespeare's humanism seems impacted, at war with itself, as if no-one in the play drew out his sympathy as more than a 'character'.

*Troilus and Cressida*, not surprisingly, calls for miracles of ensemble acting because the cast has to endow these sketches, beyond and below Homeric embodiment, with a 'life' which remains low level.

**T**HIS BELL SHAKESPEARE production does not achieve the miracle (by a long shot) though it is one of the more interesting productions this company has put on. It has raised high hopes because it is directed by Michael Bogdanov, the man who worked with Peter Brook and who ran the English Shakespeare Company with Michael Pennington and was therefore responsible for the production of the whole of Shakespeare's history plays which toured here in 1987, as well as the subsequent tour of *Coriolanus* and *The Winter's Tale*.

Bogdanov's work is famous for its eclectic modern dress and use of TV monitors and rock music, but more

particularly for the fact that he does not let these things get in the way of a 'natural' interpretation of the plays—at least in theory. His cycle of the history plays was as classically delivered as a recording by Gielgud and although the performance was full of leather jackets and shaved heads there was no whiff of the sort of directorial gimmickry that says, 'Let's do it as Israelis and Palestinians.'

I'm not sure why this *Troilus and Cressida* doesn't work, though the fact that Bogdanov is making do with a makeshift *stagione* company of Australian actors probably doesn't help (even though the company includes some of our better known thespians). At times—as in Steven Berkoff's *Coriolanus* for Bell a few years ago—the level of the verse-speaking among the old hands is a good deal higher than usual, though this contrasts—clangingly—with the younger players (most notably Toby Truslove's formally woebegone Troilus). There's something in Leonard Radic's gloomy remark of a few years ago—it was in praise of Bogdanov's English Shakespeare Company I think—that Australians tend to make too much or too little of Shakespeare. They either miss the target by a mile and fall into a kind of maladroit naturalism that does violence to the language or they flounce and prance as if in the presence of the Empire's best. In this production they do a bit of both.

Toby Truslove and Blazey Best as Cressida look bearable with their clothes off but that is, alas, the most bearable thing about them. Truslove has a not unattractive voice over which he has no control at all, and Best can 'act' but mously, small-scale. She needs to be wonderful here and she is not—the performance has a diminutive efficiency that fails to do the trick. The support for this least lustrous pair of lovers is variable. Vic Rooney is an adept-enough Agamemnon at the level of rhetoric, though the performance is not inward. Bille Browne is a 'brilliant' camped-up Pandarus and the legion who admired his Oscar Wilde last year will probably like the desolate arthritic final image of the old procurer, but the whole thing looked like appliqué pantomime to me. Peter Sumner had authority as Aeneas, Peter Carroll clucked around

skilfully as Nestor (though growing more mannered in the second half) and Luciano Martucci looked as though he might have made a fairer fist of Troilus than Truslove did.

There was no *a priori* reason to object to the representation of Achilles (Marcus Eyre) as a kind of biker queen and Patroclus (Derren Nesbitt) as a very femmy homebody, nor to their drag show at the end of the interval, but the conception was closer to the stock image of these things than to any individualising swerve to find the human face, whether sympathetic or alienating, within the type. This was just a bald hulking bull of a man, mouthing grunts in the vicinity of Shakespeare's lines, and a fussy wuss of a man whooping about like a footnote or a decoration.

**T**HROUGH ALL OF THIS, fitfully, there were moments when you could see how the director was aiming for the contemporary convention that would release the satire of the ancient mask, but time after time it eluded him. It was as if the Australian idiom (the heaviness of the acting, not the accent) reduced this play (of all plays) to the mechanics of its rhetoric. And in a play where there is nothing but the glitter of the rhetoric this tended, too often, to sink things like a stone.

None of which is to deny that the older Australian actors kept their ends up, in the absence of a unified style. John Bell gave an efficient, not-inelegant vignette of Ulysses as a staff officer.

And there was at least the suggestion of magic, even as it fled, in this production. Bogdanov's best work is miles better than this, but at least this *Troilus and Cressida* was full of interesting angles. It relaxed or concentrated the eye and showed what a supple place the theatre is, how it can, through stylisation, effect with the merest spots and shadows things that film can only achieve surreptitiously.

There were moments where a bare body, or a clothed one, had enough reality, was sufficiently angled and alive, to suggest the might-have-been in this talented but unachieved sketch of the way a director of weight might do a great piece of Shakespearean disgruntlement in the antipodes. ■

**Peter Craven** is currently editing *Best Australian Essays 2000*.

The Bell Shakespeare *Troilus and Cressida* will be showing at the Sydney Opera House to 28 October.

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# FLASH IN THE PAN



## Acid reign

*Up at the Villa*, dir. Philip Haas. Don't be deceived by the title—this is not more Tuscan pastoral in the Franco Zeffirelli mode (*Tea With Mussolini*). Yes, there is a small squad of American and English ex-pats sporting hats and gloves and fanning away the Florentine days of 1938 while muttering 'Munich' under their breaths like a charm that might ward off the inevitable. But the script and plot (this film does have one, all twists and surprises too) are acid. There is enough residue of W. Somerset Maugham's novella of the same name to make you uneasy just as you are on the brink of being charmed, or seduced. The film shares another Maugham characteristic—it insinuates itself into the private corners of its characters' emotions so that, like an accidental voyeur, you end up seeing more, thinking you know more, than you might care to.

The story begins conventionally. Poor, virtuous, beautiful English widow Mary (Kristin Scott Thomas, above) finds temporary haven in a borrowed Florentine villa and is offered marriage and luxury by the Governor-elect of Bengal, Edgar. (James Fox plays Edgar, twisting his stiff upper lip into such full facial contortion that he looks like a Picasso in progress. Fox is marvellous—

never quite staying on the safe side of burlesque. And Scott Thomas matches him.)

Enter American married libertine (Sean Penn), lush American Princess San Ferdinando (Anne Bancroft) doing Pandarus in carmine lipstick, Jeremy Davies as the Austrian refugee Mary first befriends and then patronises, and Massimo Ghini as the Fascist—and you have all the makings of scandal.

The score alternates between reassurance and foreboding, the cinematography is tight and the acting exemplary. Derek Jacobi, in sandals and eye makeup, plays the English fool somewhat lost in Florence. It would be enough just to watch him as he waddles down a Renaissance corridor, reminding us with every twitch of his hips how close pathos is to tragedy. And how far away.

—Morag Fraser

## Degrees of diplomacy

*The Diplomat*, dir. Tom Zubrycki. A few days after its opening, there were half a dozen people in the cinema to see an evening session of this documentary. It's a pity. It's great stuff. Tom Zubrycki decided to spend a year shadowing José Ramos Horta, the East Timorese independence activist and joint winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace. It could have been just another year in Horta's relentless but lonely and futile work of

touring the world trying to stir interest in the cause of East Timor. He'd been treading the same weary path for over two decades. Yet soon after filming began, Indonesian President Suharto resigned and President Habibie introduced a new attitude to East Timor. The events of the 18 months that followed are well known. Zubrycki happened to be in the right place at the right time.

The result is not just a candid portrait of Ramos Horta, although we certainly get that. We see archival footage of a young man, newly appointed as the foreign minister for the Fretilin Government, leaving his country in 1975 as the Indonesian troops arrive. We see a human being talking about the break-up of his marriage. We see Ramos Horta's elderly mother, Natalina, the unexpected star of the film, leafing through photo albums in her brick veneer home in the western Sydney suburb of Liverpool.

But more significant than any of this, the documentary presents a rare portrait of the effect of political pressure and change on one of the most passionate protagonists of that change. Ramos Horta appears without the benefits of spin doctors. Indeed, he appears with few benefits of any kind. One of the most memorable sequences in the film shows him holed up in a bed-and-breakfast in Auckland last September, trying to secure a meeting with President Clinton, as he follows the disturbing news of the devastation of East Timor by militia. He yells over a mobile phone at the flunkies of Cardinal Sinn who are delaying the Cardinal speaking to him. Worse than that, he needs to find \$800 to pay part of his phone bill before the phone is cut off and his link with East Timor goes dead.

—Michael McGirr SJ

## Pliés don't

*Centre Stage*, dir. Nicholas Hytner. The preview I attended was obviously a special aimed at ballet schools as much as critics, and the cinema teemed with slender elves carrying dustbin-sized popcorn, mega cokes and choc-top icecreams, presumably to keep body and soul together for the 115 minutes of the film.

This made for interesting viewing that went beyond the confines of the movie: sometimes the whole cinema would explode with laughter at a scene which the non-dancer would find merely mildly amusing. (But they do say dancers are so busy that they don't get out much.) They all clapped



Cooper Nielsen (the well-thewed main male dancer, played by real ballet star Ethan Stiefel) when he did something particularly springy and show-offy. And good on him—there's a lot going on in the lad's pants, and he's not a bit ashamed of it.

However, the plot and dialogue were strictly schoolgirl-comic-of-the-'50s passed through a 90210 filter. This is a sad surprise coming as it does from the creator of *The Madness of King George*. Exposure to the glamma rays of Hollywood have turned the hapless Hytner into Aaron Spelling's geeky younger brother. And there were, unfortunately, some racist elements: subtle, but definitely there. It's a very thin, cut-to-the-bone plot. (Which teenager gets picked? That's all, folks.) In this stripped-down cast there are tokens galore: only *one* anorexic chucker (hello!) and one eater: out she goes, for ignoring the implicit 'No Fat Chicks' sign that hangs over ballet company doors. In such a squeeze as this the two token blacks had to be loaded with other signifiers—the young man is also the token gay, the girl is also the token feisty rebel. The gayness of the young black man was unremarkable until it became apparent that he was to be the blonde leading girl's partner in a dance that has erotic moves. That would never do in Hollywood, would it? So you never see him in rehearsal with her, only Ethan Stiefel's demonstration and coaching ('Grind your hips *closer* to hers, Eric!'). And of course the plot comes to the rescue: just before the performance, the nice unthreatening gay black guy has to sprain his ankle to make sure we never have to see an Othello-ish scenario.

And the final dance spectacle is cringe-making: a pinnacle of banal awfulness. It is supposed to be modern and cutting-edge and all that, but the choreography is faux-Balanchine married to *Cats* and has never heard of Isadora Duncan let alone Tharp. Your teenage balletomane will love it.

—Juliette Hughes

## Slash and gag

*Scary Movie*, dir. Keenen Wayans. Parody movies are a mixed bag. They can be incredibly bad (*Police Academy VII, VIII*, whatever?) or memorable classics like *Blazing Saddles* and *The Naked Gun*.

*Scary Movie* is a gem of the genre. As ribald satire, the film thumbs its nose at political correctness and what passes as a plot is a pastiche of lampooned scenes from almost every thriller or teen-thriller in the

past 20 years. Just sit there and tick them off. *Scream I, II and III, Nightmare on Elm Street, Halloween, The Blair Witch Project, Matrix, The Sixth Sense, There's Something About Mary, I Know What You Did Last Summer*, etc., with a swipe at *The Usual Suspects* to round things off.

*Scary* is directed by Keenen Wayans (not remembered for that classic, *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinkin' Your Juice in the Hood*), who has combined with his brothers (two of whom also appear in the film) to produce a movie that operates perfectly at two levels.

At a basic level, it is the ultimate parody riddled with memorable visual gags and hilarious one-liners. At another level, it is a contemporary social satire, homing in on such questions as colour discrimination, with the much-quoted gag of the police reacting to the call 'white woman in trouble' (a busty high school beauty who is severely stabbed in the implant).

In an interview, Wayans reluctantly concedes that the film was rehearsed for two weeks, but quickly emphasises that most of the best scenes were impromptu. Among those scenes is a swipe at the ultimate horror—the filmgoer who crunches popcorn, rattles papers, talks in a loud voice and continues to use a mobile to annoy everyone around her. In this sort of movie she gets the punishment that we all think she deserves.

Against a background of sex, extraordinary genitalia and an occasional explosive ejaculation, the young cast is almost unrecognisable. I say 'almost' because I did recognise the body of Shannon Elizabeth, who plays Buffy—she spent most of her time totally nude in *American Pie*. Wayans reassures us that Elizabeth got the role of Buffy for her 'finely honed acting skills'.

The plot is irrelevant, but for what it's worth there's a crazed slasher in a funny mask loose on the high school campus. The cast gives the impression that they are having lots of fun, and why not? Wayan's world is a very funny place.

—Gordon Lewis

## Redeeming feature

*Jesus' Son*, dir. Alison Maclean. It's been a long time between drinks for ex-New Zealand director Alison Maclean (now based

in the United States). Her 1989 comic/horror short *Kitchen Sink* still stands out as one of the most effective pieces of short-form cinema I can think of. It was followed up in 1992 by *Crush*, a feature-length project produced in New Zealand, after which she headed to the United States. Since then it seems that all of the feature film projects she's tried to develop have fallen through for one reason or another. Apart from some directing for television (*Sex and the City, Homicide: Life on the Streets*), we haven't seen much from her, until now, with her new film, *Jesus' Son*.

Adapted from a series of short stories by Denis Johnson, *Jesus' Son* is structured as a series of elliptical fragments, strung together by the slightly addled narration of Billy Crudup's character (below), FH (short for 'fuckhead', so named because 'everything he touches turns to shit'). FH's narration is addled at least partly because he's something of a junkie—that is to say, he'll take anything he can get his hands on. Characters come in and out of focus, stories ramble back and forth, strange obsessions take hold



and just as quickly evaporate—even he admits that there are times when his life seems to have wandered into someone else's dream. Despite the sordid and often bleak circumstances of his life, FH seems to retain an almost simple-minded innocence of spirit, even in the hallucinatory depths of a bender following the death of his girlfriend. Whether or not this innocence means that the title of the film is meant to apply to FH or not is ambiguous; certainly the idea of redemption, or at least redemption through faith in a world that nevertheless never seems to quite fit together properly, seems to be where the film is trying to take us.

—Allan James Thomas



## Danger: money

**L**ATELY TV HAS BEEN SO AWFUL that I've been thinking I should put in a claim for a stunt TV-watcher who can just tell me what's going on. In the days before I had to write about it and therefore take full notice, I always used to do something else while watching. I still do when not on duty, as it were. Knitting has its uses and they go beyond the construction of gorilla-armed jumpers: recently I preserved at least 14 neurones from rage-induced burnout simply by not having my eyes on the screen. Alerted by sounds of nausea from the rest of the family, my first thought was to preserve the dogs.

'Blindfold them again, sweetheart,' I said. 'Or they'll start chewing the electricity cord and fuse all the lights like last time.'

'Bless them,' he said emotionally, calming a foam-flecked Jack Russell. 'They're only trying to save us. Dogs are so loyal ...'

He says he's going to start a self-help group for Spouses of People in Dangerous Occupations.

But recently, in the face of all recent precedent, decent drama has resurged. *SeaChange* led the charge, and has been joined by a really exciting new three-part series from the Beeb. *Shooting The Past* (ABC) will screen at 8.30pm on three Friday nights (6, 13 and 20 October). Written and directed by Stephen Poliakoff, it won the 1999 Prix Italia and the Royal Television Society's award for Best Drama Serial and is the best thing I've watched since Denis Potter's heyday. The story concerns a publicly owned photography museum of uniquely English unwieldiness and seeming inefficiency. It has of course been sold to an American entrepreneur who is going to establish a school of business. The gigantic collection of 10 million photographs is to be sold off piecemeal, having first had the 'eyes' picked out of the collection—the images that will attract large prices from collectors. The rest are to be sold as a useless job lot or trashed.

To tell you the story would be unfair, so I'll simply say that Timothy Spall as Oswald Bates, the mysterious eccentric, the wounded trickster figure with the super-memory, is riveting. He is funny and sad without ever being maudlin. Lindsay Duncan as Marilyn Truman (now there's a name whose resonances are all worth delving into) is merely brilliant. Poliakoff writes memorably for her, particularly as she has to deal with the uncomprehending contempt of Christopher Anderson (Liam Cunningham), the American businessman who must be

persuaded to let the collection live in its entirety. Marilyn meets the familiar challenges of TINA with only her luminous honesty. (TINA: 'There Is No Alternative' became the ecorats' mantra during Thatcher's reign and proved incredibly successful to the dreamers of avarice. Incredible because it had the effect of stifling reply in ways that people are only now beginning to realise, as if waking from long bewitchment.)

Poliakoff gives us lucid discourse on the nature of history, and in it you realise afresh how all the codswallop of the post-modernist history-killers only left us wearing the blinkers of a dead merchant, old 'history-is-bunk' Henry Ford; how the streamlining of information benefits only hegemony; how humanity is lost when memory is lost and when the freedom to wander through a garden of bright images is seen as useless. Settle in and watch, or set your VCR.

**I**N LATE SEPTEMBER there was great music on the ABC. The two-part series on Sibelius whetted my appetite for that unjustly neglected composer. When we were kids, my sisters and I would dance to his Karelia Suite, being Margot Fonteyn to its lovely Northern coldness. Soon after, I heard his Fifth Symphony and

was pierced to the marrow. It is music to read Chardin to: it echoes with the deeps of wild frozen earth and cries with the yearning for unity.

On Sunday, 1 October, at 9.40pm, the ABC's *Over the Top with Franz* is worth a look, particularly if you saw *Der Winterreise* on Sunday afternoon on 12 September. That fine young tenor Ian Bostridge sings Schubert's setting of Wilhelm Müller's 24 strange poems, but in a way that isn't a hundred miles from a rock video. Seen in a bleak room instead of a concert platform, it builds a picture of the protagonist's alienation that is positively Camus-ish. I wanted to be purist and disapproving but was won over by the really wonderful singing and playing. (Julius Blake was the pianist and by crikey he's good.) And if you can't be Fischer-Dieskau, (who can?) some visual assistance will perhaps win the piece new friends.

I suppose it's an instance of the kind of change that Oswald Bates means when he says, haltingly, at the end of *Shooting The Past*: 'We are all hit by changing things—not able to stop it.' So we adapt. Do we ever adapt. ■

**Juliette Hughes** is a freelance reviewer.







## Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 87, October 2000

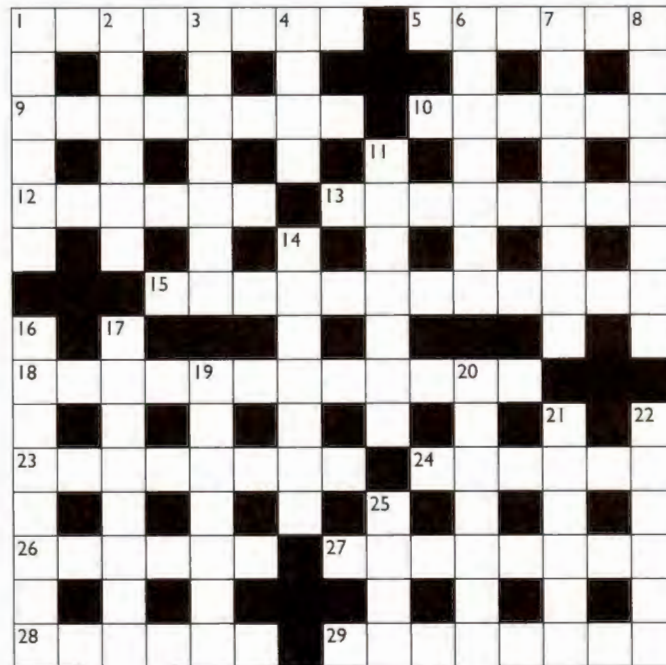
Devised by  
Joan Nowotny IBVM

### ACROSS

- 1 & 5. Ought queen put segment back in the ship for luggage supports? (8,6)  
 9. In your work at *Times in Thailand*, originally, you'd report on the speaker's point of view? (8)  
 10. Outright Arkansas bluster! (6)  
 12. Peevish at having to wear uniform. (6)  
 13. Failing an alternative, he changes sides. (8)  
 15. Adjust original inhabitants' options, perhaps. (12)  
 18. In the theatre, she can make men, for example, lose their senses! (12)  
 23. Less than tall is he who succumbs to such charm! (8)  
 24. If it went right instead of left, this country could produce cloth from goats or rabbits. (6)  
 26. The troops, spread abroad among the inhabitants, nevertheless showed mercy. (6)  
 27. Female practicality is an exercise in pointlessness. (8)  
 28. The success of Sputnik? It actually was attributed, partly, to the 21-down leader first named! (6)  
 29. The brig on the right, blurry in the fog, will be visible when the light is better. (8)

### DOWN

1. Main fastener. (6)  
 2. Interval of a month on the road? (6)  
 3. Bear lost its head in the whirlwind! (4)  
 5. The anguish of people found to be in the wrong. (7)  
 7. He occasionally ate vapid colourless food, to show he was flexible. (8)  
 8. Having taken a seat, I get up to criticise, somewhat ironically. (8)  
 11. Teen on a rebellion trip—far from being mother's first joy! (7)  
 14. Communist leader known as 'Bluey'! (7)  
 16. Quiet craftsman but somewhat tendentious. (8)  
 17. Listen! Everyone inside with military leader? It's a telltale sign. (8)  
 19. Religious group keeps us quiet, I fancy! (7)  
 20. Conveying the conclusion even before scene starts. (7)  
 21. Silly drunk about to compete for position on the regional council. (6)  
 22. Advocate that hen be given water for a start. (6)  
 25. Sharp edge, right? Polish it with upward motion. (4)



### Solution to Crossword no. 86, September 2000



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