

# EUREKA STREET

A MAGAZINE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS,  
THE ARTS AND THEOLOGY  
Vol 13 no 2 March 2003 \$7.50 (inc. GST)

## Meanwhile...

**Tom Griffiths** essays deeper ways of reading Australia's frontier history

**Delia Falconer** defends the Australian novel

**Peter Roebuck** plays a straight bat on politics and cricket

Plus war, poetry, water, the High Court, fires, and justice for stowaways

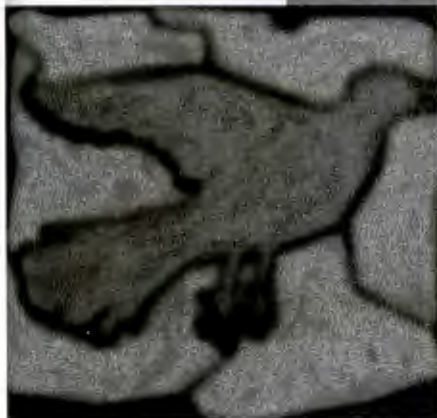


# EUREKA STREET book offer

October 2002 Vol.5 No.2

A Forum for Theology in the World

interface



REFUGEES: justice or compassion?

Edited by Hilary Regan and Andrew Hamilton

## Refugees: justice or compassion?

Edited by Hilary Regan and Andrew Hamilton SJ

Now's the time to take a fresh look at refugees and asylum seekers. These collected essays are as insightful and honest as they are unexpected. Find out what's really going on: from the perspective of international law and Australian policy to the experiences of refugees. Editors Hilary Regan and Andrew Hamilton SJ have also included some great poetry.

Contributors are Mark Raper SJ, John Ozolins, Alan Crouch, Frank Brennan SJ, Georgina Costello, Gordon Preece, Saba Hakim, Grant Fraser, Andrew Hamilton SJ, Alan Nichols, Helen Hughes and Martin Clutterbuck.

Thanks to Australian Theological Forum, *Eureka Street* has 12 copies of *Refugees: justice or compassion!* to give away. Just put your name and address on the back of an envelope and send to: Eureka Street March 2003 Book Offer, PO Box 553, Richmond VIC 3121. See page 15 for winners of the December 2002 Book Offer.



## SUMMER QUIZ SUMMER QUIZ SUMMER QUIZ SUMMER QUIZ

### Answers to the January–February Summer Quiz

1. They have all appeared on the American TV series 'Friends'.
2. Twenty.
3. Telamon.
4. Francis Crick, Maurice Wilkins and James Watson.
5. Rosalind Franklin. In 1958, four years before Crick, Watson and Wilkins won the Nobel, Franklin died, at the age of 37.
6. The Matthew Flinders, the Edward Henty, the Thomas Mitchell and the C.J. La Trobe.
7. 4909 AD.
8. a) 2752; b) 5763; c) 1423, but will be 1424 in early March, so either answer is acceptable; d) 5122.
9. White light.
10. a) A thin membrane that envelops the eyeball from the optic nerve to the ciliary region; b) the Prince of Wales, also a book by David Drake, also a Scottish clan leader, also a British locomotive; c) the central lobe of the brain.
11. De Lacaille named the following southern constellations: Antlia, Caelum, Circinus, Fornax, Horologium, Mensa, Microscopium, Norma, Octans, Pictor, Pyxis, Reticulum, Sculptor, Telescopium.
12. Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points. There! Aren't you glad you found out that one?
13. Karl Marx was described as such in verse by his fellow students at Berlin University.
14. Norman Mailer, John Updike and John Irving.
15. Epictetus, one of the Stoics.
16. Abraham Lincoln. However, he did go on to say 'Capital has its rights, which are as worthy of protection as any other rights.' *First Annual Message to Congress* (3 December, 1861)
17. Woe, you poor old Wednesday-woefuls.
18. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, described by Charles Lamb in a letter to William Wordsworth in 1816.
19. Geelong, Victoria.
20. Samuel Volckertzoon, attempting to describe what is now known as a quokka (*setonix brachyurus*), 38 years before Willem de Vlamingh described it as a rat and named its home 'Rottenest' (rat nest) island. Now of course known as Rottneest Island.
21. Elvis' first band was called the Blue Moon Boys.
22. Mrs Dai Bread Two in *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas.
23. I am a transistor.
24. Richard Starkey, aka Ringo Starr (born 7 July, 1940).
25. Madame de Montespan; Lola Montez; Mata Hari.
26. a) Solomon Lew; b) John Elliott.
27. Joe Frazier.
28. Eminem; Tom Cruise.
29. a) Thomas Stearns Eliot; b) Joanne Kathleen Rowling; c) Clive Staples Lewis; d) Herbert Vere Evatt; e) Alec Derwent Hope.
30. The 2003 Rugby World Cup. Yup. No testosterone. The mind boggles.
31. a) Susie O'Neill; b) Greg Norman; c) Marjorie Jackson; d) Rod Laver.
32. a) Lorenzo da Ponte; b) Francesco Maria Piave; c) Henri Meilhac & Ludovic Halévy.
33. In ascending (or descending!) order of hellish horror: slicing, pushing, pulling, hooking, topping, skying, sclaffing, toeing, and (never say it aloud on the course) shanking.
34. a) Mithrandir; b) Olórin.

Congratulations to all who survived the January–February 2003 Summer Quiz. And the winners are ... Carol Quinn and Erik Donnison, who will each receive *A Dictionary of Euphemisms, How Not To Say What You Mean*, by R.W. Holder (Oxford University Press).



# EUREKA STREET

A MAGAZINE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, THE ARTS AND THEOLOGY  
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*'I find reading the Iliad almost intolerable: that orgy of battles, wounds and death, that stupid and endless war, the puerile anger of Achilles. The Odyssey, however, has a human dimension, its poetry grows from a reasonable hope: the end of the war and exile, the world rebuilt on the foundation of a peace gained through justice.'*

—Primo Levi, *The Search for Roots*.

**P**RIMO LEVI is always a tonic—hopeful in his very acerbity. At a time like this, when the world—literally the whole world—waits on words, it is bracing to hear hope extolled, and exhilarating to think hard about the foundations of peace and how we might lay them down.

In March 1991, as we were preparing the first issue of *Eureka Street*, cartoonist John Spooner drew a cover for us (there it is, above, in the almost infinite regress that these *plus-ça-change-times* dictate). Because monthly magazines are not news bulletins we gave him specifications to cover all bases: something time-proof, please, to catch the anxious edge of hope and of peace in a period of international uncertainty and manipulated media frenzy (remember the nightly bulletins with their precision bombings looking for all the world like computer games?). Something also to suggest that living can't be suspended while leaders manoeuvre. Spooner took his ludicrous brief like the lawyer he once trained to be and the great cartoonist he manifestly is, and came up with the goods.

Cartoonists (and Australia has the best in the world) provide a tough registration of the way things are. In their economy of line they manage to get so much in—ironies, hypocrisies, political grey areas, the facts behind the facts, the deals done. Their work could not be more distinct from the syndicated, massaged, pooled and partial daily reporting that now so constrains dissemination of the news. Often they are the only ones routinely plumbing the depth of issues, and the only ones with tools sharp enough to point a moral that is not mere preaching. Fortunately, there are others who will lay it on the line, some of them journalists, some professional analysts, some statesmen.

On 12 February, veteran US Senator Robert Byrd gave a speech from the floor, calling his fellow Senators to account: 'On this February day, as the nation stands at the brink of battle, every American on some level must be contemplating the horrors of war.

'Yet, this Chamber is, for the most part, silent—ominously, dreadfully silent. There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war.'

Byrd, with very American gravitas, told his fellow Senators what demonstrators have since told their governments by massing in protest in cities all over the world. 'This,' said Byrd, 'is no small conflagration we contemplate. This is no simple attempt to defang a villain. No. This coming battle, if it materializes, represents a turning point in US foreign policy and possibly a turning point in the recent history of the world.'

**B**YRD IS NOT a young man, which liberates him somewhat—he has the experience of a long-term politician and nothing to lose by speaking out. But he is also, in his frankness, consciously carrying on a tradition for which the United States has been rightly lauded.

'This nation', he warned, 'is about to embark upon the first test of a revolutionary doctrine applied in an extraordinary way at an unfortunate time.' Byrd is a Democrat, but also a conservative American patriot, and alarmed by the doctrine of pre-emption, '... the idea that the United States or any other nation can legitimately attack a nation that is not imminently threatening but may be threatening in

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the future—is a radical new twist on the traditional idea of self defense.’ That radical new twist, he observes, is not sanctioned: ‘It appears to be in contravention of international law and the UN Charter.’

No-one could accuse the Senator of being anti-American. The rhetorical browbeating currently used in place of argument does not work in his case. His words demand attention, and will continue to do so even as negotiations between the US and its uneasy allies become more intense and the diplomatic arm-twisting more painful. Poor Turkey—caught in the middle.

In his analysis of the international ramifications of current US policy, Byrd draws attention to Pakistan—‘at risk of destabilizing forces’. In *The New Yorker* (27 January 2003) another veteran, journalist Seymour M. Hersh, provides a grim and documented account of Pakistan’s dealings with North Korea, of trade deals made under pressure (cash-strapped Pakistan needed missile systems) involving Pakistan’s nuclear weapons secrets—high-speed centrifuge machines in particular. Hersh’s article, drawing extensively on CIA reports, is disturbing enough in its principle focus on the trading in nuclear material but even more alarming in the picture it draws of an Administration that has taken its eyes off a situation potentially more dangerous than anything that could come out of Iraq.

Byrd, in more rhetorical mode, echoes Hersh’s disquiet: ‘Has our senselessly bellicose language and our callous disregard of the interests and opinions of other nations increased the global race to join the nuclear club and made proliferation an even more lucrative practice for nations which need the income?’

His answer is clear: ‘In only the space of two short years this reckless and arrogant Administration has initiated policies which may reap disastrous consequences for years.’

One can discount a little for partisan politics here: Byrd is a US Democrat in a Republican-dominated period. But his list of charges is echoed by many other authoritative sources who have no direct political involvement. ‘Pressure appears to be having a good result in Iraq’, Byrd says. Again, from America, not from America’s critics, come the journal articles that support that claim: Saddam Hussein might be a murdering tyrant but deterrence works with him. So the pressure to act now, and the connected deriding of the United Nations for its reluctance to sanction force, is in Byrd’s terms ‘a box of our own making’. North Korea is another matter entirely.

ONE OF THE most disturbing by-products of this current state of international tension is that so much else of import is displaced while we watch and wait. In Australia we are just coming to the end of a period of what can only be described as natural disaster—drought compounded by fire. (The cindery gumleaves on page 9 of this month’s *Eureka Street* are a random cull from my back garden—kilometres away from the burnt Canberra suburbs.) But in Canberra, as Michael McKernan notes this month (p9) natural disaster brought out extraordinary bravery, community spirit and enterprise in people who in their normal routines hardly talk to their neighbours. That’s hopeful, that’s work enough, work for us to be going on with. Odyssey, not Iliad.

—Morag Fraser

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COMMENT:2

FRANK BRENNAN

## Thrown out of court

IN FEBRUARY ALL seven judges of the High Court threw out Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock’s ‘privative clause’ which was an attempt to deny asylum seekers and all other visa applicants access to the courts.

The government’s intention was that once the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) had reviewed a decision to refuse a protection visa there would be no appeal possible to the courts. A Bangladeshi asylum seeker who was refused a protection visa appealed to the High Court on the ground that he was denied natural justice because the RRT took into account adverse material which was relevant to his case without giving him notice of the material and without giving

him any opportunity to address it. The High Court said that people in this situation could still appeal to the courts. They can appeal not only to the High Court, but also to the Federal Court and the new Federal Magistrates’ Court. Importantly the High Court, despite attempts by the government to stop this practice, can still remit such matters to lower courts to avoid the High Court being clogged with these cases.

Chief Justice Gleeson insisted on the need for decision-makers to act not only in good faith: they must also act with fairness and detachment. Five of the other judges said, ‘It is impossible to conclude that the Parliament intended to effect a repeal of all

statutory limitations or restraints upon the exercise of power or the making of a decision.' The Australian constitution guarantees that courts must always be able to assess whether a Commonwealth decision-maker has made a decision within their jurisdiction. These five judges were very scathing in stating that 'the fundamental premise for the legislation' was 'unsound'. They went out of their way to make it plain that this litigation 'is not some verbal or logical quibble. It is real and substantive'—maintaining the constitutional role of the courts.

There is guaranteed constitutional access to the courts to correct jurisdictional errors by the RRT and the minister. This guarantee covers any application based on the claim that the minister or the tribunal has not acted with fairness and detachment. Justice Callinan pointed out that parliament could not set such time limits on access to the courts 'as to make any constitutional right of recourse virtually illusory'.

How then did the government get it so wrong? Weren't they warned? Yes they were.

**L**OCKING OUT THE COURTS has been one of Minister Ruddock's abiding passions. He first tried introducing this legislation in June 1997, and again in September 1997. Back then, the Labor Opposition opposed the legislation and accurately predicted that 'the Coalition will probably fail in this objective. The jurisdiction of the High Court cannot be totally excluded'.

Mr Ruddock claimed that the legislation had been given the tick by a bevy of silks including Tom Hughes QC, once a Liberal Attorney-General. But that claim seemed dubious once Mr Hughes appeared before the Senate committee in January 1999 saying, 'The entrenched constitutional jurisdiction of the High Court to grant what is called prerogative relief ... cannot be eradicated and abrogated, except by passage of legislation after a referendum'. He warned that the 'passage of this bill would produce the altogether undesirable effects to which two former chief justices, Sir Anthony Mason and Sir Gerard Brennan, had alluded'. A month before Mr Hughes had come out and given evidence in his personal capacity, Minister Ruddock was so cocksure of his position (which has now been discredited seven-nil in the High Court) that he told parliament, 'My good friend Sir Gerard Brennan has misunderstood in part the nature of the provisions that we are proposing.' Hughes, Mason and Brennan understood all too well.

It was only in the aftermath of *Tampa*, when the government was emboldened enough, and the Opposition was beaten enough in the retreat from legal principle, that this privative clause was passed by the parliament. Now we are all to pay the price of added uncertainty with future litigation because the government wanted to play fast and loose, tampering with constitutional principle despite all the warnings. Any disaffected asylum seeker can now appeal to the courts alleging that they have been denied

a fair hearing. Minister Ruddock should heed the call of Tom Hughes when he addressed the Senate committee four years ago:

We are an affluent and a free society. It is in the nature of things, that being such a society, people claiming to be oppressed and to be the victim of injustice in their own countries will be forever knocking on our doors. It is one of the burdens of being a free society that we should, you may think, provide a system of dealing with persons claiming to be refugees which is as legally certain as any branch of the law can be and that has established and clearly understood legal criteria of exemption or liability.

Now that the High Court has established beyond doubt that a privative clause cannot exclude all refugee decisions from the courts, it is time for the executive government to design a process for the orderly determination of these matters in the courts. Back in September 1997, Mr Ruddock told parliament that he would look after matters once the courts were excluded:

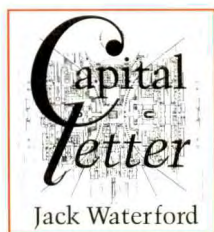
I do not intend to leave the system flawed. I intend to ensure that the system is run with integrity. I intend to ensure that the former government's measures to contain abuse of our judicial system are given effect. I want to assure the House that I am intent on ensuring that those people who are genuine are accommodated and at the end of the day there is a safety net; and that safety net is me, as minister.

Unfortunately, the other decision delivered by the High Court on its first sitting day in 2003 reveals that the minister is not your ordinary safety net. Mrs Bakhtyari and her five children have been denied a protection visa by the safety-net minister even though it was shown in the course of the litigation that Mrs Bakhtyari only learnt two days after the RRT rejected her protection visa application that her husband was lawfully resident in Australia. The minister's department knew this but did not see fit specifically to inform the RRT. If the RRT had known this, the RRT would have issued the family with protection visas as a matter of course back in July 2001 because Mr Bakhtyari was already recognised as a refugee. Instead this woman and her five children have spent an additional 18 months in detention in Woomera and now Baxter.

An appropriate safety net requires four strands: public servants with integrity, a dispassionate minister, an informed tribunal and accessible courts. It is time for the executive to respect the role of the courts. In doing so, the government would not be riding the populist wave after *Tampa*. But they might be able to design a system of review that respects the constitution and the traditional Australian way of considering fundamental rights and interests. ■

**Frank Brennan** SJ is Associate Director of Uniya, the Jesuit Social Justice Centre.





## The coalition of the unwilling

**J**OHN HOWARD PROBABLY committed Australia to a coalition of the willing two or three months before the Opposition suspects he did, but his enthusiasm for a conflict has been declining from the time that the Opposition brought United Nations assent into the equation.

Since then the Prime Minister has been backtracking, trying desperately to narrow and redefine the commitment he made, insisting that he had always reserved the right to drop out at the last moment, ruling out participation in anything but a short war and rejecting any notion either of participation in an Iraqi peacekeeping force or an army of occupation.

First off he was snookered by Kevin Rudd, who succeeded in persuading local public opinion that assent to any intervention should be contingent on a United Nations resolution. Then a piece of mischief by Laurie Brereton, that was focused on undermining Simon Crean and Kevin Rudd, finally embarrassed Labor into outright opposition to a mere American intervention. But it's not Labor that's the problem—Labor is only marginally less keen on participation than Howard is. It has been the failure of the United Nations to play to script that means Howard now has more to fear from the coalition of the unwilling at home than from the coalition of the willing abroad.

He's not the only one who miscalculated. One of the reasons for Labor's dithering (until Brereton's intervention) was the belief that the UN Security Council would ultimately cave in to American pressure. Labor never wanted to rule out the idea of joining an expeditionary force, even one going without United Nations sanction—provided the UN had been seen to fail.

What no-one seems to have anticipated is that France and Germany, with help from Russia and China, would devise a UN Iraq strategy appealing both to the realists and the moralists. The European line has been to push for time, and for threats falling short of war. However much John Howard has pooh-poohed European and Asian comments on the continuing scope for diplomacy, the prospect of further concessions and the uncertain state of knowledge about Saddam Hussein's weapons, he has been forced into the position of seeming an enthusiast for war. Or at least an enthusiast for whatever the US position happens to be at the time.

Now he's in a host of binds. The charge of being an American poodle hurts—the more so when the master does not seem to appreciate how much political capital Howard has been expending at home. Howard has become an articulate describer of the general sins of Saddam, but that's not the argument: no-one is defending Saddam. Howard cannot get any traction. No more than George Bush has he been able to show how dislodging Saddam or making war with Iraq makes international terrorism less likely, or stability in the Middle East more achievable.

Like Bush and Tony Blair, he has seemed incapable of describing what he hopes will happen after the war is won, and all too optimistic that it will be won quickly and cleanly, with no great loss of life.

If he cannot describe it to his defence forces, or to parliament, he cannot explain it to the population either. The most he can hope for is that the population will quickly separate this from other issues, and vote for him or the Liberals next time around anyway, on the basis that Labor is a disunited rabble not to be trusted on the economy. Or that the contradictions of Labor's own stand will become more obvious, or that luck will swing his way, as so often it does, with the UN ultimately coming to the party, a triumphal march into Baghdad, and a free trade treaty with Washington.

**H**OWARD HAS HAD SO much luck that nothing can be discounted. It is hard to imagine, however, that European nations will become more tractable, particularly as it becomes more clear to them that their policies are popular as well as being probably right. They do not have the same interests in toeing an American line, or being thought to. They have good reasons for allowing the jihad against the West to dissipate into one against the English-speaking West, and a more realistic appreciation of the power balances in the Middle East, if only because they do not see things through the prism of oil and Israel.

One might have thought, indeed, that Australia's interests, even as an American friend, were rather closer to those of Europe than of America. Certainly it is hard to see a free trade treaty being a substantial bait, if only because Australia's trading interests lie more in eastern Asia than with America, and that the inevitable result of a treaty would be the creation of retaliatory trading blocs from which Australia would suffer. And that's assuming that the deal we made on American agricultural subsidy was worth having.

But parades and free trade agreements are not necessarily going to appease the coalition of the unwilling, a group far bigger than the chattering classes and instinctive leftists Howard so often derides. Nor is this coalition simply afraid of cold steel. It includes those who want more action on Zimbabwe and who pushed for armed intervention in East Timor—and those who want more concentration on what is happening in North Korea, which has a leadership more unpredictable and malign than Iraq's, is more likely to use the weapons of mass destruction it undoubtedly has and which is a more clear and present danger to the peace than Saddam Hussein. Not to mention a clear and present danger to Australia's security interests. ■

**Jack Waterford** is editor-in-chief of the *Canberra Times*.



## From San Egidio

Some social and church commentators see the 1960s as an era of dissolution. Claudio Betti, recently in Australia, offers another take on the decade. With other school-mates, he was influenced by the desire for change expressed in the events of 1968. He and his 14-year-old companions wanted to avoid the slogans of politics and the generalities of church commitments, and to live the Gospel with their feet and hands. They spent their free time in the Roman slums, and prayed in the streets. Their enterprise grew into the San Egidio community, a loose gathering of groups engaged with the poor of their cities. It also mobilises its resources for particular tasks, like brokering peace in Mozambique and addressing the devastation of AIDS in Africa. Claudio has not renounced the 1960s—on arriving in Australia, his first question was: why on earth did all the school students wear uniforms?



## Peace piece

Talking of the '60s, we have recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, issued by Pope John XXIII. It formed a notable thread in the tradition of reflection on political and social life, and has played its part in shaping the increasingly strong church opposition to war of any kind as an instrument of policy. The title of the Encyclical, *Peace on Earth*, will remind some of the high hopes of the 1960s that institutions could be shaped to embody the desire for peaceful international relations. It will remind others that this noble hope was utopian, and has been replaced by the contrary view that war is an acceptable instrument when used by the strong to secure peace on their own terms. For Pope John XXIII, of course, the title echoed the angels' proclamation to the shepherds.

It emphasised the recurrent need for conversion by ordinary people and national leaders alike.



## Price of freedom

The voices of ordinary people have been mostly absent from the international debate about war. When you do hear them it comes as a shock. Listen to an old woman in North Korea who has to walk up ten flights to her room (the lifts don't work) and face a subzero winter without heating. You realise that slavery—to poverty and oppression—is still with us.

The Caritas team has focused their Project Compassion appeal for this year on the millions of people around the world who are still slaves to poverty and oppression. They ask us to imagine what it is like to be one of the 250 million youngsters in child labour or part of a family forced into exile or privation. Imagine, and then act. The money raised during Lent will help to free men, women and children around the world so that they will know the peace that is freedom.



## Your seat's too big

As if there weren't enough to worry about in the world, it seems that the majority of London West End theatres are suffering a backlash from complaining American tourists who arrive, jetlagged and with economy-class syndrome, only to contract a severe case of theatregoer's bottom from narrow seats that were constructed in the age of few elevators and no KFC. British Labour MP Chris Bryant brought up this urgent matter in Parliament and was supported by Culture Minister Kim Howells. But would the mean old Heritage Commission let them fix it? Lottery funds might, it seems, provide the squillions required. But it remains to be seen whether conservationists, trim and wiry

from years of health food and hiking, will chain their ascetic posteriors to the historically significant seats in question, deaf to the pleas of the plump. The debate continues.



## Get info

Foxed by the barrage of political information coming from every quarter? Want to know whether the French, the Americans, the Iraqis, the Russians, the Turks or the Australians have right on their side? You might find some answers in the new Master of International Policy Studies degree at La Trobe University—it even has a unit on the media. For more information see <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/socsci/>



## Got the Blues

On Boxing Day, our correspondent committed a blasphemous act. The sun was shining, the temperature a pleasant 23°C, the breeze light, and the runs, if not exactly flowing, were at least accumulating sensibly and steadily. Nevertheless, at lunchtime, she walked out of the MCG. In the 11 years since she'd last been to a Test match, she'd come to expect more—she'd come to expect Tim Lane.

Now the best general sports caller in living memory has done the unthinkable. Tim Lane has left the ABC, he's left cricket. And not for money, or greater glory, but for love. An old-fashioned professional, Lane (heretofore) had given all to his calling—affection, nay, passion, absolute fairness and a stern moral compass. Where now his stern moral compass? Love? When did the listening public give Tim Lane permission to be in love? Love, in a time of football?

Still, the whole sorry episode confirms at least one truth in these, our troubled times: you can never trust a Carlton supporter.





# THE MONTH'S TRAFFIC

## Strange times

FIRES AND FEARS

**T**HE HILL BEHIND this house and all the grassland on the Farrer ridge is blackened. Our bit of the Canberra Nature Park will regenerate in time but those who live next to it and take their morning walk on it will never forget how close it came to being our destroyer.

'Our fear', the policeman at the end of my driveway told me, 'is that this wind change will bring the fire back to you and that we will lose a significant number of houses in this street. Our advice is that you go now'. And leave a house that has been home for 20 years, a place of joy and tears, place of a wedding, numerous celebrations, much good food and drink; of children growing and leaving; place of exam fever and excitement, of steady work, of an office and library that is still my joy.

We were lucky, every one of us in this street. Fire to back fences; fire into backyards but no significant damage. We walked on Farrer ridge the next morning, dozens of us. People who may merely have nodded on a morning walk, or previously offered a shy 'g'day' now talked of our common fear and frustration in the fires.

Jesse, from lower down the street, was wide-eyed at the devastation we were all measuring. He and his Dad, he proudly told us, had opened the gates to try to help the poor kangaroos so disoriented they were bounding in terror into the fire. Jesse was pleased to see some kangaroos that morning sitting on the black soil, bewildered but safe. We told him he and his Dad had done a good job and the eight-year-old boy went away grinning.

Our morning paper told us that over 300 homes had been lost, and this was a shock because the ABC had told us the night before of dozens, then possibly 100

homes destroyed. And the figure would grow throughout the week until it reached 530. Aren't the excited early figures in disasters like these usually scaled down as reality defeats hyperbole? Relentlessly our figures went up, further cause for worry and concern as we grieved for those who had lost everything.

It was the lightning strikes, we told anyone who asked for causes, and the dreadful drought, and one of our hottest days on record and winds that you wouldn't believe. All these factors came together at precisely the wrong moment and nothing could stop them from creating the firestorm that was Canberra on 18 January.

A week later I was at the ABC to



talk; that's what I do. Lying on a chair in the producer's booth was a collection of Sunday papers—as if the presenters needed any more news than they already had. '800 missiles for Baghdad in 48 hours', a Sydney paper screamed; 'US plans revealed'. The war plan was simple: a city reduced to rubble, its citizens dazed, bombed, blitzed, its armed forces incapable of offering any resistance. Only then would the ground forces move in to take control and oversee 'regime change'. After that they could go home, unscathed, ready for the next episode in their campaign to make the world safe. Simple, really.

We have no way of knowing if the newspaper report is an accurate version of the US plan of action. If it is, it presents a terrible dilemma for those of us who cling morosely to the just war theory with its strictures about measured responses to military aggression, and the protection

of the lives of civilian bystanders.

And it is sickening to those who have just been through these fires. We can easily put ourselves into the shoes of the Iraqis whose homes and gardens and parks will be swept up in the firestorm. Whose lives will be lost, whose communities will grieve, whose children will want security, where neighbours will talk and ponder and come together in a community of fear and frustration.

If our opinion polls tell us that few Australians want this war, should we not also believe that few Iraqis would want war either? Do we not share a common humanity or is that a sentiment that war has always proscribed? In earlier wars the enemy has been demonised, but Australians, still traumatised by these fires, are reaching out in sympathy to any who grieve, are confused, or seem defeated.

We are entering uncharted waters with this war, for when did Australia ever go to war without the overwhelming support of the people, at first, for the cause? In our history, wars have become less popular as they have dragged on, but in the first flush people have believed in the war and in their government's action. Not this time. Even those going off to the war, some of them anyway, have expressed misgivings.

These are strange times; we can but hope.  
—Michael McKernan

## Cooling off in Tasmania

DIGGING FOR RICHES

**A** PIPE-SMOKING MAN in hat, overcoat and tie points to a thermometer. The best selling postcard at the State Library of Tasmania enjoins people to 'Cool Off in Tasmania', for in summer in the island state, the average temperature in the hottest





## On stopping Sauron

**W**INSTON CHURCHILL is usually portrayed as one of the few people who recognised the evil potential of Adolf Hitler and was willing to go to war to stop him. The title of Kenneth Pollack's book about Saddam Hussein, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*, is no doubt an allusion to Churchill's history of the decade before World War II, *The Gathering Storm*. Does the present crisis in Iraq require another Churchillian response? If you have seen *The Two Towers*, the latest movie instalment of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, you'll remember it's all about doves and hawks arguing over that dilemma: how best to stop Sauron, the evil Lord of Mordor?

Do we include ourselves, the goodies, in the 'axis of evil'? It may be running right through our psyche. *War is a force that gives us meaning* is a good title for a book. Its author, Chris Hedges, obviously thought so. Hedges, a correspondent for the *New York Times*, has reported from Central America to the Balkans. His book describes the seductiveness of the myth of war and its nationalistic rhetoric, the intoxication of violence and his own disillusioning experience of its raw slaughter. He concludes that the only antidote to war is love and forgiveness; if hope is to be found, it is in the particular, small acts of tenderness and kindness he saw among the innocent victims of war's devastation: 'That's what God gives us to fight back'.

My 88-year-old father has begun talking of his World War II experience, something he never used to do. I wouldn't say it haunts him, but as he looks back, it seems his life is defined by those four years of battle in Syria, New Guinea and Borneo. 'This is the day we landed at Balikpapan,' he would say. 'Today is the day Steve McKenzie was killed.' He has never glorified war, and I can't remember his ever marching on 25 April.

No-one wins in war. So what has theology to say to help us find a Christian position on it? The just war doctrine has been around a long time and gives a persuasive argument for force as a last resort. We live in a fallen world. History and war's victims rightly condemn those who hesitate to help the innocent: I saw Elie Wiesel on TV recently discuss how Churchill and Roosevelt knew about the death camps, but did nothing directly and immediately to stop them.

Are pacifists naive and unrealistic, though courageous? Pacifism may have worked in democracies for Gandhi and Martin Luther King, but does it work against a Stalin or a Hitler?

The problem is Jesus—Jesus who must always be, for the Christian, the ultimate criterion for judging anything from the will of God to the will to war. Jesus' naive and unrealistic path of non-violent resistance against 'The Empire' didn't appear to work: he ended up dead, and the Romans kept oppressing, and were still there long after.

I still haven't worked it out. But the way of Jesus haunts me. As we head out to war, no doubt to stop another Sauron, God will be looking upon us surely with a divine, familiar grief. ■

**Ormond Rush** is President of St Paul's Theological College, Banyo, Brisbane.

month is a mild 62.3°F (16.83°C). For the families of Martin Boyd and Patrick White, this was one of the attractions of a holiday away from the mainland, and for the Boyds, at least, summer in Tasmania also allowed a recoupment of finances.

On New Year's Day 2002, the mainland conception of a Tasmanian summer as an oxymoron seemed coldly warranted. Through sleet and rain the temperature barely struggled into double figures. Yet still we enjoyed the superb fruit at the Christmas Hills raspberry farm, the cheeses of Ash-

wood, the cluster of early 19th-century honey-coloured sandstone buildings at the Woolmer's estate on a rise above the Macquarie River. A year later, the pre-Christmas maximum temperatures at Ross, in the Midlands, scarcely varied on either side of 30°C.

Tourists thronged in Church Street, eagerly photographing the bridge over the Macquarie with its low, graceful arches and cartoons in stone sculpted by the convict Daniel Herbert. Fewer ventured to perhaps the prime historic site in the town, the Female Factory, in which female convicts underwent a strenuous rehabilitation designed to fit them for domestic service. Tourism has preserved Ross, and the tourists come here for what has been preserved. Some locals mutter about 'terrorists'. One in particular, tattooed, pony-tailed, taunted an indifferent Japanese woman to the limits of his vocabulary with cries of 'Chow Mein', 'bamboo'.

If there is a residual uneasiness about an economy that needs the arrival of short-term visitors from far away, there also appears to be a curious refusal of optimism concerning the discovery of extensive oil and gas reserves to the west of Ross. The field stretches from Epping Forest (treed no longer) in the north to Bothwell. The prosperity of Tasmania has for so long been





associated with the distant, whaling past, that no-one believes in an Aberdeen on the Central Plateau, or an unemptiable lake of oil beneath the sheep paddocks.

A dream of transforming the former prison settlement of Maria Island, off the east coast, into the 'Riviera of the South' bewitched and bankrupted an Italian entrepreneur, Diego Bernacchi, in the late 19th century. That mild coast has nonetheless become a place of summer retreat for Tasmanians. Along it are names given by French explorers of the 18th century: Peron, Boulanger, Baudin, Freycinet. At Scamander, the surf breaks on a long beach made hazy by spume. St Helens, sheltered within Georges Bay, trebles in size in January. This is flat land, with lagoons along the foreshore and black, hoop-necked swans swimming in them by the squadron.

Yet a few minutes west takes one sharply climbing into the hinterland of Goshen and Gould's Country. By default, or deviousness, Tasmania hoards many of its riches, while ostentatiously putting others on show. The few visitors to Gould's Country are probably there by accident, or on the promise of a name. They will marvel at the beauties of the deep, plunging valley besides which it is perched, even as they listen for the twang of banjos. Venturing further, on a rough and winding track through temperate rainforest, they will come to the Blue Tier. In Tasmania, the more remote often means the more controversial. In this lonely place, the next battle over old growth logging is likely to come.

Guidebooks will have sent tourists elsewhere, to the Pub in the Paddock (St Columba's Falls Hotel) with its bibulous pet pig, and the cheese factory at Pyengana, famous for cheddar. Travelling down the coast, one begins to encounter vineyards, such as the splendid Freycinet concern, couched in a natural amphitheatre, not far off the road. Further to the south at Cambridge, across the Derwent from Hobart, is the Meadowbank vineyard. Its

top-of-the-range pinot noir is named for another literary pilgrim who might have been dismayed to find himself here: the label is Henry James.

Oil strikes pending, what is persistently dug out of Tasmania—by novelists, poets, historians—is its past. Some of the excavation, as at the Ross Female Factory, is archaeological. More often the process is predatory, and of the imagination. For the stuff of literature is everywhere to hand. In the Catholic section of the oldest of the cemeteries at Oatlands, in the Midlands, is a headstone with this inscription: 'Sacred to the Memory of Patrick O'Flanagan who was slain by the fall of the turret of Saint Paul's Church, Oatlands.' Not killed, but slain—and by the stones of an Anglican church.

In the distance are the Western Tiers. A.D. Hope grew up in their shadow, in the Presbyterian manse at Kirklands. However, it may be in the human details—fugitive, neglected, but resonant—rather than in its natural grandeurs, that rich Tasmanian stories can be guessed at, and made ready to be told again. Thus Hope's friend, James McAuley, wrote a poem about visiting Kirklands and finding an epitaph of eloquent plainness in this country churchyard: 'Here lies Sissy, wife of Tas.' Ambivalently welcoming so many outsiders, Tasmanians will find ways of reclaiming their own.

—Peter Pierce

## Where now for reconciliation?

SILENCED VOICES

**I**N A PHOTOGRAPHIC exhibition of Aboriginal faces at Melbourne's Museum, I was struck by the remote look in the eyes of older Aboriginal people photographed in the early 20th century.

In 1999, a young Aboriginal colleague and I interviewed a dignified Gippsland Aboriginal woman in her eighties whose eyes had that same watery sadness. We were asking this woman about her earliest memories, experiences and aspirations for the future. When we touched on her early history and cultural experiences, she would not discuss these issues because, she said, 'it was shaming'. Immediately, my colleague and I jumped to the conclusion

that she was speaking of a cultural taboo or 'secret women's business'.

We were about to change the subject when I decided to ask her what she meant by 'shaming'. She responded that she had been told by the mission owners not to talk about her culture, not to speak her language and to cease telling her oral histories; otherwise, she and her family would not get their rations and would lose their children. This was what she meant by the term 'shaming'. Some six decades later this woman's conversation and behaviour were still being circumscribed by what she had repeatedly been told by figures of authority in her youth and middle age.

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The Council for Reconciliation Declaration was tabled in 2000. The lead-up saw nationwide efforts at reconciliation by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Now the initial enthusiasm seems to have disappeared, and either inertia or disappointment has set in. The recent decision in the High Court *Yorta Yorta* case (*Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v Victoria*, December 2002) left many Aboriginal Australians feeling they had been let down once again—that their culture was again being denied and dismissed. The High Court appeal by the *Yorta Yorta* people was not upheld by the majority.

There are many ironies in native title and stolen generation cases such as *Yorta Yorta* and *Gunner v Cubillo*. First, the bench mainly consists of white men sitting in judgment on what is or isn't traditional Aboriginal custom. Second, judges often rely on the patchy and incomplete writings of historians and anthropologists who wrote at a time when assessments of Aboriginal culture were influenced by their own European conceptions of culture. Third—and what many Aboriginal people find so difficult to accept—oral histories, traditions and beliefs on which Aboriginal people place a high value are easily disregarded. The passage of time also makes the burden of proof and the gathering of evidence extremely difficult for applicants. A final irony is this: the actions of colonists who removed Aboriginal people from their lands and prohibited their cultural and linguistic practices had consequences; those consequences are now used as further grounds to defeat native title claims.

The Public Interest Advocacy Centre in Sydney, in consultation with Indigenous groups, has been examining ways to resolve legal disputes involving Aboriginal entitlements. The aim is to be less adversarial, less legalistic and more inclusive of Aboriginal cultural approaches, and to take into account the need for reconciliation. Indigenous people have long advocated involvement and control in decision-making that affects the community. There is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), but that, by contrast with the Advocacy centre, is a bureaucratic structure devised by white Australians. The allocation and distribution of its resources is largely determined by government priorities that may or may not accord with what communities see as critical areas of need. In western Victoria, for example, resources that were being used effectively to assist young Aborigines had to be diverted because of a shift in government directives. In addition, the election process for members of ATSIC's board and its commissioners is highly politicised and reinforces power structures.

In Australia in 2003, Aborigines still experience high levels of disadvantage. They are over-represented in the criminal justice system and experience a staggering level of daily discrimination on the basis of their race. I witnessed this directly while travelling on a project with two Indigenous men in 1999.

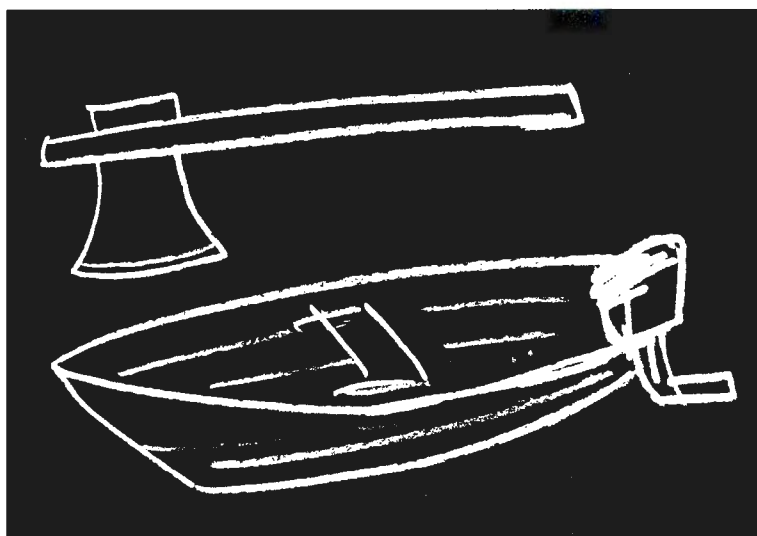
Many Indigenous families experience domestic violence, have significant health problems, ongoing trauma, depression and mental health issues. Banded solutions are clearly not working. Money is often absorbed by cumbersome administrative costs before it can reach the communities.

Victorian Attorney-General Mr Rob Hulls, immediately prior to the hearing of the *Yorta Yorta* case, instructed the Victorian Government Solicitor's office to conduct the case in a manner that respected the witnesses under examination—an acknowledgment that witnesses had been traumatised in the past. After the case, he indicated that the State would not pursue costs and would try to resolve the issue through further negotiation. The Victo-

rian government has made plans for land use agreements, and has signed a Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement with leaders in the Aboriginal community. What this will mean in practice is yet to be seen, but the document was developed in partnership with Indigenous people. The confidence of the Aboriginal community will be critical if the Agreement is to be more than a statement of aspirations.

The reconciliation process remains unfinished. The courts, given their role in interpreting and applying the law, may not be the appropriate place for these issues to be resolved. Canada, South Africa and New Zealand have all now taken alternative paths towards understanding, recognition and inclusion, and making amends for past mistakes. The federal government speaks of practical reconciliation, but perhaps progress will only occur when the broader issues are better understood. Perhaps, as Lowitja O'Donoghue once said, 'It is for the people to lead and then the leaders will follow.'

—Liz Curran



## Tides of history

THE NEW TERRA NULLIUS

*'[F]or myself I might have questioned whether the use of the motor boat powered by mined and processed liquid fuel, and a steel tomahawk, remained in accordance with a traditional law or custom'.*

**S**OMUSED High Court Justice Ian Callinan in his consideration of the

appropriate means of exercising certain native title hunting rights, on his way to dismissing the *Yorta Yorta* High Court appeal. Presumably, for Justice Callinan, a wooden spear and a canoe seemed more appropriate.

In also rejecting the appeal, the remaining majority of the High Court stated that native title claimants fail if they cannot prove that traditional law has continued substantially uninterrupted from 1788 to the present. According to the majority, extinguishment of native title happens when an Indigenous society whose laws and customs existed in 1788 ceases to be. Left unexplained is how a whole society can, at some date in the past, instantly disappear.

The majority accepted that it was open to the trial judge, Justice Olney, to find as he did that *Yorta Yorta* native title had, in 1881, (using his regrettable metaphor) been washed away by the tide of history.

Justice Olney based his finding on the account of Edward Curr, a European squatter and amateur ethnographer, who lived in *Yorta Yorta* country for a period around 1840. Curr described burial of the dead, punishment by spearing, profligacy with food. The judge looked in vain in the written record from the mid-1800s for observations similar to those of Curr. And the *Yorta Yorta* were held to account for the gap that he found.

The judge chose 1881 as the key date because in that year 42 men, 'members of the Moira and Ulupna Tribes', had signed a petition, drafted by a missionary to the governor of the colony, seeking farming assistance. For Justice Olney, this constituted 'positive evidence' that the ancestors of the *Yorta Yorta* had abandoned traditional laws.

After comparing some contemporary *Yorta Yorta* practices handed down by 'the old people', Justice Olney held that, fatally to the *Yorta Yorta* case, they differed from those described in Curr's memoirs.

The *Yorta Yorta* people today attach great importance to such places as scarred trees, middens, and burial sites on and in their country, and seek to protect them as part of their living cultural and spiritual heritage. To the judge, the use the ancestors made of such places was purely utilitarian and no traditional law required their preservation in 1788.



The practice today of taking from Yorta Yorta country only such food as is necessary for immediate consumption, and rituals associated with re-burial of skeletal remains, taken years before to museums local and afar, are not, according to Justice Olney, traditional customs. Curr, according to his written observations, did not come across these practices among the Yorta Yorta with whom he came in contact.

But the old people weren't dug up back then. And the concerns of the Yorta Yorta today to conserve natural resources, in the face of salinity, extensive logging and the introduction of cattle into their country? For Justice Olney, these are issues of recent origin in which the original inhabitants in 1788 could have had no interest.

It now seems that Aborigines may forfeit native title rights unless they live as their ancestors did according to the written accounts of 19th-century English squatters—whether accurate or not. Applying the judge's logic and the High Court's acceptance of it, if natural resources were abundant at first contact, then they should be used as if abundant today, regardless of the consequences. And sustainably managing environmental changes wrought by white occupation would be a negative, rather than a positive, element of any native title claim.

The High Court majority accepted that proving native title could present an 'especially difficult' burden for claimants, particularly where laws and customs have been adapted in response to the impact of European settlement. But where in Australia has adaption not been the experience?

By dismissing the *Yorta Yorta* appeal in the way it did, the High Court majority did not directly confront a critical question that follows from acceptance of the trial judge's 'tide of history' finding: have the Yorta Yorta fabricated their belief that theirs is a society traditionally connected to country?

Of course they haven't. Witness their inspiring oral history of long and strong survival as identifiable peoples. Sadly, the treatment of the Yorta Yorta at the hands of the legal system may lead some to label their laws and customs a recent invention.

In the High Court, Justices Mary Gaudron and Michael Kirby dissented, concluding that it is unnecessary for native title rights to have been continuously exercised, and that laws may be traditional despite their not corresponding exactly with those practised prior to contact. But



## Heated topics

**T**HE POWER OF NATURE has been dominant this summer—the heat, the drought, the dust and the terrifying spectacle of the bushfires, sweeping away all in their path.

Wherever the fires have touched they have instantly inflamed environmental debates—between those who believe nature should serve human needs and those who want to live in harmony with the environment—the bush-bashers against the tree-huggers. The forestry industry and others who make their living in the bush are calling for an increase in burning off, greater logging, and clearing the forest of fuel. However, conservation authorities and environmentalists argue that bushfires are inevitable and that we must find better ways of living with them.

Just as God was invoked by both sides in the Crusades, so the standard of science is now floundering by both sides in the environmental debate. Keeping science apolitical is like keeping politics out of sport.

According to a report released last December by the UN-sponsored Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network, the bulk of the Great Barrier Reef is in good condition, particularly in comparison to reefs elsewhere. Prominent reef scientists and conservationists, however, argue that the reef is in trouble—under attack by rising sea temperatures which cause bleaching, by recurrent plagues of crown-of-thorns starfish, by chemicals from nearby agriculture, and by fishing and tourism.

The truth seems to be that a small proportion of the 2000-kilometre-long reef is affected by any one factor at any one time. The question is when to sound the alarm: when you first become aware of a potential threat—to stop the problem getting worse—or only if the impact is obvious and the situation life-threatening. By then it may be too late.

President Bush is also finding the environment politically hot. His administration has refused to ratify the Kyoto agreement, believing that regulation of greenhouse gas emissions is bad for the US economy. But across America, states and municipalities and even the Senate are passing laws that undermine the Bush position.

California, a state built around the motor car, is cracking down hard on vehicle emissions. New York is boosting use of renewable energy, and the six New England states have instituted a program of cuts to greenhouse gas emissions that go further than Kyoto. These states argue that their environmental measures will also make their economies more robust and efficient.

Environmental problems are generally so complicated that people find it easy to generate half-truths about them. There are many pressing, controversial issues—fish stocks, resources of fresh water, GM foods—with proponents of all persuasions waving scientific data. The alternative is to educate ourselves and establish impartial centres of knowledge that can provide a more balanced viewpoint. It was good to see, for example, that the Australian government funded a Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre last October.

Without the aid of knowledge generated using the scientific method, we will have no chance of sorting out the complexity which surrounds us. ■

**Tim Thwaites** is a freelance science writer.



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Gaudron and Kirby were in the minority.

If, as now appears likely, the 'tide of history' construct becomes the new terra nullius, then the courts of law will not be the places to deliver native title justice. Properly resourced mediation, not litigation, will become the way forward. In Victoria, Attorney-General Rob Hulls has recently reiterated Victoria's desire to meet Yorta Yorta aspirations. Others may follow suit.

—Peter Seidel

## Being scared of GM

AN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENTIST'S VIEW

SCIENCE WRITER Graeme O'Neill's article entitled 'GM scare hots up' (Science Watch, Melbourne Sunday Herald Sun 29 December 2002) warrants a response. Here it is.

Being scared of GM [Gene/Genetic Manipulation] may not be rational but it is reasonable. Humans are still very much taken with their apparent power over nature. The insights of science have heightened both the scope and extent of that power, and genetic manipulation represents a quantum leap in both.

Science, however, is not itself power. It is the careful attempt to build theories that can withstand the tests of repeated experimentation and open criticism over time and varied practice. The creation of theory is the domain of informed inspiration, but transforming theories into science is the domain of rationality. It involves finding and running experiments that fit into what is already accepted as science and then subjecting the results to repeated criticism. Science may be our most noble creation, and so the recently released (December 2002) Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering report about poor science teaching in schools is well justified in its concern.

But however noble, science is not (and never can be) ultimate truth. It does not aspire to that. It 'simply' is the most able set of interpretations we have at any time

and is, by its nature, always open to questions about its insight, laws and methods. Scientists are definitely not in a position to say, as Graeme O'Neill does, that we have 'nothing to fear from GM foods'. We can only say, as he does a little earlier in his article, that 'GM ingredients have been on our supermarket shelves for six years without a single scientifically reputable report of any adverse impact on human health'. Even then, as a scientist I must ask questions about how well O'Neill knows the field of writings on the topic and about what he regards as reputable.

A more important concern that genetic manipulation brings up is one that goes way beyond direct health implications to humans. It arises out of the doubt we must always have about scientific knowledge and the contexts within which it is applied.

Science doesn't offer directions or prescriptions although it can be used to test directions and prescriptions when testable bases of direction and prescription are found. Uses or 'contexts of application', on



the other hand, arise from priorities applied imaginatively, and priorities arise from social and personal expectations.

As is the case in all fields of innovation, genes are engineered according to the priorities of those with influence. Such priorities are supported by the ways of living of most of the rest of us—that is,



probably by yours and certainly by mine. While these priorities may well reflect market opportunities offered as a result of scientifically illuminated possibilities, the opportunities are neither science nor are they necessarily benign. They depend on interpretations, and interpretations are, in part at least, idiosyncratic and unpredictable—and most of us would fight for that to remain the case.

If we accept evolutionary theory, we might say that organisms develop within the possibilities available to them in their own structures and in the structures of their surroundings, propelled by the mutations that chance brings their way. Genetic manipulation involves imposing the usual two sets of interpretations and priorities on nature: those embodied in existing science (what we know) and those represented by the existing market (what's important to us). These provide new sources of mutations which are the kick or motivator in the evolutionary process. While human manipulation can certainly be regarded as just another evolutionary propellant which the built-in structures of nature can be relied on to accept or reject, the equation is not quite that simple.

Humans are already sufficiently powerful to suppress nature's attempts to reject us. (Indeed, as a still-living sufferer of an auto-immune disease—Crohn's—I am a living example of that power.) We have become a global or nature-wide influence. This in itself may not be a problem. However, we have no choice but to exercise that influence through the interests and interpretations available to us. And what attracts mass-market support commands most of our resources and efforts. It becomes entrenched, part of our vested interest and therefore very difficult to remove quickly or to change. We develop protective devices, our world-spanning risk-management infrastructures: insurances, legislation, markets, armies and especially the political policy-making infrastructures that underlie the acceptability of all the others.

So, with only the current shallow public assessment structures to judge what

the market presents to us, we are determining the future of something with very broad implications. And again, while this is not new—Indigenous Australians went ahead and transformed the continent with fire without the benefit of an environment impact statement—we have now established global systems that make it difficult for nature as a whole to protect us. Worse, many of us who understand the importance of these systems to our everyday lives wilfully disregard the social rigidification they represent—in part, I imagine, because we cannot appreciate the natural consequences. Of course and inevitably, nature will prevail, but it may do so in ways that are unpredictable to us and that we may not like.

C.S. Lewis explained much of this 60 years ago in his punchy little book, *The*

*Abolition of Man*. It is still in print. I recommend it as reading for 2003.

—Frank Fisher

*This month's contributors:* **Michael McKernan** is a broadcaster and author, most recently of *This War Never Ends: The Pain of Separation and Return* (University of Queensland Press, 2001); **Peter Pierce's** most recent book was *Australia's Vietnam War* (Texas A & M University Press, 2002); **Liz Curran** is a lecturer in Law and Legal Studies at La Trobe University; **Peter Seidel** is a Public Interest Law Partner with Arnold Bloch Leibler, lawyers and advisers to the Yorta Yorta peoples since 1993; **Frank Fisher** is Director of the Graduate School of Environmental Science & Centre for Environmental Management at Monash University.

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RJ. Black, Terang, VIC; R.A. Grant, Donvale, VIC;  
F. Hemming, Panorama, SA; M. Landy, Red Hill, ACT;  
Rev L. McMinn, Cook, ACT; R. Nicholls, Athelstone, SA;  
L. Robson, North Ryde, NSW; J. Taylor, Naremburn,  
NSW; M.P. Thornton, Toowoomba, QLD; E.M. van de  
Laar, Ballarat North, VIC.



# The things that



Australia is in a one-in-a-century drought. In India, water is always rife—a precise illustration of what *not* to do. Maybe we can learn?

**A**CCORDING TO TAMIL LEGEND, the Cauvery River came into existence around 1800 years ago when the Chola king, Kanthaman, prayed to the great sage, Agasthya, that his realm might be filled with water. The sage answered the prayer by tilting his great pot, and its waters flowed from the highlands of what is now Karnataka all the way to the Bay of Bengal. The river became known as the 'mother to the people'.

The river's almost mythical status was hinted at by the renowned Tamil scholar, Dr Prema Nandakumar, who had cause to write, on 20 October 2002, that for Indians, 'A river is more than just the waters that flow in it. Cauvery is a goddess.' In its long history, the Cauvery has nurtured the kingdoms of the

Cholas, Cheras, Pandyas and Pallavas, leaving along its fertile banks a splendid architectural, spiritual and musical heritage. Today, the Cauvery still rises from the hills of Karnataka and empties into the Bay of Bengal after a journey of over 850 km. Along the way, it irrigates 453,400 hectares of agricultural land in the Mandya and Mysore districts of Karnataka before sustaining 918,000 hectares of rice paddies around Thanjavur in the state of Tamil Nadu.

But this mother/goddess is now the subject of bitter infighting among her children.

On 8 August 2002, the Cauvery Water Tribunal (an independent agency set up in 1990 to handle water disputes along the river) ordered the state of Karnataka to release the waters of the Cauvery to



# divide us



scarce and the conflict over its management  
**Anthony Ham** reports.

alleviate hardship being experienced downstream in Tamil Nadu, where the monsoon rains had not arrived. The tribunal's ruling was followed by an identical Supreme Court edict on 3 September.

Karnataka stalled, playing a dangerous game of compliance and defiance. A poor local farmer named Guruswamy protested against the release of Cauvery waters to Tamil Nadu by jumping to his death in the Krishnarasagar dam in Mandya district. The following day, Karnataka's Chief Minister, S.M. Krishna, suspended the release on the grounds that its own farmers needed the waters because the monsoon hadn't fully arrived in Karnataka either.

Kannada (the indigenous language of Karnataka) film stars supported the chief minister's stand,

demanding that no water be released to Tamil Nadu. Their action prompted retaliatory fasts and protests by Tamil film stars in Chennai. A state-wide strike across Tamil Nadu was accompanied by inflammatory threats to cut electricity supplies from Tamil Nadu to its neighbour. In Karnataka, Chief Minister Krishna embarked on a nine-day march across affected areas of his state with promises to defy the Supreme Court and protect the interests of local farmers. On 20 October, the *Sunday Times of India* reported that Chennai—a sprawling metropolis of over six million people—had, at most, 25 days' worth of drinking water in storage. City authorities announced that they had full confidence in the rain god.

It was not until 40 days after the waters were withheld that the chief minister tendered an unconditional apology to the Supreme Court and allowed the release of the waters as ordered. He did so in part to avoid contempt-of-court cases pending against him, in part because rains had begun to fall across Karnataka. His announcement sparked off protests by farmers in Mandya, over 500 of whom were arrested, along with sundry MPs. In the subsequent violence all road and rail links in the area were closed.

It had become a bitter fight between 'us' and 'them'. S.K. Shivalingiah, from the village of Somana-hallia (and a neighbour of Krishna), declared that 'We never expected our own man to betray us'. He promised that the chief minister would pay at the next elections. Farmers in both states dropped any pretence of solidarity with fellow farmers—all of whom depend on the waters with equal desperation—and divided instead along linguistic and state lines. For its part, the Supreme Court told the Karnatakan leader: 'Curiously enough, you have fights with all your neighbours with regard to water. You do not have the spirit of sharing. You want to keep everything to yourself and that is selfishness. Your generosity will be measured by your attitude at the time of scarcity and not when you have surplus.'

**O**N 11 NOVEMBER, I visited the banks of the Cauvery in the central Tamil Nadu town of Tiruchirappalli. It was more sand bar than river—the release of waters had done little to restore the levels once enjoyed by this grand old river.

A few days later, *The Hindu* newspaper reported that the Tiruchirappalli district of Srirangam—home to the Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple, one of the largest and most impressive temple complexes in south India—is one of the most underdeveloped regions in the state. The small huts of agricultural labourers crowd the river bank. They have no sewerage and no electricity. Consequently, the Cauvery, the goddess, is used as a public toilet.

Weeks earlier, in Fort Cochin, I listened to local organisers of a festival called 'Everybody's Place'. It was designed to counter the perception among locals that, while their own homes should be kept spotless,

Above: the Cauvery River at Tiruchirappalli (Trichy) seen from the Rock Fort Temple, Tamil Nadu. Photograph by Anthony Ham.

public places were not their responsibility. But the festival, which featured art installations ingeniously made from piles of garbage, is long gone, and the beach is again piled with rubbish that is anything but artistic.

I walked along the banks of rivers in Madurai and Chennai, picking my way through the rubbish and sewage, averting my eyes from the ramshackle shanty towns that crowded the river bank. It is difficult to understand what such desperate living actually means.

From Tiruchirappalli, I travelled with my partner, Marina, to the southern pilgrimage centre of Rameshwaram, a sleepy outpost that is taken over at night by packs of stray dogs. We checked into the Hotel Maharaja, the best hotel in town—bloodstains on the floor and walls, and mosquitoes circling above the bed.

The heat and the high-decibel music blaring from a temple loudspeaker system made it impossible

only to offer some tablets of ayurvedic medicine and to tender apologies that he had nothing more to give. Throughout the night, railway officials brought blankets and pillows, each expressing genuine concern for our well-being.

At one point, the train ground to a halt—one of those incomprehensible stops in the middle of nowhere. I stood in the open doorway, staring at the tracks. Brambles merged seamlessly with backyards and rubbish tips. A train sped past. Passengers waved gleefully and the attendants on our train rushed to the door, searching for and then waving enthusiastically at their friends and colleagues as they passed. A moment of connection in the wilderness.

At the end of the journey, in Thanjavur, I stood at the window of our hotel room. It was seven storeys above the street, and cost almost two months of David's salary. About 150 metres away, a ragged old man sat

The separation between states, between peoples, perpetuated by new lines drawn on maps across ancient lands, is where we all went wrong.



to sleep. We found ourselves talking with David, one of the hotel workers. Shyly, but sunnily, David told us his story—how he is married to a Muslim woman who has never travelled from Rameshwaram, how he dreams that his two children will one day go to university, how he earns 40 rupees (\$A1.50) per day.

The following morning, Vijay from the corner shop embarked on an excited monologue while he served his customers, us among them. No single thought bore any apparent connection with what had gone before. At one point he announced that he cared nothing about the colour of somebody's skin—'black, white, green, I don't care'—or their religion. 'I am Hindu but I go to church because my friend is Christian.'

Later the same day, we fled Rameshwaram because we could. By then, Marina had become ill. Aboard the train, Krishnan from Mumbai, latterly of Nagpur, offered with supreme graciousness to move elsewhere so that Marina could lie down. He returned

on a discarded railway sleeper by the tracks, chewing a biscuit he had found, resting all his worldly possessions alongside him in a small, grimy sack. We made eye contact. There was a moment's pause and then he waved and flashed a beaming smile. I waved back, looked away, waved again and then closed the window.

I gave him nothing, too overcome with the inertia of passing through his world and too comfortable to countenance leaving the comfort of mine to cross the tracks to offer him my hand or something more. Yet in his gesture of fellow human feeling, which for a fleeting moment I shared, I saw how people endure. And I understood how the separation between states, between peoples, perpetuated by new lines drawn on maps across ancient lands, is where we all went wrong.

When I moved back to the window, the old man was gone. ■

**Anthony Ham** is *Eureka Street's* roving correspondent.

Above: Streets of the old town, around the Rock Fort Temple, close to the banks of the Cauvery, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu. Photograph by Anthony Ham.



# Foundering justice



Stowaways' rights to seek asylum are being denied, argues **David Manne**.

**W**HY SHOULD TWO young African men, seeking protection from persecution and stowed away on a foreign ship berthed in an Australian port, be allowed to disembark and make claims for refugee status?

To those with some knowledge of Australia's obligations and responsibilities under various human rights instruments, the issue may seem too elementary to warrant inquiry. For those with a less legal bent, but with a sense of justice and common humanity, the answer may seem equally straightforward.

However, events which unfolded in January this year, at ports in Launceston, Corio Bay and then Fremantle, point to a radical shift in Australia's response to asylum seekers arriving on our shores. (More on this later.) These events mark a further—and alarming—twist in Australia's retreat from its commitment to compliance with the solemn protection obligations enshrined in international instruments, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, to which we remain a signatory.

These days, talk of ships and asylum seekers is likely to stir memories of the dramatic events involving the MV *Tampa* in September 2001. You will recall that in a sudden, radical pre-election reversal of policy, 433 people seeking sanctuary were interdicted from Australian waters. They were then diverted to be detained and 'processed' in poor Pacific nations.

Construction of the new so-called Border Protection strategy saw the urgent erection and implementation of the policy of 'excision'. Put simply, parts of Australian territory that are commonly the first destination of asylum seekers arriving by boat were erased ('excised') from the 'migration zone'—the area in which the

Migration Act applies. The intent and effect was that no person arriving in such places could make a valid application for refugee status (or any other visa) at all. To date, this new dehumanised zone—a place where international human rights are only respected in part, or not at all—applies to only a small amount of Australian territory situated off the far north-west coast of the mainland (Christmas and Cocos islands are cases in point). The government's application for 'planning permits' to extend the 'excision' and Border Protection program to allow the erasure of the entire expanse of northern Australia has been rejected by parliament. Most of Australia, at least on the statute books, remains unexcised.

This makes the following events even more disturbing and controversial.

On 12 January 2003, the MV *Dorine*, a Polish bulk carrier flying the flag of Cyprus, berthed in Bell Bay, Launceston. It had sailed from Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and had been at sea for 21 days. On board were two men of African descent who had stowed away on the ship. It appears that they were interviewed by various parties, including Australian Customs and Immigration officials, and also by maritime union officials concerned for their welfare.

It soon became clear that the two African men wanted to disembark, seek legal advice and claim refugee status. They were seeking protection from feared persecution in their home countries. While the ship remained docked in Bell Bay, it also became apparent, from media and other reports, that the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) had determined that the

two men should not be allowed to leave the ship while it was in Australia. In other words, despite their fears, the men should not be permitted to make applications for refugee status.

The *Dorine* next sailed to Geelong, where it berthed at Corio Bay on Saturday 18 January 2003—within the (non-excised) migration zone. The two asylum seekers were still on board.

The evening was sultry and grey—a spectacularly unassuming setting. Together with another lawyer, Eve Stagoll, I boarded the *Dorine*. After some time, we were able to meet the two African men. Each informed us that they had a well-founded fear of being persecuted in their home countries and that they wished to apply for refugee status in Australia. Over the next few hours, we helped them prepare valid applications for refugee status, which we lodged with DIMIA the next day. The two men were not allowed to leave the ship with us. The captain of the ship had been served, by DIMIA, with a legal notice that prohibited release of the men from the ship—under threat of serious penalties.

The following day, DIMIA accepted that the two asylum seekers had now made valid applications for refugee status—the lodgment of the applications finally triggered the decision to permit their release from detention on the ship and onto Australian soil. This acceptance represented a complete reversal of the department's previous position. It also made it abundantly clear that to effect this result, it had not only been necessary for legal advisers to board the ship, seek access to and assist these men, but at no time prior to DIMIA's receiving the



applications had there been any intention of allowing the men to leave the ship, or otherwise present their fears of persecution and have them properly considered before the ship set sail for international waters.

The *Dorine* has since sailed to other jurisdictions, and the two men are now being held in immigration detention, where they must remain throughout the determination of their cases.

**T**HAT THIS WAS NOT an isolated event or strategy by DIMIA is made clear by what happened on the other side of Australia on Friday 24 January.

Another foreign ship was berthed in Fremantle, apparently set to sail within two hours. On board was an Iraqi national. He also wanted to apply for asylum in

asylum seeker off the ship and onto Australian soil so that he could have his case for protection against Iraqi persecution properly and fully considered.

Have we witnessed in these two events a new and even more radical shift in the government's post-*Tampa* policy toward asylum seekers?

In the past, it appears that the government's policy toward asylum seekers who arrive in Australia as stowaways has been to allow them to disembark and make applications for refugee status.

This policy was unsurprising and certainly uncontroversial, given that the right to seek and enjoy asylum is contained in a number of human rights instruments—including, most notably, Article 14(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'Everyone has the right

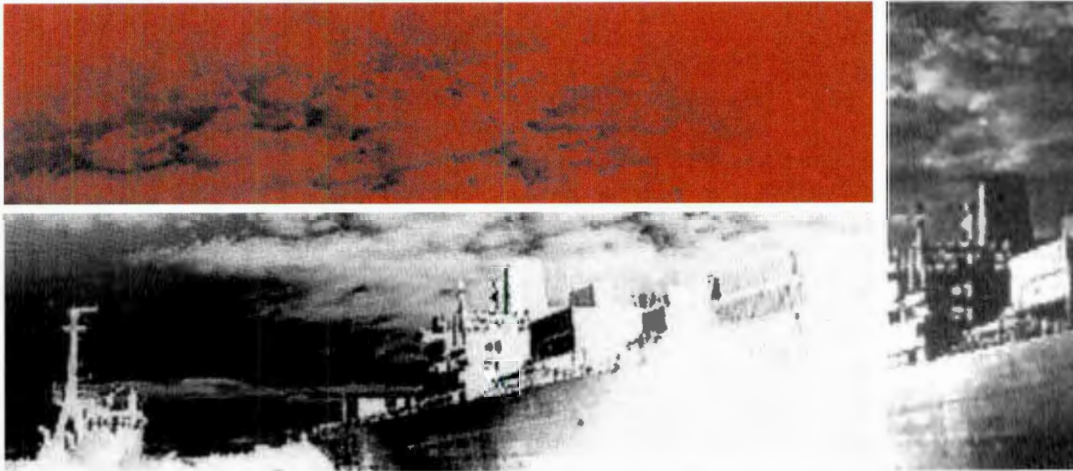
borders simultaneously invokes certain international responsibilities and obligations. As observed by Professor Guy Goodwin-Gill, while it may be a fundamental principle of international law that sovereign nations are entitled to exclusive jurisdiction over their territory and persons therein, such authority also carries certain responsibilities. They include the responsibility to guarantee and protect the human rights of those persons within the territory and under the state's authority. (For more information see *The Refugees in International Law*, 2nd edition, G.S. Goodwin-Gill, Oxford University Press, 1996.) In order for the right to seek and enjoy asylum to be a meaningful right, it must include the right to make an application for asylum before any action is taken to remove the person from that jurisdiction.

These two recent events involving stowaway asylum seekers point to an alarming post-*Tampa* strategy of the government, in which ships' captains will not be permitted to let people seeking asylum leave the ship while it is in Australian territory, regardless of whether it is an excised or non-excised place.

Many questions concerning international human rights law and the precise scope of protection guaranteed to asylum seekers under the Refugee Convention are complex. They don't lend themselves to easy solutions. However, the two recent 'stowaway' cases do permit elementary analysis. It does not matter whether the asylum seekers will ultimately be found to meet the UN definition of a refugee. The critical point is that, in each case, they have an incontrovertible right to seek asylum in Australia and to have their cases fully and properly heard in Australia. The apparent decision to prohibit them from doing so is unambiguously in contravention of our international obligations and responsibilities.

Were all other countries to adopt such policies and practices, the international framework designed to protect refugees would be so seriously undermined as to be rendered meaningless. And from an ethical standpoint, such practices seem to have cast our country's commitment to justice, fairness and decency out onto the high seas. ■

**David Manne** is a lawyer and co-ordinator of the Refugee & Immigration Legal Centre.



Australia. Again, he had not been able to do so. And once again, it appears that the ship had been served with a departmental notice forbidding the release of the Iraqi man from the ship.

A similar chain of events followed—with some stark and ironic differences.

A legal adviser managed to obtain access to the asylum seeker on the ship and helped him prepare and lodge a valid application for refugee status before the ship set sail.

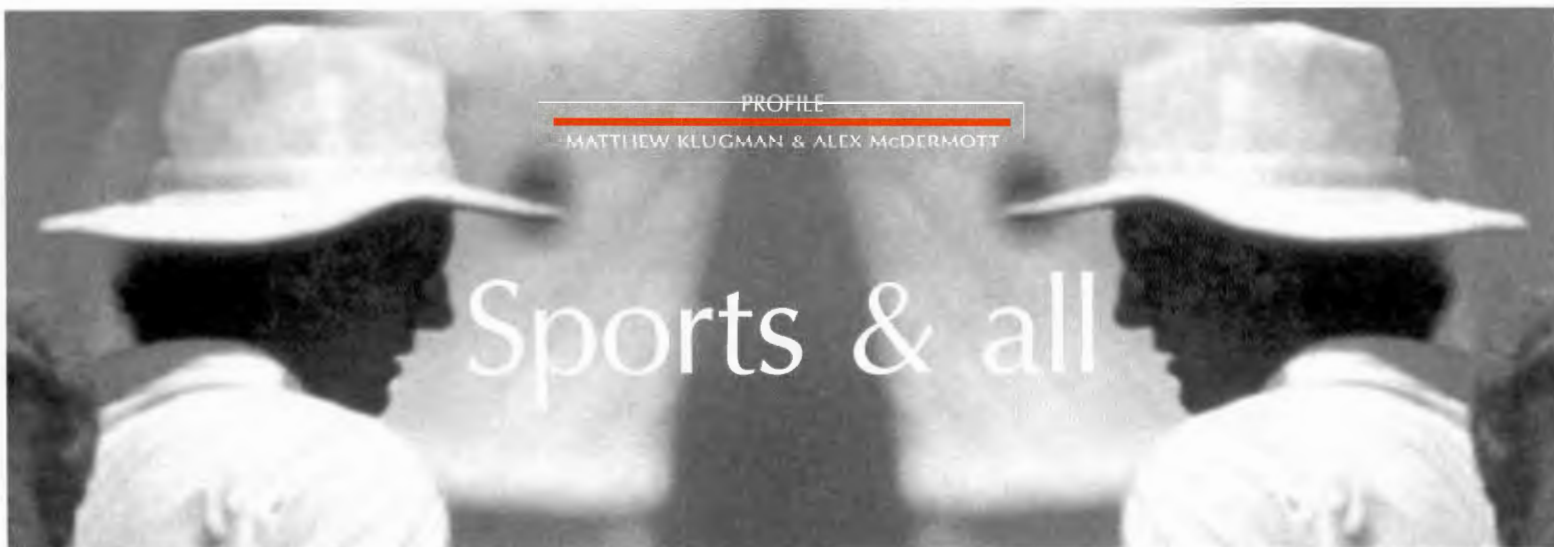
While the application was being prepared, in the very same port, Australian Naval ships were being farewelled as they set off for the Gulf and a possible war with Iraq.

Meanwhile, it was necessary for a team of lawyers in Melbourne to appear before a Federal Court judge at around 7pm that evening to seek an injunction to ensure that the ship did not sail without DIMIA agreeing to allow the

to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.' It is also clear that, as a signatory to the Refugee Convention, Australia's core obligation to any asylum seeker in its territory is to ensure that she or he is not expelled ('refouled') back to a situation of potential persecution. Other human rights instruments to which Australia is a signatory similarly prohibit states from placing people in situations of dire risk of human rights abuse. As a matter of international principle, an asylum seeker who arrives in a territory seeking asylum has rights. The rights include consideration of whether or not she or he requires and deserves protection. Put simply, these rights are accorded on the assumption that the person may be a refugee, not that he or she is *not* a refugee.

Further, while states, as sovereign nations, clearly have the right to protect their territory, including their borders, the arrival of asylum seekers within those





## Peter Roebuck's cricket commentaries connect us with more than just a game.

**'F**OR GOODNESS SAKE do not make me sound good or fine!' Peter Roebuck wrote to us in an email a few days after the interview. 'Strong and bad points battle here as elsewhere!' It was a stark warning—which we solemnly promised to take on board—but not a surprising one, for battles are important to Roebuck. He has a dramatist's eye for the ordeal.

In Australia we mainly know Roebuck through his commentary on cricket in the pages of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* and through the airwaves on the ABC. His is a fresh voice, often stern and demanding but always engaging with the intricacies of the game at hand, with the plot of each day's struggle as it unfolds for players and spectators alike.

It's unusually broad stuff, for Roebuck brings the outside in, revealing the way our shared contexts and stories may illuminate the drama at hand. His writing is as eloquent on the politics of racial slurs as it is describing the wonder of Michael Vaughn's pull-shot. In recent times he has likened Nasser Hussein to Napoleon—'waiting around [in vain] for the arrival of relieving forces'—and Steve Waugh to a 'bloke whose lawnmower has broken down again'.

Here is a mixing of intellect with

sport, mind and body if you like. Many of us have dreams of making the two meet; Peter Roebuck has made a career out of it.

But how might such a career evolve, and where might it lead?

**I**T BEGAN WITH cricket. Born in rural England, coming 'from a struggling family in some ways', Peter Michael Roebuck had a talent for sport. Soon a respectable school provided him with a cricket scholarship and his parents with jobs.

Then, in the early 1970s, in his mid-to-late teens, life became a bit more complicated—it was discovered that young Roebuck had brains. Suddenly, after a youth filled with cricket and hard-fought games, academia beckoned. Oxford offered him a place to study law, but people there told him he should 'keep quiet about cricket', that it was best to put aside such childish things and concentrate solely on his studies. This was not to Roebuck's taste: 'I wasn't going to bring my brain and not me.' So Peter Roebuck accepted a place at Cambridge University's

law school instead. There he found the freedom to both study and play sport, a combination that clearly kept him enthused, as he went on to win a cricketing blue and take first class honours.

At the end of his degree, Roebuck was again faced with a choice—cricket or law. Cricket it was. The choice turned out to be no real choice: 'the call was loud within',

he tells us now, his tone quietening as he considers the matter thoroughly, fingertips lightly pressed together.

'You search for the individuality within insofar as you can ... There was an opportunity to see what you could do.' And he took it. He returned to his native Somerset and made a career as an opener, sometime bowler and eventual captain. In the winter months he travelled. Here again cricket was his passport, this time to see the world. Over the next decade Roebuck would coach and play his way through places as disparate as Greece, Fiji, Australia and Hong Kong.

Living off cricket, Roebuck gave little thought to what he might do when his playing days ended. Then one day in Sydney it rained. He started writing down his impressions of Viv Richards, a Somerset team-mate. He sent it off and it was published by the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Back home in England, *Cricketer* magazine asked him to contribute some pieces, which he did. Wry, perceptive, humorous, doleful, occasionally acerbic pieces on life as a career County cricketer then followed for the next ten years of his career.

**'A** PRECARIOUS PREOCCUPATION', a descriptive journal of a season playing for Somerset, written in the early '80s, captures this mood perfectly. 'Botham has called a meeting for this evening at 9:45 to discuss the game', he notes. 'Our meetings have never made a scrap of difference before. We don't so much prepare as arrive. I think our attitude is "Let the

Towards the end of the 1980s he became part of the anti-apartheid movement, writing in support of the sanctions against South Africa. Here Roebuck found a new voice.

opposition worry about us, we don't want to know anything at all about them".'

Further on he describes the seasonal bout of despondency, a trough 'which lasts sometimes a week, sometimes a day'. When even a fiery motivational harangue from Viv Richards proves ineffective, friend and team-mate Vic Marks tries to talk him out of his gloom. This backfires, however, when Roebuck's argumentative streak is roused, with the upshot being 'we agreed that not only should I retire but he should, too!' Thus satisfied, they kept on playing.

Evident within the partly wry, partly maudlin note of these pieces is a love of the life of a middling County cricketer—the people it surrounds you with, the culture of it—for all of its faults, for any of its mediocrity. That peculiarly English talent for using self-mockery as comic device is shown in high relief.

Underneath it all, though, Roebuck was searching for a different life. Anglo-Saxon England—as opposed to the immigrant cultures which sustain multicultural Britain—was cramped, class-conscious, overly subtle, 'finding fault not strength' and clinging to an irretrievable past. As he told us, it was an England characterised by 'lost humorists and fiction writers—a bad sign.' Not a place for an aspiring writer, nor for someone with 'youthful idealism ... buried but down there somewhere.' Soon Peter

Roebuck was spending more and more time in Australia.

**R**OEBUCK'S FIRST FORAY TO Australia produced culture shock: 'I can hardly tell you how far Australia seemed from England for a boy from the country areas of Somerset.' On arrival he was struck by the light, the shock jocks that ruled the Sydney airwaves, and—most bizarre of all in a country that prided itself on a rather larrikin disregard for authority—the overriding obedience to rules. At the lights on roadsides 'everyone would stand there and wait for the little man to turn green.' This was a rum continent indeed.

But he liked this sense of cultural isolation—I wanted to be far away and make a fresh start with a blank piece of paper.' Most importantly, Australia had the strong foundations that Peter Roebuck craved. There was an honesty and a directness, 'a willingness to roll up one's sleeves and have a go'. A willingness to face the ordeals of life and of sport.

Roebuck goes on to talk about Aboriginal initiation ceremonies, as an expression 'of what has been an ancient and long-standing tribal structure in *all* societies'—that of teacher and pupil, father and son, the need for a period of training and ordeal to precede maturity. 'I like simplicity, I like tribal structures. We've got to tell people that hardship and difficulties are *normal*. That we will encounter them, and there's nothing *wrong* with that,' he concludes with feeling. 'We're making life flatter by protecting people too much ... The whole point is not the result, it's the journey.'

Perhaps it is the path travelled by Steve Waugh—a steely-wristed fighter enchanted by history—that most illustrates what Roebuck loves about Australia and sport. Waugh came early to Roebuck's attention, spending a season with him at Somerset in the late 1980s. But it was when he became Australian captain that he really came into his own, prodding his team to see the wonders of the Taj Mahal, the sacredness of Gallipoli, the reality of poverty and disease, and the strength within themselves. 'Sport isn't a recreation in Australia'—rather, sport offers the chance to strive, and in this striving to meet and explore the depth of one's being. What Steve Waugh has done is taken 'himself and the players on this *journey*, this kid from Bankstown ...'

Just as telling for Roebuck was the way Waugh goes against the grain of national identity. He's an independent outsider, who keeps to himself and is self-contained, a national hero who's more of a loner than anything else, in a country where the male cultural tradition is a clannish gregariousness of the mates.

Coming to Australia also influenced Roebuck's writing. He speaks with affection of the late and much lamented Bill O'Reilly: 'an extraordinary man, and an extraordinary writer.' A fine exponent of a particularly Australian language, with his mix of bush and Old Testament, the 'beautifully constructed sentences' sharpened by the driest of humours. O'Reilly was an old Labor man, a Catholic of the pre-Vatican II persuasion, an old English teacher—the heritage ran deep, and was continually nourished by the simple and most important fact of all: 'he really enjoyed words'. O'Reilly used to write his reports out, Roebuck tells us, in an exercise book, pick up the



Images of Peter Roebuck above and on p21 are from *Tangled up in White, Peter Roebuck on Cricket*, William Heinemann Australia, 1990. Photographs by Patrick Eagar.



phone, dictate the copy down the line and that was it—off he'd go, job done on the first take. 'Hardly anyone could do that,' Roebuck says, searching for a few moments for a parallel. 'Mozart, that's about it.' Roebuck asked O'Reilly once how he went about it, and he said, 'Well, I try to work out what I think. Then I state it as strongly as I can. And if they don't take any notice I do the same tomorrow.' And I thought,' Roebuck concludes, taking a large draught of tea, 'that's a pretty good Australian viewpoint.'

ONE OF THE ironies about Roebuck's recent life as a cricket commentator is his trenchant criticism of the English cricket culture he was born into. For Roebuck, the English cricket system has got worse, which is why he's so harsh on it. A recent column, titled 'English Cricket is Full of Nonsense' (25 January 2003) began:

Ten years ago, a bunch of spoiled brats bearing the name of the England under-19 team arrived in Australia. They brought with them sponsored kit, fat contracts and an air of self-satisfaction. Unfortunately, they were not much good ... Flattered by contracts with desperate and overfunded counties, they have ideas above their cricketing station. Most fall flat on their faces. Many do not train and practise properly, sink to the lower grades and imagine it is someone else's fault.

You can see why in some quarters he wouldn't be well liked.

Another major concern for Roebuck, both as a writer and as an individual, has been race. He has written that the colour of people's skin never seemed a relevant issue for him. Towards the end of the 1980s he became part of the anti-apartheid movement, writing in support of the sanctions against South Africa. Here Roebuck found a new voice, one no longer simply concerned with recording, enjoying and ironically bewailing the life of the County cricketer. Now the system came under criticism: the cricketing bodies for reluctance to act on and regulate an issue so fundamental as equality between black and white, but also the players for being so short-sighted as to insist on their 'right' to go and make a living playing in a country like South Africa under apartheid. 'Can the rights of players to go where they like stand aside

the right of races to be equal?' he asked.

Since then he has coached a number of black African cricketers. And more recently, he bought a property in Natal—on the spur of the moment. Although he describes his attraction to Africa, and the things that took him there, with words that betray an almost dreamy sensibility—the light, the raw beauty of the place, the simplicity—he is not content with that. He adds, 'If you're part of the battle you've got to be part of the reconstruction or else you didn't really care in the first place. You cared, rather, for your own mental well-being.' You have to give the whole of yourself, you have to engage, and Roebuck is also engaging in Zimbabwe, where he supports orphaned children.

Not that we would want to make Peter Roebuck seem only fine and good. In 2001 he received a suspended jail sentence for caning three young cricketers from South Africa. He had offered to coach them at his former home in Taunton, Somerset. When they failed to obey his 'house rules' he caned them. Aside from anything else, what is evident here is the hardness of a man with high standards for himself and others—which may surprise those who equate Roebuck's lyrical writing with a gentle, uncomplicated soul. Roebuck the taskmaster remains as much in evidence as Roebuck the activist.

Roebuck does not find racial politics easy. He has written against a sporting sanction of Zimbabwe—he knows people linked both to the opposition and to Mugabe's regime, knows some of the complexity of the situation and his own fallibility, and believes that it will be better if the World Cup matches in Zimbabwe go ahead.

PETER ROEBUCK recently became an Australian citizen. It was one of the proudest moments of his life—even for loners a sense of belonging, of acceptance in a place, is important. Yet while Roebuck has embraced life in Australia, he is not completely comfortable with the culture. There is a narrowness here, a belief that the Australian way is the correct way. And

underneath this can be racism. When the Sri Lankan spinner Muttiah Muralitharan was recently targeted by Australian crowds chanting abuse, few Australians condemned it. Murali (as he is called), acclaimed by Wisden as the best bowler of all time, is a Tamil from a war-torn country, considered a gentleman by most of his peers. But in Australia, 'it is Murali's bowling action that causes offence, not the actions of Australia's supporters'. The outrage is palpable in his voice. Australia has the foundations, but not necessarily the vision, for greater justice.

How then, we ask, is one to marry the contrary impulses, the archaic tribal structures of initiation, of teacher and pupil, with political engagement? Ultimately, Roebuck concludes, 'we're searching for a broadening of our society but what we *don't* want is to take away the strength of our society.'

Peter Roebuck is still on a journey, following cricket. He loves it. Loves, or is magnetically drawn to, the uncertain balance struck between moments of real and

possible beauty, and an eternally cursed contrariness. But, as he has emphatically written, cricket is most certainly not:

*'I like simplicity,  
I like tribal  
structures. We've  
got to tell people  
that hardship  
and difficulties  
are normal.  
That we will  
encounter them,  
and there's  
nothing wrong  
with that.'*

a nice game. It is a temptress, a Cleopatra of a game. Herein lies its greatest appeal. Its art is elusive. Cricket cannot be mastered. Like a seductress it moves away, cocking a finger, for you to follow and yet warning you as to the consequences. On the field tragedy follows hard upon triumph, ease and discomfort sit side by side ...

Contraries let loose and constantly wrestling, a strong allergic reaction to orthodoxies of any kind, coupled with a refusal to be pigeon-holed in any way: that's Roebuck, or a piece of him at least. He's 'always tried to give the whole of [him]self—fallibility and all'. Not nice, not fine, but a man with that rare gift of being able to make the game, and the world around it, sing. ■

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# THE FRONTIER FALLEN

In the heat of debate over the number of Aboriginal dead on the Australian frontier we neglect more fruitful ways of gathering evidence.

**A** WAR OF WORDS about Australia's frontier has been declared. Historians are exhuming bodies from the archives and counting them. What was the nature of the violence between Aborigines and settlers? How many Aboriginal people were shot or poisoned during the European occupation of the continent?

Over the last few years Keith Windschuttle has accused a generation of historians, in particular Henry Reynolds, of grossly exaggerating the number of Aborigines killed by Europeans in the occupation of the continent. He has been especially critical of the historiography of massacres and of Reynolds' estimate that 20,000 Aboriginal people died in frontier conflict.<sup>1</sup>

I believe Reynolds' estimate is conservative, and a reasonable and intelligent quantification that will continue to be revised but can never be definitive. Windschuttle's challenge—to count the dead with scepticism—has elicited detailed responses from other scholars, including Reynolds himself.<sup>2</sup> I am interested here in the politics, psychology and language of his scepticism. Debates about the number of dead, I shall argue, continually founder on fundamental disagreements about the nature of history and memory, and also the language and idea of 'war'.

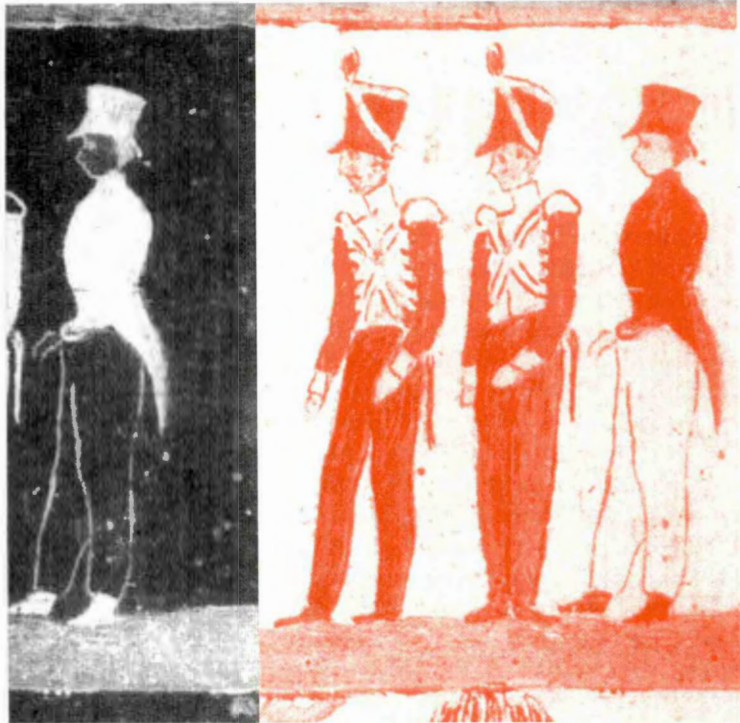
### *The killing of history*

Windschuttle's 1994 book, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary*

*Critics and Social Theorists*, expressed his anxiety and anger over the impact of postmodernism, deconstructionism and other forms of 'critical theory' on the discipline of history. His concern—a common one since the 1980s—was that the distinctions between history and fiction were being dissolved and the past had been deemed unknowable. More fundamentally, Windschuttle's book was a defence of the idea of history as an objective science and a privileged product of western society. A number of those scholars he chose to attack—Greg Denning, Inga Clendinnen, Paul Carter and Anne Salmond—were among those who have tried to step outside the imperial, European view of the past in order to embrace a cross-cultural history.

Windschuttle was unsettled by the relativism that discarded the notion of unilinear, directional time and placed Indigenous perspectives on equal terms with Western ones. He affirmed his belief that there is such a thing as History and not a multiplicity of histories. History was not just written by the winners; it helped put Western culture at the top of the social evolutionary ladder; it was one of the gifts of civilisation and one of the tools of colonisation. The substitution of history for myth was one of the triumphs of European civilisation, and it spiritually paved the way for the occupation of the New World. Europeans had a history and were continually making it, whereas 'primitive' peoples were





the timeless subjects of a different form of analysis, anthropology. In the 19th century, history became scientific by being accurate and factual, by revering the official documents of the new nation states, and by championing a discriminating concern with 'the primary source'. Such a view of history—as the triumph of the West, the end and the means—makes one contemptuous of history from 'the other side of the frontier'.<sup>3</sup>

Windschuttle's argument that much frontier violence has been fabricated is, therefore, partly a campaign for a simpler empiricism, one that privileges counting, figures of authority and legal conventions, and one in which a 'reliable figure' of clandestine violence is achievable. This amounts to a rejection of the insights of histories that are cross-cultural in both subject and method. He resents the fact that Indigenous memory and forms of history have been given serious attention by the western tradition. Much of the oral evidence among Aboriginal people of violence on the frontier is 'mistaken', mistaken because their knowledge is less scientific, emotive and parochial.<sup>4</sup>

When, as historians, we get close to the 'frontier', we often find it evaporating either into intimacy or distance. Early European collectors of Aboriginal artefacts, for example, might be thought to be 'primary sources' on Aboriginal culture because they dealt in the raw material of cross-cultural exchange. In a recent study of ethnographic collectors in South Australia, Philip Jones has portrayed the frontier as 'less a line which separated than a zone which unified' and as a source of 'new and potent forms of culture'. But collecting could also be an act of distancing, a way of keeping the frontier at bay, a means of denying the vitality and continuity of the other culture. In other words, the frontier messes mischievously with that conventional division between primary and secondary sources, between contemporary and reminiscent ones, between eyewitnesses and hearsay, between presence and absence. The frontier

is a phenomenon supremely designed to undermine the rule of law and the legal method. Thus, a historical method that applies these distinctions too slavishly is prey to comic error and serious oversight.<sup>5</sup>

#### *The construction of silence*

In his 1980 Boyer Lectures entitled *The Spectre of Truganini*, Bernard Smith suggested Australian culture is haunted by the dispossession and violence done to Aborigines. It is 'a nightmare to be thrust out of mind', he wrote. 'Yet like the traumatic experiences of childhood it continues to haunt our dreams.' Bernard Smith and W.E.H. Stanner (in his earlier series of Boyer Lectures) urged their fellow Australians to interrogate 'the Great Australian Silence' about Aborigines, not only to reveal suppressed facts about the frontier but also as part of an essential exploration of the white Australian psyche. For the Great Australian Silence was often 'white noise': it sometimes consisted of an obscuring and overlaying din of history-making. But the denial was often unconscious, or only half-conscious, for it was embedded in metaphor and language and in habits of commemoration. Silences are not just absences, though they can be manifested in that way. Silences are often discernible and palpable; they shape conversation and writing; they are enacted and constructed. We need to pay them as much attention as we pay official white noise. And analysing the uneasy language of conflict helps us discern the emotional and political slippage—the distinctive dissonance—at the heart of the Australian frontier experience.<sup>6</sup>

The euphemisms of the frontier, laconic and sharp, entered the Australian language. Aborigines were 'civilised' or 'dispersed' or 'pacified'; white settlers went on a 'spree' and boasted of the 'black crows' they had shot. The land itself received new names—such as Murdering Creek and the Convincing Ground—that mapped the unofficial violence. The word-play was conscious and mischievous. 'A quiet tongue' was said to be a qualification for a frontier policeman, and the infamous W.H. Willshire boasted that it was his carbines that 'were talking English'. These forms of language and description slip in and out of recognising the violence of the frontier. They reveal that many colonists accepted murder in their midst; but they reveal, too, their awareness that it could not be openly discussed. There were good reasons to be silent, especially after Myall Creek. Describing the organised shooting of Aborigines in Gippsland in the 1840s, F.J. Meyrick noted: 'these things are kept very secret as the penalty would certainly be hanging.' Even those who were appalled by what was happening found themselves forced into impotence and silence. Meyrick commented in 1846: 'If I could remedy these things I would speak loudly though it cost me all I am worth in the world, but as I cannot I will keep aloof and know nothing and say nothing.'<sup>7</sup>

Illustration above left: from the 'Proclamation to the Aborigines', artist unknown. Keith Windschuttle includes it in his book

*The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One, Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847* (Macleay Press, 2002). He notes the date as 1828 and locates the original in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

Windschuttle's interpretation of the paintings reads as follows: 'These painted boards were placed on trees and in places frequented by the Aborigines. The signs were a proclamation of the intention to treat all people, black and white, as equals. They were an illustration of the Evangelical and Enlightenment sentiments of the time.'

Henry Reynolds also uses the Proclamation as illustration, though differently. See p27.



As an example of the construction of silence, let me introduce you briefly to Alfred Kenyon, the leading writer of Victorian pastoral history in the first half of the 20th century. The 'greatest romance' in Australian history, reflected Kenyon, 'is the rise of the sheep breeder or pastoralist ... [T]he finest example of man's mastery over the opposing forces of nature, of his justification of his position at the head of the organic world, is ... the breeding of fine wool'. Through an account of the pastoralist, Kenyon told the story of what he called 'the peopling of the continental spaces' or 'the filling up of Victoria's vacant corners'. He and R.V. Billis produced a much used map of squatting runs in Victoria which represented pastoral holdings as discrete, bounded territories (rather like Aboriginal tribal areas) that pieced together into a jigsaw claiming the whole of the state. Kenyon disparaged the possibility of Aboriginal antiquity and yet was a keen collector of Aboriginal artefacts. He removed thousands of stone tools from the landscape of south-eastern Australia, and in their place he erected stone cairns marking the paths of European explorers. Australia's occupation by Europeans was simple, he claimed, because of 'the absence of any coloured race worthy of consideration'. He described it as '[a]n occupation where the dispossessors and the possessors lay down in amity side by side like the lion and the lamb, with the usual result to the lamb'.<sup>8</sup>

Kenyon went out of his way to excuse the squatter of any violence towards Aborigines. 'The old-time mission station has more to answer for than the squatter's station', he explained. His was a class history, of wealth versus labour. Any frontier violence, said Kenyon, hedging his bets, was perpetrated by the lower classes and was unsanctioned and regrettable. He repeatedly scoffed at the tales of massacres and poisoned flour, while admitting that the rumours were widespread. In fact his continual slapping down of these stories reveals that a strong current of oral

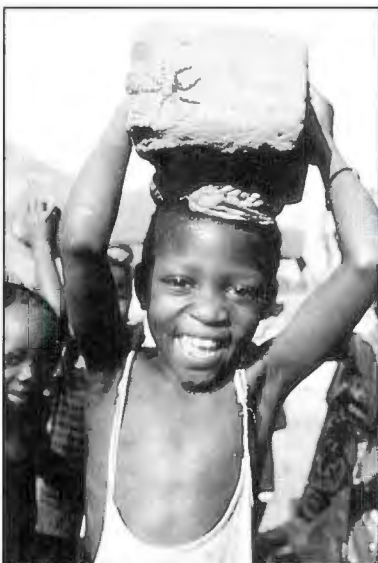
testimony of frontier violence did exist, and that Kenyon and others sought to control and suppress it. Kenyon was not inhabiting a silence, he was creating it. He was confronting a cacophony of undisciplined voices. Noise there was, and he sought to overwhelm it. Kenyon's carefully constructed 'white noise' was in response to an unruly babble of whispers.<sup>9</sup>

In the language of conflict there is a constant conflict over language. In 1998 in the Kimberley I discovered someone had carefully scratched out three words on a recently erected government interpretation sign about Aboriginal-settler relations. One of the words removed was a local Aboriginal name, Malngarri, implying the existence of a distinct language and people; another was the word 'religious', implying an alternative belief system; and the final word scratched out was 'invasion', invoking the possibility of war and land rights. Recognition of Aboriginal culture, religion and country constituted the offensive language of this sign. The Great Australian Silence continues to work in quiet ways.

#### *The sinews of settler memory*

For over five years in the 1980s I officially ministered to popular anxieties about the changing boundaries between public and private in Australian history. I was employed as Field Officer for the State Library of Victoria, a job that involved the acquisition of historic manuscripts and pictures for the Library's Australiana research collections. It was known as the 'cup of tea' job, for it took one into the lounge rooms of Victoria to discuss the future of family papers and the likely public uses of quite personal pasts. That work exposed me to the politics of the past, to the dilemmas of collection, possession and preservation.

It was a time when the political and scholarly revolution in Aboriginal Studies was making its mark on the history and commemoration of the Australian frontier. Victoria's sesquicentenary in 1984-85 prompted the controversial memorialisation



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of conflict between Aborigines and settlers, even on official plaques. Descendants of pioneering settlers were unsettled, and wondered what historians might find in family papers donated to libraries. The transformation of family history into national heritage could seem, in these circumstances, a dangerous honour.

Libraries attract unusual popular faith and esteem. It is, I believe, because they have a recognised role as the generators and custodians of stories. From the experience of my 'cup of tea' job, I can tell you an immensely heartening thing: people generally give private papers to libraries not to make money or to become famous, but to connect with—and to discover—stories in their culture. They believe, rightly, that once family things pass over to a public institution, they enter a world of popular and scholarly conversation that draws out unexpected meanings and understandings. In other words, people give to a library to learn—to learn about themselves as well as their society. Libraries and museums link people and things to the world of storytelling and scholarship. Donors of archives therefore warily monitor the fashions of research. There is a tense, symbiotic relationship between what they choose to make public and how history is told.

Of course, historical records are constantly lost and destroyed, randomly and carelessly, without purpose or import. But what is kept is kept with purpose, and what is made public has import. And therefore the gaps and silences in the public record might also signify. A fascinating graph might be sketched of the cycles of preservation and destruction and their relationship to the fashions and politics of scholarship.

In the 1970s and 1980s, there might have been an increase in the burning of early pastoral diaries and letters. As an official collector of such records, I heard stories that this was so. The reasons for such culling could be defensive or constructive. One descendant of both settlers and Aborigines (and a supporter of Native Title) told me that he had once destroyed a station's records 'to protect people from an explosive political situation' and 'in the hope that it might clear the air for a fairer future'. He described how and where he set the evidence of massacre to flame. He regrets doing it now. 'I thought I was doing the right thing at the time. I hope I don't burn in Hell for it.' It is possible that the sense of alarm created by conservative pressure groups in the wake of the High Court's 1996 *Wik* decision has led to the suppression of evidence of another kind, this time evidence not so much of conflict as of sharing and negotiation.

When records are officially preserved, they often leave the locality of their origin, go to the city, become institutionalised and thereby become subject to local suspicion. For anyone schooled in the professional discipline of history it is a shock to encounter the proud oral culture of rural Australia. In a small community, oral sources of history are often regarded as the pre-eminent means of access to the

local past. Academic historical tradition, founded as it was on the craft of documentary scholarship, has often viewed oral history with distrust. But on the local scene the tables are turned. There, history is a possession of the town's elders, the approved custodians of the past, sometimes 'the oldest resident'. They are people who have earned the right to pass on and interpret their town's inherited wisdom. Knowledge gains authority from its genealogy. Residents view with scepticism any alternative, outside avenues of access to that past, especially if they are literary, official or urban.

Because of their attention to particular places, local and colonial historians were always more alert to the Aboriginal past than were academic historians, who were overwhelmingly concerned with establishing their discipline through the writing of national history. Even as Aboriginal people were excluded by national histories, they found a place in local

'Deep down', wrote poet Les Murray in 1975, 'we scorn the Aborigines for not having provided us with the romantic vision of a remembered war'. A proper war would have dignified the settlers' violence, brought it out in the open and allowed them the romance of heroes and campaigns.



histories. The recent rediscovery of the Aboriginal past has as much to do with a new academic valuing of the local and the oral as it does with cross-cultural insights.

In the year following the High Court's 1992 *Mabo* judgment, David Roberts explored 'the knowledge' of the New South Wales country town of Sofala and found a resilient oral tradition of a local massacre (at Bells Falls Gorge), telling of a large number of Aboriginal people who were shot or pushed off a cliff. Most residents, reported Roberts, maintained 'that the story is not just a yarn or a myth but a "local knowledge", not requiring the details and tangible proofs that historians use as the foundation of their work'. Although surviving documents tell of the declaration of martial law in late 1824, of reprisal parties sent out against the Aborigines, and of several incidents of

Illustrations pp27–28, also from the 'Proclamation to the Aborigines'. Henry Reynolds, in *Fate of a Free People, A Radical Re-Examination of the Tasmanian Wars* (Penguin, 1995) also includes the Proclamation. His caption reads as follows: ' "Proclamation to the Aborigines", artist unknown. One of the painted signs used by Governor Arthur to illustrate the intention, if not the reality, of government policy.' Reynolds sources the Proclamation from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.



multiple murder, no contemporary written evidence precisely confirms the oral tradition. Pages of letters are missing, and official reports were not filed or have not survived. The discrepancies and uncertainties surrounding the massacre story prompted Roberts to reflect on the politics, past and present, that lead people to suppress or exaggerate violence. The community Roberts visited and questioned in 1993 clung to the oral tradition of violence but also seemed averse to discussing Aboriginal association with the area in any detail. Residents declined to recognise registered Aboriginal sites in the region at the same time as they memorialised the place of a remembered massacre. There were stories that, because of fear of land claims, farmers may have destroyed large



One descendant of both settlers and Aborigines (and a supporter of Native Title) told me that he had once destroyed a station's records 'to protect people from an explosive political situation' and 'in the hope that it might clear the air for a fairer future'.

collections of bones, presumed to be Aboriginal, which they uncovered on their properties. People kept quiet about local discoveries of Aboriginal relics. The proprietor of Sofala's museum declared: 'you tend not to want to find Aboriginal stuff for obvious reasons. You're asking for trouble.' The local massacre may well have happened, and written evidence suggests its likelihood; but the story may also have focused the memory of widespread violence onto one dramatic feature of local topography, concentrating diffuse conflict into a conclusive parable. 'What of the local Aborigines?' asked Roberts at Sofala's Royal Hotel. 'They're all killed mate', replied the bush storyteller. And so the story of the massacre could have served a similar purpose to the 'last of the tribe' monuments erected across Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Such forms of commemoration, even where they were sympathetic to Aboriginal people or angry about their suffering, served mostly to reinforce a sense of inevitability about what happened, and gave a misleading

sharpness to the notion of frontier.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s there emerged a new scholarly and popular interest in stories of frontier conflict, and Roberts explains how Bells Falls Massacre became enshrined in regional and national histories, 'the nation now believing what many small rural communities have long known'. The politics of reconciliation, suggests Roberts, sometimes means that 'plausible speculation has given way to sensationalism', and the oral tradition has been elaborated in print and given wider prominence, blurring the boundaries between the local and national, oral and written, popular and scholarly.

The importance of this study is that, unlike Windschuttle's work, it considers the motivations for both the suppression and exaggeration of violence and assesses oral culture with seriousness as well as scepticism. The sinews of settler memory are palpable and strong, and historians have to wrestle with them. The Australian frontier reveals its character through memory and history-making as well as through recorded contemporary experience. We need history because some things cannot be recognised as they happen.

#### *The history of killing*

At the heart of the frontier conflict debate—and of the concern with the number of dead—is the language and idea of 'war'. It was a frustration to many colonists that the constant domestic tension and sporadic conflict of the Australian frontier did not fit their image of a war, though they often used that term. In 1913 Western Australians even inscribed the phrase 'Lest We Forget' on a monument to explorers killed by Aborigines.<sup>11</sup> But the experience of settlers was generally not of public violence against a respected foe, but more frequently a private drama of betrayal, fear, suspicion and disdain. 'Deep down', wrote poet Les Murray in 1975, 'we scorn the Aborigines for not having provided us with the romantic vision of a remembered war'. A proper war would have dignified the settlers' violence, brought it out in the open and allowed them the romance of heroes and campaigns. But 'war'—much as it might have offered psychological relief—was legally and politically unacceptable.<sup>12</sup>

'War' was also culturally imagined as occurring elsewhere. In 19th- and early 20th-century Australia, there was a curious conflation of a vision of pastoral peace and a keen anticipation of war. Colonists yearned for the sort of blood on an international stage that would prove their racial vigour and exorcise their convict inheritance. At the same time as they celebrated the peaceful occupation of their new land and projected sunny images of patrician pastures and woolly flocks, they hungered for war—a real war—that would baptise their nationhood. So denial of war on the Australian frontier underpinned nationalist yearnings. And a powerful silence was cemented



at the core of an emerging Australian identity.

'War' is a word that Windschuttle is keen to avoid. It is because he is bending over backwards to hang on to that word 'murder'. Concerned above all to demonstrate that colonists embraced British law and justice, he finds it easier to recognise 'murder' than 'war'. Constant, sporadic and personal violence is less disturbing to the state than slaughter. 'Massacre' is an ambiguous word because it uncomfortably slips between the categories: it describes organised, mass killing that is nevertheless unequal and illegal. The Myall Creek massacre of 1838 is Windschuttle's favourite example because it is one of the few massacres officially described as murder. And so Windschuttle concludes, as if it were a new insight, that most Aborigines were not killed in massacres, but in ones or twos. He appears to find civic relief in this.

Reynolds sees settlers defending newly won land. Windschuttle sees 'legitimate police operations'. Police were 'doing their duty' he tells us again and again, clinging innocently to that word. But what was their 'duty'? Was it civil or military or something uncomfortably in between? Did the violence take place within the civic frontier, that is, within the effective embrace of British law and justice, or did it take place on 'the other side of the frontier', in a war zone? Or was it neither completely one nor the other? Windschuttle turns away from the most interesting dimensions of frontier history—the gaps between expectation and reality, and between experience and language. It is in these dissonances that we find the distinctive character of the Australian frontier—and the origins of the unease at its heart.

Henry Reynolds is the historian most identified with the rediscovery of frontier conflict. Reynolds is a strange target for Windschuttle because his work embodies empiricism and empire in some of the ways that Windschuttle wants. As Peter Cochrane noted in a perceptive critique of Reynolds' work published in *Eureka Street* (1998), he piles up his evidence, indulges in 'relentless documentation' and writes with 'a morally charged positivism'. Reynolds casts imperial restraint on colonists in the most positive terms, downplays home-grown humanitarianism, and resists the Australian nationalist narrative that equates 'self-government' with democracy and fairness. His history gives the high moral ground to the common law—which was ignored or defied or misunderstood by settlers—with a consequence that he writes, as one commentator put it, 'the kind of history that the law can take notice of'.<sup>13</sup> Reynolds is therefore particularly infuriating to his conservative critics, argues Cochrane, because he has defeated them on their own ground.

Windschuttle and other critics have branded Reynolds a 'separatist', arguing that the invention of widespread frontier violence, now and in the past, has been in the service of a politics of 'separatism' that aims to isolate Aboriginal people from white

society. Separatists of every era, argues Windschuttle—from the missionaries of the 19th century to the likes of Reynolds today—exaggerate frontier violence to justify protective reserves, land rights or a separate Aboriginal state. The language of war certainly makes conflict political and links violence to land and nation. There is a clear political lineage, and one pursued in Reynolds' work, that moves from frontier conflict to war to land rights to sovereignty. But labelling Reynolds a separatist completely misunderstands his work.

Reynolds' oeuvre is daring for the very reason that it attempts nothing less than the integration of Aboriginal history into one of the great themes of Australian settler nationhood. He has explicitly contrasted the forgotten Aboriginal dead with the revered fallen warriors of Australia's overseas wars. 'All over the continent', he argued,

Aborigines bled as profusely and died as bravely as white soldiers in Australia's twentieth-century wars ... [But] do we make room for the Aboriginal dead on our memorials, cenotaphs, boards of honour and even in the pantheon of national heroes? If they did not die for Australia as such they fell defending their homelands, their sacred sites, their way of life.

'Fell' is an immensely powerful and symbolic word here, as Ken Inglis has noted in his book *Sacred Places*. It is an impressive appropriation of the imperial language of war. And putting a number on the dead enables Reynolds to bring this whole arena of Australian history and memory into the conventions of military commemoration.<sup>14</sup>

Reynolds began his research by enumerating the whites killed by blacks with the aim of demonstrating that 'settlement' was not peaceful but contested and at times uncertain. The numbers of fallen whites became a measure of the challenge of occupation and also established Aborigines as agents and not just victims, as enemies and not just subjects. Then Reynolds took seriously the far more difficult task of estimating black deaths. A conservative estimate of the casualties (20,000) enabled him to compare its significant size with the numbers of Australia's overseas sacrifices. Another reason to count—or at least to try—was to recognise, as our culture does in war, that each individual life lost in such a cause was heroic, a death to be honoured in its uniqueness, another sacrifice without a genuine grave.

Reynolds' work might be placed in that great 20th-century tradition of historiography about the Anzac Legend, a lineage that includes C.E.W. Bean, Geoffrey Serle, Bill Gammage and Ken Inglis. Many historians have acknowledged frontier conflict and have now travelled to the other side of the frontier, but no-one other than Reynolds has so tenaciously championed Aborigines as Anzacs.

We know just how controversial this strategy is from the response to Ken Inglis' suggestion in 1998,

at the launch of *Sacred Places*, that the Australian War Memorial should represent warlike encounters between black and white.<sup>15</sup> Inglis' proposal came out of his lifelong study of the settlers' culture of commemoration, and in a book steeped in intelligent sympathy for the rituals of war. It wasn't a war, wrote his critics. And even if it was a war, then it wasn't an officially declared war and both sides didn't wear uniforms. And even if it still rated somehow as a real war, then Aborigines were the other side, and they were the losers, and victors don't put up monuments to the losers. Aborigines are not Us. Here speaks the real politics of separatism in Australia today.

In focusing on frontier violence, Windschuttle takes us back to the beginnings of the modern historiographical revolution that was unfolding as Henry Reynolds commenced his work. The renewed revelation of frontier violence soon led to more serious treatment of other aspects of cross-cultural relations in Australia, and many scholars, including Reynolds, went on to develop more subtle and varied analyses of the frontier. They argued that the frontier was more intimate and personal than previously allowed, that there was as much sharing and accommodation between black and white cultures as there was confrontation and violence. Historians became critical of the limitations of what was called 'massacre history'. It was white history, they said, and it diverted attention from personal and institutional forms of violence.

It is interesting to remind ourselves of the critical reception of Roger Milliss' book, *Waterloo Creek*,

published in 1992—a book Windschuttle describes as having been 'reviewed with universal favour when it appeared'. Although there was widespread admiration for Milliss' archival tenacity, and the book won several literary prizes, historians found aspects of it disappointing. By the early 1990s, there was a strong feeling among people researching Aboriginal history that a narrow obsession with violence and white guilt ignored more subtle and complex understandings of the frontier. Historians criticised Milliss for contributing to a simplified and uncomplicated morality, for perpetuating a fixation with overt violence, for returning to a concept of a purely oppositional frontier, for overlooking the Aboriginal experience, and for failing to interrogate the silences.<sup>16</sup> Peter Read summed up the situation with these words: '*Waterloo Creek* would have been state-of-the-art in 1970, it would have been in the mainstream in 1980. In 1992 it is dated in conception and analysis.'<sup>17</sup>

Windschuttle's critique of frontier history, by affirming the effectiveness of the rule of law, might be seen as part of the recent academic willingness to explore the range of non-violent interactions on the frontier. But by denying a whole dimension of violent interactions and the complexity of their evidentiary legacy, he has provoked a necessary revival of 'massacre history', ignored more vital and subtle analyses of cross-cultural relations, and returned us to an old language of conflict. ■

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13. Peter Cochrane, 'Hunting not Travelling', *Fueka Street*, Vol 8, no. 8, 1998, pp32–40. The unnamed commentator is quoted by Cochrane, p35.

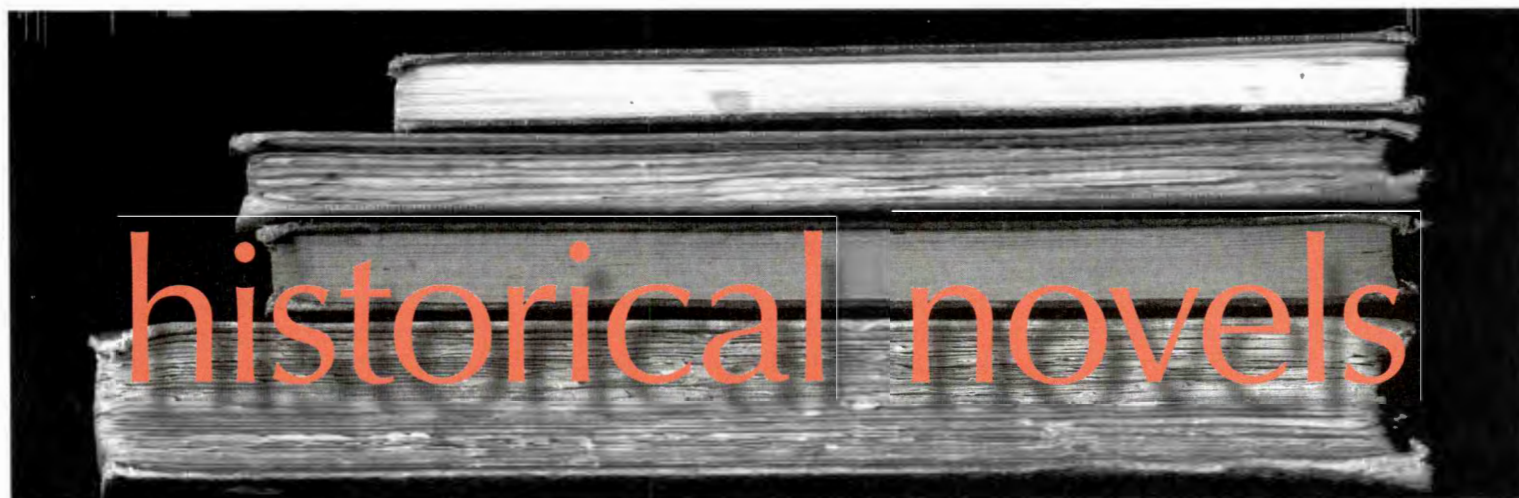
14. Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1982, p201; Inglis, *Sacred Places*, p448.

15. The Governor-General, Sir William Deane, launched *Sacred Places* and was attributed with Inglis' views in some reports of the book launch. See, for example, Helen McCabe, 'Governor-General Pushes Memorials for Aborigines', *Courier-Mail*, 18 November 1998; Glen St J. Barclay, 'The Politics of War ... and a Memorial', *Courier-Mail*, 20 November 1998.

16. Peter Read, 'Unearthing the Past is Not Enough', *Island*, no. 52, 1992, pp49–53; Marian Aveling, 'The Waterloo of White Guilt', *Australian Book Review*, no. 139, 1992, pp6–7; Gilhan Cowlishaw, 'Review Article', *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol 4, no. 1, 1993, pp62–7; Adam Shoemaker, 'Exorcising Old Ghosts', *The Australian*, 14–15 March 1992; Stuart Macintyre, 'Founding Moments', *London Review of Books*, 11 March 1993, pp12–13; Lyndall Ryan, 'Review', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol 25, no. 99, 1992, pp330–1; Bain Attwood, 'Massacre: Our Absence From Our Past', *Overland*, no. 128, 1992, pp83–5.

17. Windschuttle, 'The Myths of Frontier Massacres in Australian History', Part 1, p16; Read, 'Unearthing the Past', pp49–53.





Are we writing too many of them? Is there a crisis of relevance in Austlit?  
No, argues **Delia Falconer**.

I CAME TO READING, to *really* reading, fiction in the 1980s, which felt then, and seems even more in retrospect, like a golden era for the novel. In the mid-'80s at Sydney University you could not hold your head up without having read *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The gay boys of our acquaintance circulated copies of *HQ*, featuring long interviews with 'new exotic' writers like Bruce Chatwin; the straight boys wooed prospective girlfriends, perhaps inadvisedly, with copies of Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*. Serious girls cropped and violently coloured their hair in homage to the heroines of Helen Garner novels. The coolest students migrated either to the Fine Arts department—still buzzing after the 1984 visit of Jean Baudrillard—or to the Australian literature courses, where they discussed the merits of Astley over Adams; in their spare time they might pen credible imitations of Peter Carey's 'Death of the Mime' or attend readings at the Harold Park Hotel.

Flash forward almost 20 years and the talk, wherever you turn, is of a literary crisis—particularly in Australia. Over the last five years or so there has been a growing sense of panic about the state of fiction that began around the time of the Demidenko (and subsequent Radley and Koolmatric) frauds. In 1996, Miles Franklin winner Christopher Koch charged the demon of postmodernism for our failing literary culture; more recently

Frank Moorhouse blamed creative writing courses for saturating an already overloaded market. Others lamented the proliferation of grunge, or the absence of 'political' novels from the literary landscape. This sense of urgent pessimism really gathered force in 2000 when the *Australian Book Review* ran a symposium on whether we published 'too many' or too many 'mediocre' novels. It was underscored by the seven-year-long grip of the Howard government, an arts-hostile regime that, under the guise of returning us to the solid values that had supposedly been inhibited by the political correctness of the Keating era, was characterised by meanness of spirit, insular self-interest, and a strict adherence to the fiscal bottom line.

SINCE EARLY 2002 this anxiety about the state of the art has centred on the content of Australian literature and its apparent failure to confront the present. In the *Bulletin* (13 November 2002) Hannie Rayson called for a 'theatre of engagement', while in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Malcolm Knox (21 January 2002) and Drusilla Modjeska (8 August 2002) took the Australian novel to task for its retreat from modern life.

According to Knox and Modjeska we are writing too many historical novels. Modjeska, once a great lover of Australian fiction, was surprised recently to discover that she no longer enjoyed

Australian novels, which she finds, on the whole, 'tricksy and insubstantial'. While our non-fiction writers have risen to the complexities of our times, she argued, the sheer rate of change seems to have overwhelmed the novel, which now confines itself almost exclusively to exotic settings or the past. Knox, too, was troubled by his own lack of interest in contemporary Australian fiction; novels written by French and American authors (Houellebecq, Franzen, Moody) seemed to capture his own reality far more effectively than, say, Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*. This was because too many Australian novels have retreated into the 'far-off, the period, the unfamiliar, the allegoric'.

There is no doubt that these are difficult times, in which it seems reasonable to be both alert *and* alarmed. The Keating-era sense of optimism about both Australia's future and the possibilities of fiction seems light years away now. It is hard sometimes to feel excited about writing novels at all. There is a sense, at least among writers of my own generation, of flatness, a holding of breath as we hope that someone will write the next significant book, a weariness about our floated and inflated writing economy, with its big advances and over-hyped new novels—as a friend says, 'Sometimes I read and find myself thinking, it's all just text.'

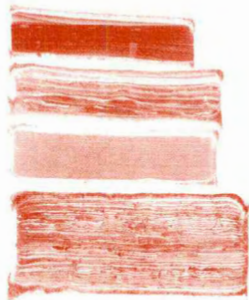
But is writing about historical subject

matter a decadent activity these days—as Knox puts it, fiddling while Rome burns?

I cannot help feeling that arguing for more novels about the present and fewer about the past is not particularly helpful. How far back, for example, does a novel have to reach to be disqualified from relevance—20, 30, 100 years? Is *all* modern subject matter on higher moral ground: are novels, say, about cross-dressing policemen in the outback, or simplistic takes on economic rationalism automatically better than ones about the cruelty of Australia's early penal system that still haunts us, or Australia's first step into international affairs? Is it possible to be too much of the moment (and here I think of Joan Didion, whose essays about the '70s are endlessly readable, but whose coolly contemporaneous novels now seem impenetrable)? What of Kim Scott's splendid *Benang*, which commits the triple offence of combining the past, allegory, and magic realism to find a metaphor to encompass 100 years of Aboriginal grief and hurt?

Aren't there more *useful* questions we should be asking about the

Perhaps we need to acknowledge that the very concept of a novel that can sum up 'our' present might be dated.



types of books we wish to read and write?

The most surprising aspect of the Rayson, Knox, and Modjeska articles is their tacit agreement that the use of historical material is, *ipso facto*, politically complacent: by writing about history, swottish authors are aiming for gold stars (neatness, tick; cultural cachet, tick) while shrinking from the messiness of the present. Modjeska (and *Heat* editor Ivor Indyk, quoted by Knox) infer that Australian authors gravitate to history because it sells well in the global market place. Knox dismisses the historical novel as a throwback to Australian film's '70s costume dramas of 'starched collars, horses, waxed moustaches and lace corsets'.

This is grist for good polemic, but it is also, ironically, an exercise in forgetting. Even if the historical novel has passed its

use-by date—which seems doubtful—to dismiss it outright risks sacrificing some of the best and most useful impulses in our recent literary past.

The historical novel has its own history, of course, which some academics date back to the 1820s—but it seemed to take on a particular energy and tone after the great decolonisations of the 1960s when new groups began to speak at last for themselves and question the authority of history itself: women, people of colour, gays and lesbians, the citizens of newly liberated colonial regimes. This demystification of history was behind the late 20th-century explosion of novels that fictionalised real people in order to challenge more orthodox, nationalistic versions of the past. There was nothing cute or conservative about E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1976) for example, a watershed book that retold the story of 20th-century America's teens from the point of view of three families: white, Jewish, and black. Doctorow's use of real historical figures (Houdini, Emma Goldman), now a much-criticised trope of recent fiction, was an act of *chutzpah*. It was—and to me still is—a delight to see the polite façade of official history broken open, to see historical figures as individuals with private motivations, to watch Doctorow argue with America's saccharine version of its past.

In Australia, novels like *The Savage Crows* (1976) and *Lillian's Story* (1985) coincided with a groundswell of new ways of thinking about our history, ranging from Aboriginal challenges to terra nullius to the recuperative work of academics such as the University of Sydney's Elizabeth Webby who were digging into the archives to discover the forgotten works of Australian women writers. Australian history became sexy, not just a textbook rehearsal of Gradgrindian facts. The historical novel could uncover forgotten stories and show us how things might have turned out differently. This still seems desirable, particularly in the case of reconciliation. I am persuaded by Ross Gibson's argument that we need to revisit our history's badlands in all their complexity, or else risk being paralysed by nostalgia for an oversimplified past.

The novel may stand alone in its

ability to deliver this complexity; Milan Kundera argues that the power to create a fully human world is the novel's exclusive preserve, because of its long tradition of humorous scepticism and of creating a realm in which judgment is suspended. I noted with interest John Howard's holiday reading, reported recently in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: Rudi Giuliani's *Leadership*, Bob Woodward's *Bush at War*, a biography of Churchill, an account of the fall of Enron. Howard seems to like dry facts, to see them arranged into stories of progress, and hates it when they interfere with his version of the present (in which case they are 'black armband' history). As I looked at this list I could not help thinking, if only Howard could be moved by an imaginative reconstruction of our history; if only he could be jolted out of his own simplified fictions of mateship and of a harmonious white Australia. It still seems to me worthwhile as a novelist to say, after Doctorow, there *were* Aborigines, there *were* Afghans, there *were* boat people, there *were* Chinese, from the first years of this nation.

Yet this debate also reminds us that the historical novel is not, *ipso facto*, an anti-conservative form either; like any genre it needs to renew itself or become stale. In times like this it seems more important than ever to be able to distinguish those novels that have true utopian force, a force that other books can build on.

**W**HAT MIGHT THE new breed of novel about the present look like? Knox and Modjeska agree on one candidate—*The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen.

This best selling novel tells an apparently simple story: a Midwestern mother whose children live dispersed along the east coast of America wants them to come home for Christmas. Around this basic plot structure and its beautifully realised characters, Franzen manages to paint a broader picture of the traditional values that defined middle America disappearing into a world as confusing and unrecognisable to Enid as it is to her husband, who is in the first throes of Parkinsonian dementia.

While Knox and Modjeska praise *The Corrections* for its confrontation with the present, it is salutary to note that Franzen's novel was used in an entirely different, and contradictory, crisis in the



northern hemisphere last year. Not long after the World Trade Center fell, the English critic James Wood placed a piece in the *Guardian*—the most high-profile of a number of publications on the same theme—arguing that too many novels were relentlessly about the *present*. He accused young novelists of an ‘hysterical realism’ inherited from the Great American Social Novel pioneered by DeLillo: a superficial fascination with the trivial, the obscure, the fashionable, the evanescent. Like Knox and Modjeska, Wood was concerned that the authors were writing for brownie points: ‘The reviewer, mistaking bright lights for evidence of habitation, praises the novelist who knows about ... the sonics of volcanoes. Who also knows how to make a fish curry in Fiji! Who also knows about terrorist cults in Kilburn! And about the New Physics!’ Wood conceded that, in spite of its ‘softened DeLilloism’, *The Corrections* at least came close to returning the novel to its proper concerns—the metaphysical, the human, the inner life of a culture.

Clearly, *The Corrections*’ power goes beyond mere content. Franzen’s genius lies in coming up with an enduring metaphor for the process of late 20th-century change itself—‘correction’, the supposed ability of the stock market in a deregulated global economy to right itself. Each of Franzen’s characters pursues this implicit promise. Such deep metaphor gives the novel’s ruminations on contemporary cuisine, its forays into Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) and advertising and script-writing, suggestiveness and a convincing sense of purpose.

It is also worth noting that in his now-famous *Harper’s* essay, ‘Why bother?’ Franzen does not spruik for the novel-about-the-present, but considers instead *how* to pull it off. The technology lag between novel and electronic media means that it takes years to write a good book, while it takes only minutes in televisual time for a vast range of ideas, objects and issues to emerge, exhaust themselves, and die; this means the novel is no longer suited to the Tolstoyan or Dickensian mission of social reportage. And in times characterised by ever-more-rapid change, how do you write a novel that isn’t bloated with issues? ‘I’d already worked in contemporary pharmacology and TV,’ Franzen writes, ‘and race and prison life and a dozen other vocabularies;

how was I going to satirise Internet boosterism and the Dow Jones as well, while leaving room for the complexities of character and locale?’

To be fair, Modjeska flags some of these dilemmas, but Franzen goes further towards thinking through some technical solutions. He argues that the point of literary fiction these days is to be essentially ‘tragic’; that is, to raise more questions than it answers, and to eschew the ‘rhetoric of optimism that so pervades our culture’. In an age of simplicity it is one of the last bastions of the complex: it is charged with preserving the ‘dirt’ behind a culture’s polished surfaces.

**H**ERE IS AN irony. What works about Franzen’s approach—historical intelligence, allegory, intervention—is also the province of the best historical novels. What is going on?

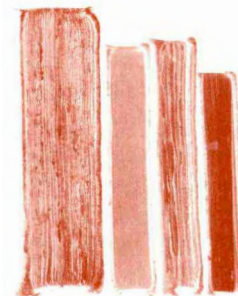
These contradictions point to a more legitimate focus for panic than our novels—the crisis in our *reading* culture. It seems to me that this latest crisis over content is a smokescreen for a bigger, more alarming story that has manifested its symptoms over the last five years in a whole chain of moral panics.

It is impossible, here, to do more than gesture towards some of the problems afflicting the literary novel over the last decade. These include a devastating disappearance of spaces for the long review-essay; belt-tightening in the publishing industry; changing fashions in the teaching of literature away from the close reading of novels; and a concurrent hostility in the press toward anything with the taint of the ‘academic’ (particularly the demon of ‘post-modernism’). These factors have led to the distressing situation we find ourselves in now: a literature divided into competing niches, plagued by nostalgia, while contemporary novels face a rapid obsolescence.

What is most alarming is the fact that a whole generation of recent novels has all but disappeared from view. We are in a kind of Twilight Zone in which new novels are omnipresent yet invisible; a paradox that is reflected in our panics and critical confusion. Writing by newer authors is often dismissed from the literary estate as mediocre, flimsy, or the calculated product of creative writing courses; or, perversely, praised to the skies

and quickly forgotten. Yet the fact is that, hidden deep within the blind spot of this panic is a feast of interesting, edgy, and political novels about both the present and the past.

Contrary to popular belief, the best novels do not automatically endure; T.S. Eliot said that they did, but he also dispensed a lot of ink explaining why his own work belonged, naturally, to the exclusive club of greats. A healthy literature depends upon a healthy literary culture; great novels may be born, but then they must also, to a certain extent, be made. It is impor-



The more we chat about writing, the less we say about it at length.

tant to remember that the great optimism about our literature in the ‘80s coincided with the boom in Austlit studies, which relied, understandably, on discovering great living authors to define its own position in the academic market place. I wish by no means to diminish the achievements of Peter Carey, say, who is a fine writer in anyone’s terms, but there is no denying that this facilitated appreciation of his work.

Things changed in the ‘90s when English departments moved on into the newer, groovier disciplines of literary theory and cultural studies (while media studies is the buzzword of the early 2000s): individual authorship and the concept of ‘great’ literature were replaced with a focus on the meanings readers made of books and films. At the same time departments that had undergone the theory revolution rooted out close reading courses like noxious weeds, an interesting move for disciplines that value pluralism. Meanwhile, the academics and critics who stayed with Austlit stuck largely with the generation they had unearthed: Grenville, Jolley, et al.

Take a tour of the Australian literature reading lists of our universities now and there is a spooky sense of déjà vu: with the exception of Carey’s new work it is hard to find novels more recent than *It’s Raining in Mango* or *The Well*. Our



most recent academic study of a literary generation is Brian Kiernan's *Most Beautiful Liars* (1977); we have not had an overview of contemporary Australian writing since *The New Diversity* (1988). There is no conspiracy here. But what rangles is a lack of historical self-consciousness among some Austlit academics, who are perhaps projecting their own discipline's loss of authority onto the newer writers. It was distressing to hear one professor claim that there had been no significant novels of the '90s.

At the same time the crisis in academic funding has meant that a new generation of academics and critics has not moved in. Reading *The Corrections* I also felt, like Knox, a stab of recognition. Chip is a stand-in for my own generation: who attended university in the '80s, who believed in concepts of 'resistance' and the 'trickle down' effect of academic thought, who emerged from MAs or doctorates to discover that there were no jobs in academia. My social world is full of 'Chips' in their late thirties or early forties, in a state of passive depression, still finishing theses, or struggling with part-time jobs in academia. The more successful Chips are now working in the public service or have just retrained as lawyers.

**T**HE INVISIBILITY OF '90s fiction was compounded by a loss of spaces for reviewing. Reviews do not tell us the 'right' way to read novels, but they have the effect of suggesting that books are thick and meaningful and of broadening avenues for their interpretation. Review journals of the '80s such as *The Age Monthly Review* could consider Australian writing in long articles that were not unusual in going over 10,000 words compared to the average 900-word review in today's papers.

It sounds churlish to point these things out. In a way things have never seemed better than for the writers who began their careers in the '90s. In spite of post-GST turbulence, there are more novels being published, more writers' festivals, mentorships, residencies, book clubs: I am grateful for every single one of those opportunities. In a sense, we are in the last throes of the '80s bull market that announced itself with those images in *HQ* of Jeanette Winterson nude and painted as a faun: this is our deregulated phase, as Knox and Modjeska rightly point out, in which Australian novels, at least of a

certain type, have sudden currency overseas. Yet the more we chat about writing, the less we say about it at length. Most festivals are tied to the promotional schedules of publishers; the author's advance is often the main focus of publicity; niche marketing focuses on content. Part of our ennui in the face of new books has less to do with the sameness of their content than the seamlessness of their promotion. The juggernaut moves on to the next new book, while we have no time to explore what makes them unique.

Take the sad, short life of 'grunge'. Here was a group of young novelists writing risky books about the present—what we say we want. But grunge was the product of a highly successful advertising campaign whipped up around Justine Ettler's *The River Ophelia*. This aggressive branding exercise set the terms of the debate, which was predictably polarised: 'grunge' writers like Ettler, Christos Tsiolkas, and Andrew McGahan were lumped together on panel sessions in which they, quite fairly, ended up arguing their exceptionalism. The net result was a reduction of their books to content: weren't they just about drugs and sex? While critics yearned for 'political' novels they scanned the horizon for books about party politics or economics; they entirely missed the fact that *Loaded*, like *The Corrections*, was a sophisticated attempt to look at how globalisation has changed the old categories by which we used to understand our place in the world. Grunge exhausted itself quickly; mention it to a table of publishers at a writers' festival now and you could be excused for thinking you were looking at a 'Who Farted?' calendar.

But perhaps the most pernicious influence on our literature has been an abiding hostility to any taint of 'postmodernism', the demon that lurks in terms like 'tricksy' and 'insubstantial'; that is used to invoke a vast array of sins including alienation, a lack of heart, amorality, incoherence, even Demidenko. No matter how edgy their work was, no-one wanted to be labelled postmodern, which was even worse than grunge. There is an element of comedy in the fact that while postmodern university departments were losing their interest in novels, creative writing courses that tended to be anti-theoretical

were being accused of churning out postmodern clever-clever books. There is something comic about the sight of some of our mature writers, whose works *were* being studied in postmodern courses, scaring the punters at festivals with tall tales about the evils of postmodern theory.

This wilful misrepresentation of 'theory' has meant a critical refusal to actually see some of the changing ideas (about history, for example) that were part of the wellspring of contemporary fiction. Because whatever is experimental or iconoclastic about our writing has had to be kept at a remove from this contamination, a kind of myth has evolved that whatever is new has sprung fully formed out of the ether; what works is thus made unrepeatable. It is supremely ironic that that book of the hour, *The Corrections*, is absolutely postmodern in its outlook: in his metaphor of 'corrections' Franzen sees his characters' lives as a set of economic symptoms.

This is a crisis indeed. But my point is not to compile a catalogue of woe, rather to suggest the ways in which our recent novels are in relatively good shape—but also to sound a warning note that if we cannot find a way to locate and marshal their more positive energies, we risk making little progress.

Perhaps, above all, we need to acknowledge that history itself has moved along with our literature; that the very concept of a novel that can sum up 'our' present might be dated.

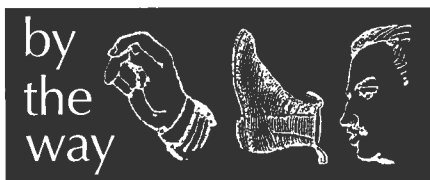
It may be that the novels that tell us who we are are already here, or need rescuing from the queer, koori, grunge, po-mo, historical, or multicult baskets. It may be that we need to stop scanning the horizon for the old-fashioned 'political novel' and learn to read novels that trace the byways of globalisation in private lives as 'political' too; we might need to foster novels with experimental—perhaps even 'postmodern' forms—as they try to fit themselves to a new reality. It may be that there will not be one big blockbuster like *The Corrections* that will perform the more and more impossible feat of summing everything up.

Our best sense of ourselves will come out of the broadest ecology of novels. ■

**Delia Falconer** is the author of *The Service of Clouds*.







**'P**AVILLON NOW OPEN. Surviving FOOD and DRIN'. This sign, propped up outside Spencer Street Station, was attracting a lot of passing attention the other morning. For one thing, the alternative to looking at it was falling over it because it loomed up through the bustling crowd very quickly, and right in the middle of the causeway leading from the station's tawdry depths. And then, of course, there was its oddity.

Easy to laugh though, I thought, catching myself smiling, as were many normally gloomy commuters. Here, no doubt, were people for whom English was their second, perhaps even third language, trying to make a go with their little café (or their huge *pavilion*—you couldn't be sure) in a foreign land and a difficult tongue. Easy to scapegoat the stumbling English of such honest tryers.

Scapegoating was on my mind, I have to admit. (Isn't it the year of the scapegoat? No? Maybe just the goat.) At the height of the summer, Australian cricketer Darren Lehmann expressed his anger at losing his wicket with a terse, racist and sexist outburst which was within the hearing of the Sri Lankan dressing room, and which greatly and very reasonably offended the Sri Lankan players. Lehmann's utterance was inexcusable, violent and indefensible. He was carpeted by the match referee, Clive Lloyd, severely rebuked, fined, ordered to attend counselling and called upon to apologise. Already full of remorse, Lehmann apologised in writing and verbally and then to each of the Sri Lankan squad individually. The Sri Lankans thanked him and pronounced the matter closed. Clive Lloyd was satisfied and the Australian Cricket Board (ACB) considered that due process had taken its course in this serious matter.

At this point, the Australian head of the International Cricket Council (ICC), Malcolm Speed, intervened. He said Lehmann's transgression was of such magnitude and seriousness that it should attract more stringent punishment. He pronounced it a 'Level 3' breach of the rules governing players' conduct, the penalty for which could be a fine, banning from a stipulated number of matches, or both. Lehmann was tried—again by Clive Lloyd—and banned for five matches.

In his great essay, 'In Defence of P.G. Wodehouse', George Orwell concedes that Wodehouse should never have done what he did and that certain degrees and kinds of recrimination were in order. Cassandra's massive attack on Wodehouse, however, in which he brands him among other things a traitor fit for the rope, was in Orwell's view excessive, to put it mildly. Typically, Orwell wonders what it was that could have driven Cassandra to such an extraordinarily hyperbolic response and concludes:

... Wodehouse made an ideal whipping boy. For it was generally felt that the rich were treacherous, and Wodehouse—as Cassandra vigorously pointed out in his broadcast—was a rich man. But he was the kind of rich man who could be attacked with

## Year of the scapegoat

impunity and without risking any damage to the structure of society. To denounce Wodehouse was not like denouncing, say, Beaverbrook ... Consequently, Wodehouse's indiscretion gave a good propaganda opening. It was a chance to 'expose' a wealthy parasite without drawing attention to any of the parasites that really mattered.

Darren Lehmann's outburst was much more than an 'indiscretion'. But few, if any, of the journalists who would later applaud his second 'trial' and heavier punishment, seem to have perceived undue lenience in the first swift, unequivocal reaction of the match referee followed by Lehmann's own painfully elaborate succession of verbal, individual and written apologies. Speed's intervention—on the grounds that Lehmann had not been punished appropriately or enough—was opportunistic.

**L**EHMANN IS A wonderful cricketer but he is still, for various reasons to do with untimely injury and the depth of available batting talent over the past decade, a somewhat marginal player in the squad. He still has to 'cement his place', as the scribes say, in the Test team at least. Personally, he is not especially articulate. His balding, ample appearance does not suggest charisma. His nickname is 'Boof', not because he's a dill, which he assuredly isn't (especially in 'cricket brain' terms), but because he's uncomplicated, easygoing, conciliatory and accepting. If you're looking to make an example, a big splash-ing international 'case', of someone in the Australian squad, Lehmann's your man because the backlash will almost certainly be negligible. Quite unlike what it would be, for instance, if you pursued Gilchrist or Hayden or McGrath—who are, respectively, wholesome, Christian and steely-no-bloody-nonsense, and all entirely brilliant. Or even Warney, who is often a target but equally often spread-eagles detractors by sheer panache.

In *The Sunday Times* of 26 February 1984, Robert Mugabe is quoted thus: 'Cricket civilises people and creates good gentlemen. I want everyone to play cricket in Zimbabwe; I want ours to be a nation of gentlemen.' If Malcolm Speed had been disposed to attack Mugabe by immediately refusing to lend credence to his monstrous regime through the game of cricket on which the ruthless dictator obviously places such international and moral store, he would have been buying himself a real fight for a crucial cause. To denounce Lehmann was not like denouncing Mugabe and his nation of gentlemen. Sandbagging Lehmann with the full force of the ICC Law Book was a placatory, safe wave in the direction of the black cricketing nations, while leaving untouched the monster who really matters. ■

**Brian Matthews** is a writer and academic.

# THE CREATURES



**I**N FOLKLORE AND FOLKTALE, and in the many kinds of writing which have their roots in that realm, animals help to figure human beings. Those creatures may speak, surprisingly or as a matter of course: the words of Balaam's ass, in the *Book of Numbers*, are a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, while Swift's Houyhnhnms are at it all the time, for the instruction of Gulliver, their crazed convert. But loquacious or not, from Aesop to Orwell, literature's birds and beasts have been chosen as beings from whom we may take our bearings. What Coleridge calls the 'shaping spirit of imagination' often takes its own shape from that other kingdom.

When I try to think about why poetry matters to me, individual lines present themselves, if not as touchstones, at least as striking pieces of evidence: they sing themselves up as claimants. No doubt they take some of their force not only from the whole poems in which they occur but also from the circumstances of their being read or their being remembered, but unless one believes that literature is cordoned off from the rest of experience by a ring of fire, that is exactly what one would expect. And the same is true of entire poems; I do not understand completely why it should be that 'animal' poems often have a special appeal, even a special authority, for me, but they do; and they also seem to incorporate much of what I do understand about poetry. So here are three of them, with some reflections on them, and on that incorporation.

The first, by William Matthews, is called 'Vermin':

'What do you want to be when you grow up?'  
 What child cries out, 'An exterminator!'  
 One diligent student in Mrs. Taylor's  
 class will get an ant farm for Christmas, but  
 he'll not see industry, he'll see dither.  
 'The ant sets an example for us all,'  
 wrote Max Beerbohm, a master of dawdle,

'but it is not a good one.' These children don't hope to outlast the doldrums of school only to heft great weights and work in squads and die for their queen. Well, neither did we. And we knew what we didn't want to be: the ones we looked down on, the lambs of God, blander than snow and slow to be cruel.

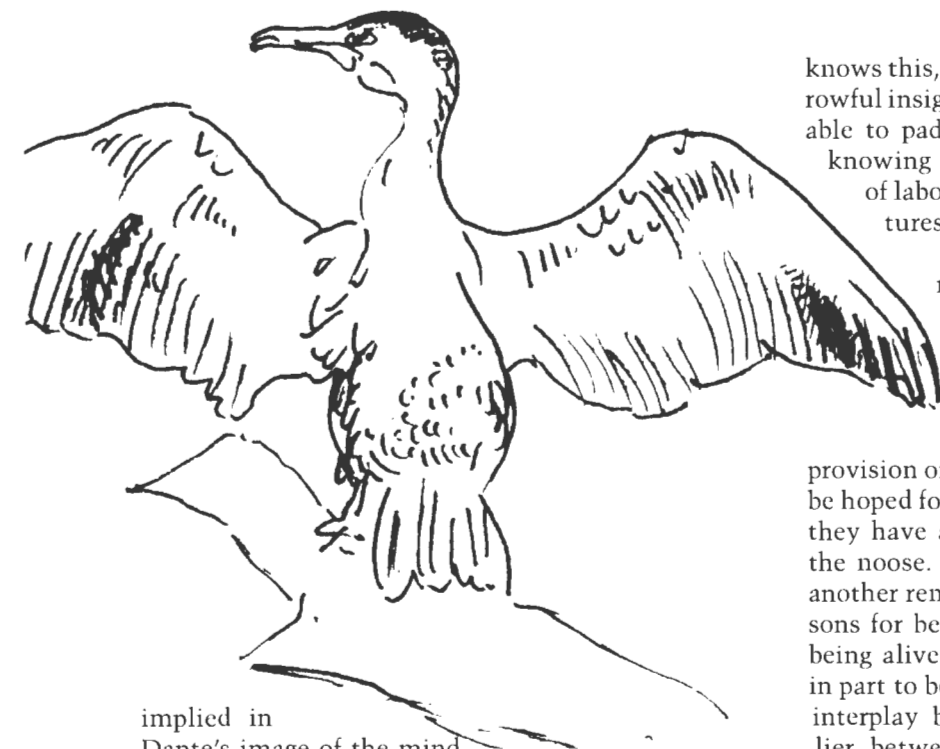
This is one of the many thousands of modern poems which either are sonnets or are haunted by the ghosts of sonnets. 'Vermin' is in fact a good deal more formally organised than its casual air might suggest: a few minutes spent, for instance, on seeing how either the first or the last words in the lines either rhyme or chime in with one another would bear this out. Matthews, in some notes on poetry as an art, remarks that 'The purpose of the forms is to raise talk above babble, and the purpose of the "talk" is to tether the severities of the forms to the mess of emotional life. It's a two-party system, and each party needs a loyal opposition.' He is singing my song, I must say, a song which prizes poetry's ability to negotiate between the different kinds of demeanour which come the way of most human beings. It is inhuman never to be casual, and it is selfish never to be formal; poetry is a tribute, a contribution, to a more rounded state of mind and heart.

It was claimed in a military assessment of a particular officer that 'the men follow him into battle out of curiosity'. This seems improbable: but it is certainly true that, above all as writer but also as reader, one follows an initial phrase into the action of a poem out of curiosity; people write poems in order to see how they will turn out. There is another poem by Matthews which is triggered by the same question as forms the first line of 'Vermin', and there things turn out differently. Poets live in the hope that their minds will not simply fly by automatic pilot—as very properly the mind does much of the time in other contexts—but will have some of the power and vivacity





# THEIR WORDS



implied in Dante's image of the mind moving as a beast does in its skin.

The most obvious and universal example of this is the asking of questions. Every question, even the most banal—like, 'how long is this essay I am reading?'—is dramatic. Questions hold up the policeman's lighted wand in the darkness, and demand reaction; for good or ill, they intervene. 'Vermin' begins with a brace of questions—which do not work in the same way, incidentally—and then suffuses the rest of the poem with an ethos of question. We know by the end of it what the children didn't want, and what the poet's contemporaries didn't want, but that astonishing shift in register to 'the lambs of God,/ blander than snow and slow to be cruel' raises a whole set of questions about those Christmas-framed beings, and about their despisers, who look down on them, as the diligent student would look down on the ants.

**T**HAT TITLE 'VERMIN' could hardly ever be without an emotional freighting, and anyone who remembers how often in the 20th century the archons of left or right characterised their victims in just that way will find their shadow falling over this poem: ours is the species which can attempt to disqualify some of its own members not only from life but even from identity—the ultimate 'ex-termination'. Matthews' poem

knows this, but doesn't have to go on about it. His sorrowful insight is, in effect, one element in the 14 lines, able to pad along in the whole, beside Beerbohm's knowing urbanity and the rejected theatricality of laborious and self-sacrificing children, as creatures of many kinds coexist on a savannah.

Matthews, in another place, notes a remark of Saki's—'Romance at short notice was her speciality.' Insight at short notice is one of his, and the ants, the lambs, Mrs Taylor, Beerbohm, the children, and the ever-supple 'we', are all there in the poem to foster it. This provision of insight is one thing which can, variously, be hoped for or feared in poets, and over the centuries they have accordingly been awarded the garland or the noose. But I think that 'Vermin' also bears out another remark of Matthews: 'one of the primary reasons for being alive is to experience the pleasure of being alive.' The creatures in 'Vermin' are all there in part to be the vectors of a kind of joy—a joy at that interplay between form and mess mentioned earlier, between economy and outreach. One medieval characterisation of eternity was '*nunc stans*'—'a perpetuated now.' Every poem is a creature of time, but like the creature who conceives it, it dreams of another condition, and styles itself to show that dream and its pleasure.

Speaking of pleasure, here is Amy Clampitt watching a bird. The poem is called, 'The Cormorant in Its Element':

That bony potbellied arrow, wing-pumping along implacably, with a ramrod's rigid adherence, airborne, to the horizontal, discloses talents one would never have guessed at. Plummeting

waterward, big black feet splayed for a landing gear, slim head turning and turning, vermilion-strapped, this way and that, with a lightning glance over the shoulder, the cormorant astounding-

ly, in one sleek involuted arabesque, a vertical turn on a dime, goes into that inimitable vanishing-and-emerging-from-under-the-briny-

deep act which, unlike the works of Homo Houdini, is performed for reasons having nothing at all to do with ego, guilt, ambition, or even money.

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*Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams*

"There is something so horribly inevitable about being stuck somewhere until midnight – to me, it's a bit like being in labour: there's no going back and you're just going to have to grit your teeth and go through with it, however painful it may be."

*Beryl Rule on New Year's Eve parties*

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Yes, it's a sonnet again, that form of which Charles Simic wrote recently that it 'is a literary equivalent of an endgame in chess. It is about a series of quick-witted and unforeseen moves within the confines of rigorous rules against an unknown opponent who can be anything or anyone from God to a case of unrequited love. Because we are at our best as poets and philosophers when we are cornered, sonnets continue to be written.' I suppose that the cormorant of Amy Clampitt's poem might judge such a performance as prompted by ego, or guilt, or ambition, though there's rarely any money in it. But whatever of that, Clampitt's own performance is clearly one in which she's gone to town on behalf at once of the bird and of the language which is, comprehensively, the bird's element.

**C**LAMPITT CAME LATE to writing poetry in a persistent way, and said once that she mightn't have done so at all if it had not been for Gerard Manley Hopkins. Apart from some relationship between her cormorant and Hopkins' windhover, she clearly shares his sense that language is an electric element, flaming from point to point, empowering insight and luminous with delight. In this and in many other of her poems, she sounds like a cross between Noah and Charles Darwin, eager to shepherd the vulnerable and determined to characterise the transient.

Her poem's first four words serve notice that our standard terms of appraisal are up for revision, since potbellied arrows will not usually go anywhere. For most of my life I have been a lover of Jonathan Swift's writing, and the best short description I know of what he is up to is the one which claims that he is saying, 'It is not as you think: look!' Swift does indeed want us to think again, and part of his genius is to help us to look again—*Gulliver's Travels* is only the most spectacular example of this. Clampitt has the same confidence that to re-see and to re-think are part of the same gesture. Her poem takes the cormorant into our family from the first—bony like all, potbellied like some, that arrow which comes only from human hands—and characterises it in dozens of ways derived from the human sphere, before liberating it into a wild otherness in the last two and a half lines.

Gulliver preens himself on loathing falsehood and rendering things truthfully, but the book which encases him shows how inept he is at getting things straight. Clampitt, like Swift, is a dealer in wonders, in talents 'one would never have guessed at', and like him too in her starbursts of lingo, the tipped horn of verbal plenty. Touchingly, I think she is also like him in her intuitive sense that language is as frail as it is formidable. Swift, God knows, could be moralist enough, and so, as the last line of her poem displays, can Clampitt be: but Swift was as much ironist as moralist, eloquent often about the fact that words failed him in the face of what other words had made clear. 'Homo Houdini', also known as Adam or as



Eve, is the one who brings off performances whose motives may in part be named in the poem's last words, but who is likely in the end to be a mystery to himself or herself.

Marianne Moore said that we were the ones who write 'error' with four 'r's, and so we do: but from such crooked sketchings a lean-to house for meaning still emerges. One might think of the oceanic element into which the cormorant dives as being the equivalent of the silence into which the poet dips or dives, in hopes of bringing up the fish of significance. As a matter of fact, in her poem, Clampitt's bird is not said to return with any quarry—the deed is all, with no other yield. And some poetry mainly has this to say, that the poet has gone into that boundless ocean which preceded and will succeed all words: the words flag the element which has nothing to give them. This too is a way of telling the truth; perhaps it is the cleanest, as it is one of the most onerous, forms of testimony to all that one is not, oneself. Silence is the strangest creature of all.

**B**UT MOST OF the time poetry is in dialogue with silence, doing the one thing it can. Matthews said that for a writer language is the sixth sense, and this is true: it comes from us, probes beyond us, and sends messages back to us, at least when it is being used respectfully. One famous version of the opposite to this is Ring Lardner's, ' "Shut up", he explained.' Poetry, even when it is being conducted with evident panache, is asking reality to speak up, and is doing so on the assumption that reality will never run out of new things to say about itself. Aquinas, speaking for many, observes that we proceed from the known to the unknown; I do not think that he stresses the fact that gainsaying, 'naysaying', is itself a door into the unknown, but so it proves to be, very often, at least in poetry. It is as if the mind, in order to know things well, is hinged or folded back from a point of negativity. In Clampitt's poem, 'implacably', 'discloses', 'never', 'inimitable', 'unlike' and 'nothing' are all words which do particular local jobs, but they also mark freshness of attention in the poem as a whole, and a consequent surprise. If questions, in Matthews' poem, make for intellectual and emotional drama, 'The Cormorant in Its Element' is in effect one long exclamation, whose own drama is heightened by gainsaying.

After the ants and the birds, which are old enough, here comes a fish. It is lodged in Richard Wilbur's 'Trolling for Blues', dedicated 'for John and Barbara':

As with the dapper terns, or that sole cloud  
Which like a slow-evolving embryo

Moils in the sky, we make of this keen fish  
Whom fight and beauty have endeared to us  
A mirror of our kind. Setting aside

His unreflectiveness, his flings in air,  
The aberration of his flocking swerve  
To spawning-grounds a hundred miles at sea,  
How clearly, musing to the engine's thrum,  
Do we conceive him as he waits below:

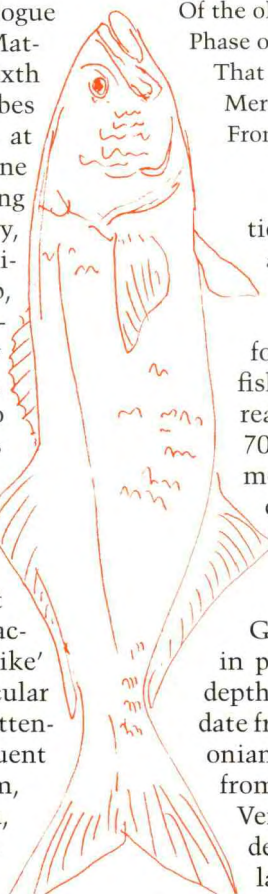
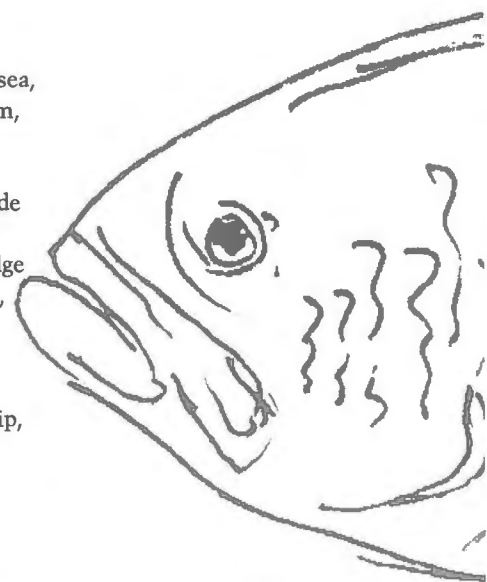
Blue in the water's blue, which is the shade  
Of thought, and in that scintillating flux  
Poised weightless, all attention, yet on edge  
To lunge and seize with sure incisiveness,  
He is a type of coolest intellect,

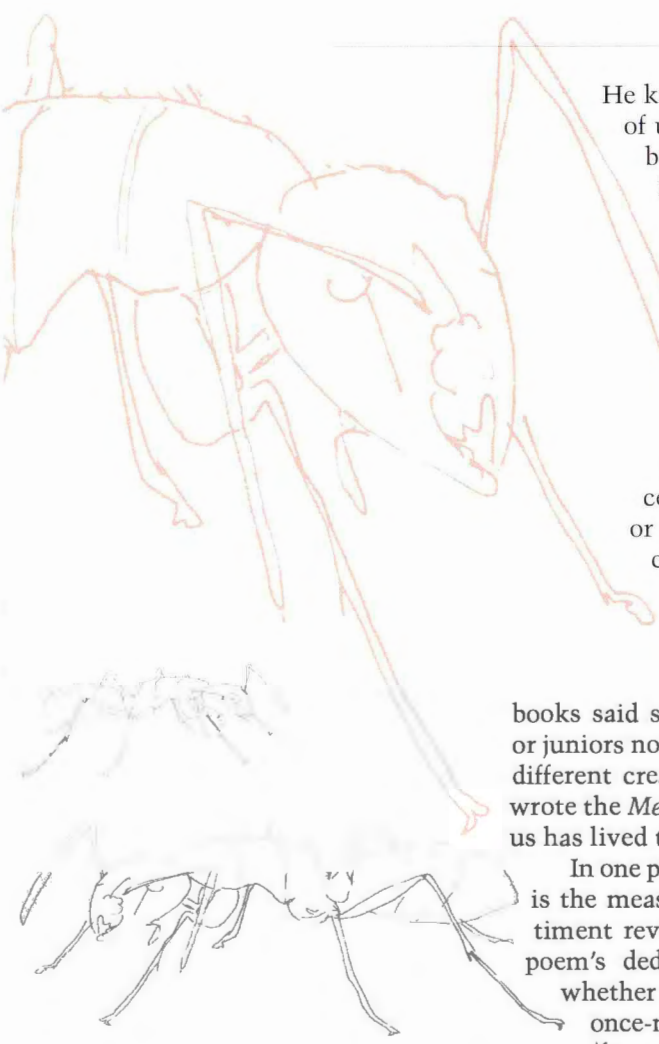
Or is so to the mind's blue eye until  
He strikes and runs unseen beneath the rip,  
Yanking imagination back and down  
Past recognition to the unlit deep  
Of the glass sponges, of chiasmodon,

Of the old darkness of Devonian dream,  
Phase of a meditation not our own,  
That long mêlée where selves were not, that life  
Merciless, painless, sleepless, unaware,  
From which, in time, unthinkably we rose.

The 'blues' of the title refers to the Atlantic bluefish, which is migratory, pelagic, and a voracious predator. It can be a metre in length, can weigh 14 kilograms, and may be as old as 12 years. It is fished intensively for commercial reasons, and also as a game fish: between 1979 and 1997, American recreational fishers caught an average of about 70 million pounds of bluefish each year. The most famous of the Chiasmodon band is the one called the 'black swallower', which feeds on whole fish, often individuals larger than itself—it has greatly enlarged fangs in its jaws, from which it takes its Greek title of 'cross-tooth'. It lives typically in pitch black water which is very cold, at a depth of up to 3000 metres, and it does indeed date from about 375 million years ago, in the Devonian period. Glass sponges have been retrieved from 1400 feet down, and boast among them the Venus' Flower-Basket, which houses shrimps destined one day to become trapped by its lattice of spicules.

To know such things is relevant to one's understanding of the poem—not only of its points of reference, but of its pitch of the imagination. Wilbur is an old man now, and this poem was written well on in his career, but some of his earliest and most brilliant poems were already establishing negotiations between those familiar foreigners, the birds and beasts, on the one hand, and ourselves on the other.





He knows of course that none of us can think like a beast, but he also knows that it is part of our privilege to press at the borders of our present construals, and to take some steps into what is for us a present darkness, but is in effect another being's light. After all, each of us, with greater or less success, has re-guised herself or himself from infancy to childhood to adolescence to young adulthood to middle age and perhaps beyond: and whether or not the

books said so, or our elders or peers or juniors noticed, we were somewhat different creatures as we went: Ovid wrote the *Metamorphoses*, but each of us has lived them.

In one philosophical truism, 'man is the measure of all things'—a sentiment revisited, glancingly, in this poem's dedication. I have no idea whether John and Barbara were once-met fellow fishers, or (for example) Wilbur's grandchildren: but a dedication always marks recipients both as readers-to-be, and as the sponsors or the mentors of attention, and in this poem the male and the female, 'our kind', preside in a degree over the conditions and the fortunes of other kinds. When Wilbur acknowledges in the first stanza that we have made the bluefish 'a mirror of our kind', this takes place in their company.

**W**ILBUR HAS ALWAYS been concerned with just that—with 'company', whose other rendition is 'conviviality'. It is not that he neglects solitudes: there stalk through his large body of poetry one solitaire after another—a wolf, one of Giacometti's attenuated male figures, a boyish soldier at dawn in a combat zone, a woman deranged by fury, and so on. It is rather that by contrast with many poets—I suspect as many ancient as modern—he finds language and all that it mediates collegial. That he is a Christian may be (as it should be) a help in this regard, and it is appropriate that he brings a virtuoso piece to its conclusion by referring to the comradely finesse of Francis of Assisi, but we are probably dealing here with something which precedes, though it undergirds, a religious allegiance.

And yet those solitaires will never go away. Auden has a short poem of beguiling simplicity whose

refrain is, 'In solitude, for company'. There we all are, after all—each unprecedented and without sequel, scarcely commanding the alphabet of personal identity on even our few adept days, and often looking at those we love best as if each were the Rosetta Stone: but contriving too, or at least accepting, one degree of solidarity after another.

Wilbur knows this in his bones, and always has. A witty friend of mine said to me once, with a view to lurching, 'let's go over to University House and see whether the creatures have turned into people.' So far as I can remember, they had, but of course the people were still creatures, every self a someone else. Wilbur, who I would guess has never written an informal poem in his life, is a great fashioner (as here) of stanzas, and a great worker from one stanza to another. 'Stanza' is the Italian word for a room, and a poem by Wilbur is a well-built house in which each room has its own identity and integrity, but in which there is free but measured transition from one room to another: formally, there is solitude, and formally, there is company.

This formal fact about the poem is not incidental to it: as someone said a long time ago, 'the form is on the inside', and in art, as in many other important areas of life, to find the right form is indispensable if one is to find such truth as is available. And so it is appropriate that 'Trolling for Blues' is steeped in the language of being mindful—'make a mirror', 'conceive him', 'the mind's blue eye', 'meditation', and so forth. But this is not a poem about the dapper terns in their stylish performance, nor only about the bestial spirit in which 'our kind' has made lion and otter and pelican and phoenix its own. It is about the immense tension between, on the one hand, the realm of the comprehensible and the convivial, and on the other, 'that long mêlée' not only of a geological and an evolutionary past, but of incomprehension and the incomprehensible in our present. It is in fact a poem attended not only by Darwin, but by Freud, and Socrates, and the author of the first verses of *Genesis*.

And now I find, glancing back at these three poems, that for all their differences they have this in common: that they end with the bestial world made stranger to us, and with us made stranger too. It is language which makes this possible—language, whose *raison d'être* is to bridge our solitudes in a more than material fashion, but which, so the savants tell us, no two people speak in exactly the same way. Perhaps the best emblem of what happens among us when we speak with care is still the zodiac—that wheel of the creatures, domestic and exotic, who are supposed both to prompt and to yield to one another, beings eloquent in their foreignness as in their familiarity. One thing is sure: a good poem always says that there is a good way still to go. ■

**Peter Steele** SJ has a personal chair at the University of Melbourne.



## Being Taught a Mantra

From Athos via the Ganges—  
the mantra:  
sub-vocal, Vedic  
with its hands at peace,  
taught, if it can be taught,  
by one friend to another  
in the sunshine  
on the verandah  
among white birds.

In the teacher the mantra nests.  
He flocks with praise  
after Mount Athos,  
to where he climbed  
as a young man  
with sturdy legs  
and the quest.

In the pupil  
the mantra is a paper-weight,  
a reminder, a bone in the throat,  
a discipline  
a hope  
working its way in.

The bone sticks  
until he imagines a friend,  
one mortally ill and viscous  
with a poison tongue  
and a spear for those  
who would come near.

To her he might  
offer the mantra  
of one sound  
unclouded,  
for the hand stretched  
in peace if

## Hotei

Oh Oh  
Ha Ha  
Pat my belly  
Go on  
Go on  
Smell my breath  
Scratch my neck

I am all stubble  
Am light, am heavy  
Then light again  
As my sack.

Hotei (Budai in China) sometimes known as Laughing Buddha

## Damaged Buddha

*Standing Amitabha  
Hebei Province. Sui Dynasty*

Headless  
    an opalescent torso  
        fluted with memory  
        a procession of form  
that is arm-less and so  
    free of holding:  
    as if  
at the moment of  
    Shravasti  
        flames  
exploded the thinking self  
    splendidly made  
        a pyre  
of the suffering days  
    with ground waters washing  
        all the pain clear.

But hold my feet please  
    my soles remain  
        and still burn  
        with speech.

# Pastoral Dreams

*'That is well said,' replied Candide, 'but we must cultivate our garden.'*  
—Voltaire, *Candide*.

**L**ATELY I'VE BEEN dreaming of moving to the country. There's something about the chance to work closely with the land, to have more chooks than suburban living allows, to grow one's own fruit and vegetables, that I yearn for. I know this is not a unique dream—the possibility of escaping into the country seems to hold out a tantalising promise to many of us. Poets and writers have been romanticising the country, the pastoral life, since at least the 3rd century BC when Theocritus poetically idealised rural life in his *Idylls*. In this literary tradition, happiness was associated with the simple, natural life of the shepherd tending his flocks. The opposed image was the corrupt city, with the bitter competition of its inhabitants for ever more worldly goods.

Clearly, country life is not simple or innocent like this. The predominant images of the country these days are more consistent with our nightmares than our idealisations. Rural areas are portrayed both as redneck wastelands and as places that were formerly pleasant, but have now been devastated by drought—natural and economic. We pity their lost schools, banks and other community resources while fearing their xenophobia. Or so it seems through our popular media.

And yet the dream of escaping to the country for a different, fresher life remains strong. So what are the possibilities for such a move? What are the consequences and costs? And why is the idea of uprooting and starting again in the country such a tantalising one? Two recent books, David and Gerda Foster's *A Year of Slow Food* (2001) and

Patrice Newell's *The Olive Grove* (2000), give a sense of the dreams and realities of particular kinds of rural life. Both trace the move from the city to the country, but the country life they moved to is markedly different from our conventional imaginings.

In the mid-1970s David and Gerda Foster moved from Sydney to a rundown house in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales and began the process of rebuilding the house and living off the land. Twenty-five years on, *A Year of Slow Food* charts a year of growing and cooking almost all their food. Written in journal form, it details the week-by-week activities while also reflecting on the 25 years past. It's an engrossing tale, ranging from what it was like bringing up eight children to managing their menagerie of chooks, cows, pigs and bees. Fittingly, each chapter ends with a (usually) mouth-watering recipe from the week's produce.

**I**N THE MID-1980S Patrice Newell was tired of her life as a television presenter, and with her partner, Phillip Adams, bought Elmswood, a farm in New South Wales' Upper Hunter Valley. *The Olive Grove* follows her attempts to make the 4000-hectare property sustainable by farming biodynamic beef cattle and starting an olive grove. It, too, is fascinating in its details—from managing cattle in a drought to the taste of fresh olive oil and the politics of water management.

At their hearts, both *A Year of Slow Food* and *The Olive Grove* are Austral-

ian pastoral tales, stories of living more closely with the land. And thus they are linked to the ancient literary tradition of holding the country up as a place to escape from the ills of the city. In her foreword, Gerda Foster relates how healthy her children were growing up in the country: 'Now that they live in Sydney they have encountered a number of the usual city lifestyle health problems. They come back here to recover.'

A former model and TV news researcher, Patrice Newell extols the pleasures of working with the land, and living with an aim other than that of being seen:

Out here, around the hills of Gundy, no one is watching. No one sees me reverse from the garage in a four-wheel drive to drive to a gully with a pile of books, intent on identifying an unusual grass. Nobody is watching when I get up at dawn to help cut testes from young calves, or butcher a lamb on the kitchen table with a bandsaw. Only I see, and the experience is liberating. I sing everywhere I go.

But while both Newell and the Fosters escaped the city for the farm, they were not interested in mainstream farming as it is currently practised. As Newell says:

Oh yes, there's serious agribusiness, those mechanised, monocultural rural enterprises managed from town where profits go to a corporation, usually overseas. But that's not the farming I want to do, which involves the desire to really work with land—where you're dust-covered or mud-splattered, depending on the season; working as a mechanic, a water



expert, a weight lifter, a soil analyst, all before smoko.

David and Gerda Foster were interested in eating farm-fresh foods, but as David Foster says, 'It is hard to find a farmer today with the skills and inclination to feed a family and if you did, you wouldn't be able to buy the food, for reasons of public safety.' So they too practise an alternative kind of country life, growing most of what they eat. They eat slow food:

authentic tucker ... It is farm food, prepared only from freshest of fresh ingredients, that tastes as food should taste, as food did taste, in the days when rural Australians grew their own, before they had a choice.

In these passages both Newell and the Fosters hark back to a previous era, an era less devastated by the ravages of commercialism, a time when you could scrape a simple life by doing everything that needed to be done. The model for this nostalgic pastoralism is Henry Thoreau's *Walden*, in which Thoreau describes a year of living in a small hut he built near the Walden ponds of Concord, Massachusetts. In *Walden* Thoreau explicitly sets himself apart from both the city life of his peers, and the commercial farming life of his neighbours. Self-reliant with a vegetable patch and fishing tools, Thoreau was free to contemplate nature and undergo some kind of inner, spiritual transformation (or so he presents it). Here was the essence of the pastoral, the search for a life of simplicity and integrity, and the grounding of this life in the rhythms and cycles of nature.

**L**IKE THOREAU, THE Fosters and Newell share a desire to live differently from the prevailing ethos in both the city and country. They are all committed to leading an organic style of life, eschewing the use of synthetic chemicals in food production, in their search for a sustainable way of living. So what are the possibilities for the kind of life they want to live? What are the costs and consequences?

*A Year of Slow Food* gives the sense that David and Gerda Foster have been pretty successful at establishing themselves in the country. Not that they rely completely on their property. A Miles Franklin Award-winning novelist, David Foster speaks of writing as his cash crop. Gerda Foster also

works as a counsellor at a local prison. And in addition to their own garden, they also do a bit of share farming with someone else who lives nearby. Still, through share farming, their own garden and the town commons where their cows roam, they get almost all the food—vegetables, eggs, meat, dairy, fruit and honey—that they need.

The struggle for sustainability seems harder in the life that Patrice Newell is trying to create. Rather than relying on her own garden and a few animals, she relies on a market for biodynamic beef and a prospective market for biodynamic olive oil. Her olive trees are also reliant on water from the local river, a diminishing resource on which many others have a claim. A small producer, Newell is up against large agribusinesses in the competition for both consumers and resources.

Life for Newell on her farm is therefore complicated by a dependence on others, a dependence from which the Fosters seem largely free. But the complications of Newell's necessary engagement with others seem beneficial in certain ways, opening her up to consider questions of ecological resource management and local versus global consumer cultures. Part of the joy of her book is its exploration of these questions, as she recounts the difficulty of communal water management, and the possibilities for community action and reform for a small producer in a global world.

Literary scholar Daniel Peck has argued that, in the pastoral tale of *Walden*, Thoreau acts to contain the complexity of the 19th-century world, to create a space free from the mores of the ongoing industrial revolution and from the everyday violence of human life. In a similar way, both the pastoral dreams found in *The Olive Grove* and *A Year of Slow Food* act to contain the complexity of 21st-century life.

For Patrice Newell, Elmswood is a way of holding back a genetically engineered future that seems to have little regard for social or environmental sustainability. *The Olive Grove* offers a different future, one which values the local and sustainable and acts to conserve natural resources, working with nature rather than against it. To me her particular path, while desirable, seems a bit unattainable; one needs a lot of capital to buy 4000 hectares and attempt to turn it into a going concern. The life of the Fosters seems more attainable. But I have more questions of it.

In escaping to a largely self-sufficient life, Gerda and David Foster contain the perils of the present. In a way this seems like an idealistic response to the epidemic of uncertainty that is late capitalism: whom to trust, how to deal with the many external threats. In the face of these modern perils, the Fosters live fairly independently of the market, of fashions, of rationalisation.

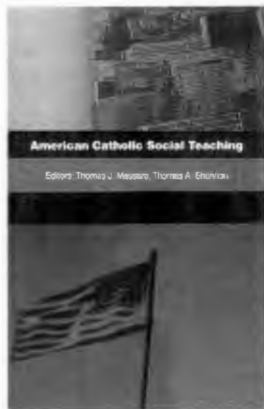
**B**UT THIS IS TOO HARSH. *A Year of Slow Food* is meant to be 'a culinary account of one year', not a solution to environmental and social ills. And the Fosters do have relationships with the person they share farm with, with their children in Sydney, with Gerda's counselling and David's writing. Yet I think part of my—and perhaps some of our broader—attraction to country living is the fantasy of a self-enclosed life where one is free of the complications, hassles and uncertainties (as well as the joys and gifts) of sharing life with so many others.

In his book *The Virtual Republic*, McKenzie Wark writes of the ever-increasing specialisation of modern jobs, and the associated loss of community, of a local commons: 'People just head further and further down the track of specialisation, looking after their own.' David and Gerda Foster live a life that is largely unspecialised, producing and cooking almost all their own food. Yet their local town commons is in danger of disappearing, and while they do have some engagements with their local community, it is unclear whether their self-sufficiency allows for full participation 'in the whole of civil society' that Wark seeks. Patrice Newell is more obviously an active reformer.

Both *A Year of Slow Food* and *The Olive Grove* show that fulfilling lives in the country are still possible, despite popular press accounts to the contrary. They also illustrate much of the hard work that goes into making that life physically and financially sustainable. The costs and consequences and the possibilities for social sustainability are less clear. Both books fired my own pastoral dreams, but they didn't make the dream or its associated dilemmas seem any easier. ■

**Matthew Klugman** is a Melbourne writer.

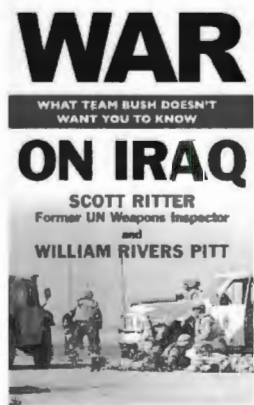
Books discussed in this essay: *A Year of Slow Food* by David and Gerda Foster (Duffy & Snellgrove, 2001) and *The Olive Grove* by Patrice Newell (Penguin, 2000).



**American Catholic Social Teaching** (Vol 1 CD, Vol 2 print), Thomas Massaro & Thomas Shannon (eds). Michael Glazier-Liturgical Press, 2002. ISBN 0 8146 5105 4  
We have in recent years seen the United States Bishops at their worst as court testimonies reveal the way in which some have dealt with sexual abuse within the church. In their attitude to the war on Iraq, we have seen them at their best, resisting their government's predilection for violence.

The bishops' criticism of an unjust war initiated by their own nation draws on a strong episcopal tradition of moral reflection on United States public life. The collection of articles edited by Massaro and Shannon, accompanied by a CD containing bishops' statements on social issues, is a rich resource. The statements stretch over two centuries, and cover a broad range of topics. The printed articles offer reflection contemporaneous with the statements. They give some idea of the perplexities and passions which form the context for the writing of the documents. Among the articles, I was delighted to see such disparate treasures as John Ireland's reflections on being American and Catholic, the manifesto of the Catholic Worker movement, and Elizabeth Johnson's analysis of the strains imposed today on one who wishes to be both woman and Catholic.

—Andrew Hamilton SJ



**War on Iraq: What Team Bush doesn't want you to know**, Scott Ritter (former UN Weapons Inspector) & William Pitt. Allen & Unwin, 2002. ISBN 1 74114 063 3, RRP \$9.95

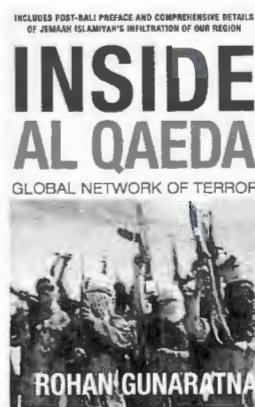
**September 11, 2001: Feminist Perspectives**, Susan Hawthorne & Bronwyn Winter (eds). Spinifex Press, 2002. ISBN 1 876756 27 6, RRP \$32.95

**Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror**, Rohan Gunaratna. Scribe Publications, 2002. ISBN 0 9080 1195 4, RRP \$29.95

The debate about war with Iraq is difficult to make much of because its currency has been increasingly strident assertion rather

than argument. It is more helpful to read about its various contexts than to spend much time on defences of war.

Scott Ritter offers some landmarks in the jungle of weapons of mass destruction. In a short and simply spoken interview, he proposes and discusses the central questions: whether under the present public scrutiny, Iraq could develop and produce nuclear, chemical and biological weapons without detection; whether any chemical and biological weapons that were manufactured before the Gulf War could survive undegraded; whether it is morally conceivable that the secularist Iraq would support Islamic terrorist movements; and whether a war on Iraq would hurt and not



further terrorism. Ritter offers reasons for his negative answers to each question. I have not seen his arguments met by proponents of war.

The collection of articles edited by Susan Hawthorne and Bronwyn Winter provides a useful chronological and thematic record of responses to the events of September 11. Although its contributors are all women, the merit of the book lies less in any specifically feminist character than in the quality of the writing and the compassion of its perspectives. The writers consistently resist the nationalist and aggressive response that is embodied in the movement to war on Afghanistan and Iraq. I found Barbara Kingsolver's comments particularly enlightening.

Rohan Gunaratna describes well the relationships that form al Qaeda. His account, which relies heavily on CIA documentation, is thought-provoking, because it illustrates the way in which a focus on terrorist organisations distracts attention from the motivations and contexts which nurture terrorism. Terrorism comes to be located in a malignant cell that can be isolated and eradicated, and not as embodied in a subtle pattern of historical, political, economic and cultural relationships. The colonial exploitation of the Middle East, and the use of terrorist organisations both by the United States and by military in Pakistan and Indonesia, do not receive due attention. It is notable that, even with his narrow focus, Gunaratna believes that to attack Iraq would help rather than hinder the cause of al Qaeda.

—A.H.

**Marriage and the Catholic Church: Disputed Questions**, Michael Lawler. Michael Glazier-Liturgical Press, 2002. ISBN 0 8146 5116 X, RRP \$69.95

Any Catholic writer on marriage deserves some sympathy. Catholic teaching on marriage and family is seen popularly (including by many Catholics) at once as unremittingly negative and unrealistic and as morally defective in its treatment of divorce and annulment. Michael Lawler recognises this crisis. But he sees that the Catholic tradition has much to offer a society in which marriage itself is in crisis, as well as much to learn from this society.

He argues for a broad understanding of the Catholic tradition, drawing upon his historical knowledge of the variety of practices and approaches throughout Christian history. His writing is properly exploratory, outlining difficulties both in society and in Catholic teaching. He treats honestly such diverse questions as premarital relationships, the acceptance of divorced and remarried people into the Eucharistic community and the reach of Christian marriage—arguing that Christian faith and tradition have much more to offer than a simple rule which closes discussion. For readers who have not given up on the church as a source of illumination, moral insight and hope about marriage, this book will be enriching and stimulating.

—A.H.





# Bio-picks

**Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 16, 1940–80. Pik–Z, John Ritchie and Diane Langmore (eds).  
Melbourne University Press, 2002. ISBN 0 522 84997 0, RRP \$82.50**

**W**HEN THE PHOTOGRAPHER asked Governor-General, Field Marshal Sir William Slim to smile, he protested: 'Dammit, I am.'

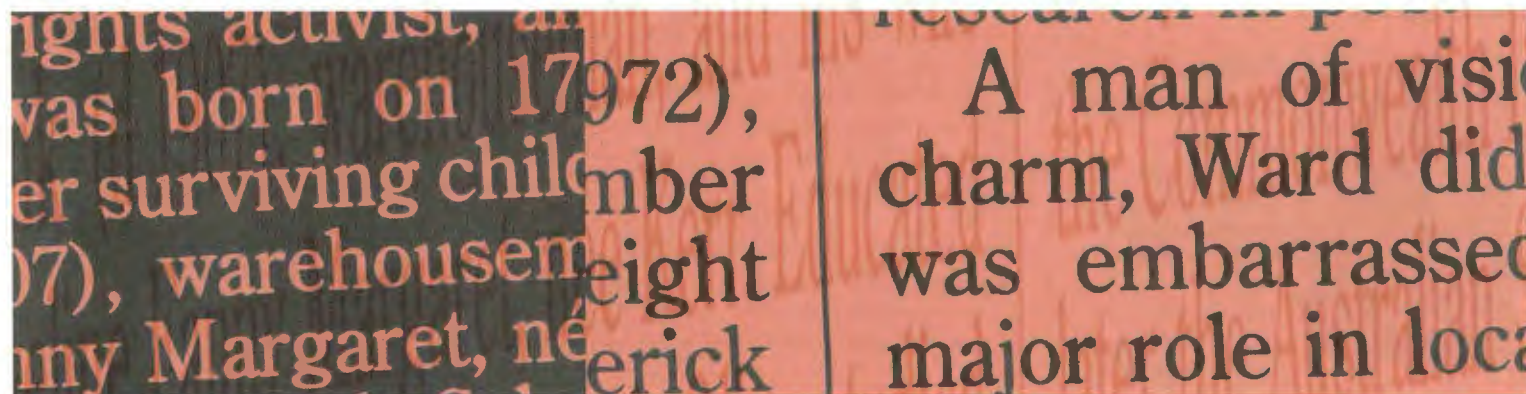
Sir William Yeo, a federal president of the Returned Soldiers League, dismissed the members of the British Commonwealth as 'a polyglot lot of wogs, bogs, logs and dogs'.

Australian-reared Kenneth Wheare, Oxford professor of politics, notable adviser

and seven on Sir John McEwan by that admirable journalist, the late Clem Lloyd. The best-known politician in this volume is Eddie Ward, the pugilistic dissident, who broke all records for being 'named' in federal parliament. Asked when he felt his health was failing he said it was the day he 'took a swing at Gough Whitlam—and missed'. To make further political weight there are the conservative minister, Sir

Lady Rylah's strange death and precipitate burial. More explicit is the entry on the ruthless, impartial political 'advertising executive', Solomon Rubensohn, who knew the skeletons in all the parties' cupboards, but who was trusted because he was 'utterly discreet'. To his staff he was 'an utter and complete bastard'.

Political figures should not, of course, be the pre-eminent interest of a national



to new nations, used to say over his breakfast paper: 'I see they've torn up another of my constitutions.'

Unfortunately, among the 673 entries in this last volume of the fourth series (1940–80) of the *ADB*, such memorable vignettes are too infrequent. However, before anyone suggests that this could be due to having too many tame biographers—there are 569 authors—it must be remembered that alphabetical flukes can dull any part of a series like this. Among the political leaders, for example, the first volume (13) in the period featured Beazley, Calwell, Cain, Casey, Chifley, Curtin and Dedman; the second (14) had Evatt, Fadden and Holt; the third (15) had 14 columns on Menzies by his distinguished biographer, Alan Martin,

Thomas White, and, separately, his wife, the Red Cross advocate Lady Vera (née Deakin), and Labor Speaker (1943–49) Sol Rosevear, who was 'frequently drunk in the chair' but adept at concealing it.

Within a few pages there are portraits of the last man to be hanged in Australia, Ronald Ryan, and (with Sir Henry Bolte) his virtual co-executioner, Victorian Attorney-General, Sir Arthur Rylah, who was also distinguished in his hypothetical 'teenage daughter' whom he protected from reading such filth as Mary McCarthy's *The Group*. Otherwise, Rylah was a social reformer in matters of betting, drinking and Sunday movies, but his biographer refrains from suggesting poll-driven cynicism. He does not, however, shirk reference to the first

biography. This volume begins most appropriately with a model entry on the first editor of the *ADB* (Vols 1–5), Douglas Pike, by its second editor, Bede Nairn (ed Vol 6, co-ed 7–10), biographer of Jack Lang (1986) and author of the most sagacious book on the Labor Party, *Civilising Capitalism* (1973). Nairn summarises the problems faced in establishing the complex production system of the *ADB*, which required a versatile and highly literate office staff, the co-operation of working parties from the Commonwealth States and Armed Services, and unpaid writing from a miscellany of authors, academic and otherwise, whose output varied from the meticulous to the slipshod and needed close checking for accuracy and bias. A clergyman, Pike jested



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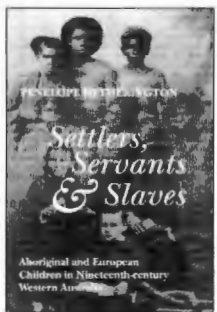
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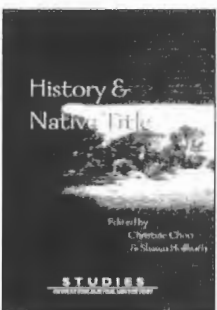
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that, as there were no adjectives in the Psalms, they were not needed in the *ADB*. He favoured lean prose, an ideal which has generally been kept in mind in this volume, but his prejudice against qualifiers might have been confirmed by 'dam-buster' F.M. Stafford's 'open face' and Stephen Schnaar's 'good-natured face, and with a wide mouth and large ears'. Less goofy but just as unhelpful is E.H. Rembert's architectural style: 'Dudokian forms were suffused by Rembert's own idiosyncratic spirit.' Also, stressing economy of words, Pike may have found it superfluous to say that G.C. Remington, having 'access to prime ministers and premiers ... made extensive use of telephones and cables [really!] as he [both?] developed and cultivated an impressive network of allies'.

Any reservations, however, should not be allowed to detract from the interest of the bulk of the entries, with 'standouts' such as anthropologist Donald Thomson; 'linguist' T.G.H. Strehlow (but was he not also an ethnographer or, better, an ethnolinguist?); poet Kenneth Slessor; the greatest of wartime public servants, Sir Frederick Shedden, who put over 2400 boxes of his official papers in the archives; Lieutenant General Sir Vernon Sturdee who burnt his private papers; Sir William Slim of the wintry smile; and Baron John de Vere Wakehurst, the last 'imported' governor of New South Wales (1937-46), whose mother believed him 'to be the incarnation of Pharaoh Thotmes III and encouraged his interest in Egyptology'.

For old-timers there is pleasure in resurrecting the memory of somewhat forgotten identities. In music, for example, there is the accomplished 'second-string' conductor, Joseph Mozart Post, whose enthusiastic father had two other sons, John Verdi and Noel Schumann. Under 'Spivakovsky, Jascha', a renowned pianist who settled in Australia, there is space not just for his noted violinist brothers, Tossy and 'Issy', but for the singing maestro, Adolf, mentor to Sylvia Fisher. For nostalgic Sydney Catholics, there is a formidable trio: Dr A.M. Woodbury, founder of the Aquinas Academy, a theologian who 'lacked the capacity to engage with those holding contrary views' and who had been named 'Bismarck' when a seminarian; Fr Paddy Ryan, whose anti-communist methods were described by B.A. Santamaria as 'cowboys and indians' but who in the Split stayed with the ALP; and Dr Leslie

Rumble, whose Question-Box publications sold seven million copies, mainly in the US, and whose voice at 'ninety words to the minute' sounded less like his name than 'like worn sandpaper'. For Melbourne Catholics there is an authoritative piece on Archbishop Justin Simonds. Less rewarding is the entry on the Jesuit provincial, Jeremiah Sullivan (1877-1960), coming in part from the constrained 'official' *Australian Dictionary of Jesuit Biography* rather than being appropriately fresh—and, as needs be, fearless.

**A**MONG OUTSTANDING WOMEN there are the two Wedgwoods: Camilla, 'anthropologist and educationist', descendant of the great potter, and Dame Ivy, who was married to one. The former made her mark in New Guinea and the Australian School of Pacific Administration; the latter was the third female elected to the Senate and the first from Victoria. Joan Rosanove (née Lazarus) QC, admitted to the bar in 1919, had to wait until 1965 to take silk. Her husband Mannie said that 'as a cook, she was a brilliant lawyer'. The early death of Lilian Roxon (1932-73) of the eponymous *Rock Encyclopaedia*, made it possible to include an up-to-date feminist who graduated from the Sydney 'Push' to earn a double-edged dedication in Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch*. Perhaps even more spirited was Olive Rowe (1888-1979) whose future husband (c.1910) wooed her by tossing 'Milk Kisses' in her direction at Mac-Robertson's chocolate factory. 'Lonely and depressed' after his death, she took up ballroom dancing at 62, won gold medals galore and at 67 the International Dancing Masters' Association's gold statuette and 'added the cha-cha to her favourite tango'. Still dancing on her 91st birthday, she was finally quelled in a motor car accident.

The fourth series of the *ADB* attempted to redress to some extent the imbalance of entries between the sexes and to boost the inclusion of Australian Aborigines. So there are entries on some 80 women and perhaps 10 Aborigines. Unfortunately, some of the entries, and their subjects, have been too lightweight to justify such compensatory treatment, even allowing that by representing some particular avocations they may illustrate the complexity of Australian life.

'Millicent Eastwood' in Volume 14 as a representative 'landlady' was a dreary, trivial case in point and raises a question as



to how she was chosen. Likewise the inclusion of the infant, Azaria Chamberlain, in Volume 13 was risible and suggested that the *ADB* needed closer supervision by its national editorial board.

It is also surprising to see demeaning suffixes such as 'aviatrix' and 'tailoress' still being used.

Not that male entries do not need paring as well. In spite of the *ADB*'s splendid achievement since the 1960s—and with the serious illness of general editor, John Ritchie, during this volume's production, great credit must go to Diane Langmore

and staff—there is a need for a comprehensive review of all *ADB* policies. For example, should the quantity of entries be reduced and more space be given to important entries, and how should authors be chosen and supervised? To take even major entries in the past written by reputable historians: how did the author overlook the remarriage, at 75, of the first headmaster of his old school, Melbourne Grammar, to a schoolgirl aged 16 (see J.E. Bromby, Vol 3); how could the entry on Sir John Latham (Vol 10) avoid a frank account of the jobbery involved in his

resignation as Federal Opposition Leader (and next PM) in favour of Joseph Lyons in 1931; how could the entry (Vol 7) on William Baillieu give such a bland account of his notorious swindle in 1891–2? The *ADB* does not need the honoured maxim: *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* (speak only good of the dead). Sturdy William Cobbett got it right: *De mortuis nil nisi verum* (the truth), he said—and then plenty of it. ■

**James Griffin** has contributed to earlier volumes of the *ADB*.

BOOKS: 2

GARRY KINNANE

## Women and the life of art

*The Cruel Man*, Sue Vanderkelen. Black Jack Press, 2002. ISBN 0 958 5992 9 7, RRP \$29.95

*More Hats: Men in Hats Enhanced*, Michael Jorgensen. Black Jack Press, 2002. ISBN 0 958 5992 8 9, RRP \$24.95

**S**ELF-PUBLISHING AND boutique publishing ventures are not always exercises in self-indulgence. Forms of local writing, ranging from fiction to biography, memoir and history, have their own genuine interest and market, but tend not to attract the established publishing houses, if only because of the limited returns. In filling the gap, do-it-yourself publishers like Michael Jorgensen's Black Jack Press manage to make available fascinating and valuable work that would otherwise never see the light. Such a case is his edition of Sue (originally Sylvia) Vanderkelen's novel *The Cruel Man*, which her family has held in manuscript since her death in 1957.

In the 1930s, Sue Vanderkelen was a beautiful young woman who could not choose between the social acceptability of her silvertail upbringing and the bohemian alternative of her circle of friends. She was the daughter of the Belgian Consul, grew up in Melbourne's Toorak, and was educated at a Catholic boarding school. She met the painter Colin Colahan (a Xavier College boy) in her late teens, and eventually they began a long and tortuous love affair. Neither of them, for different reasons, was able to take the final step of commitment to the other.

Through Colahan, Vanderkelen was drawn in to the Meldrumite group of artists, and became a devoted acolyte of



Studio portrait of Sue Vanderkelen, 1930.

Justus Jørgensen, who taught her painting and gave her relentless advice on how to live her life. Indeed, she was pulled between these two forceful rivals until Colahan left Australia in 1935. She then threw in her lot with the Jørgensen tribe and helped in the creation of the artists' colony at Montsalvat, in Eltham, cooking meals for the workers and donating money for the buildings, one of which became known as 'Sue's Tower'. In the 1940s, she began quietly to write about it all.

The novel is set in the years leading up to her lover's sudden departure, and although it is intensely autobiographical, it does have a wider canvas of characters and interests. I have to say here that I have mixed feelings about Michael Jorgensen's editorial interventions, especially his decision to change the fictitious names given by Vanderkelen to her characters to the 'real' ones. In doing so he feeds our desire to pry into the private lives of well-known people—always irresistible—but also potentially undermines Vanderkelen's writing by making this a book more about celebrities than about her insight into the human heart. It is precisely to get away from the constraints of the actual that a writer adopts the strategies of fiction. We should respect her choice.

Despite this, I found myself enjoying both elements—the drama of revealed lives,

and the intelligence, grace and impressive honesty of the writing.

*The Cruel Man* has three sections, the first dealing with the search for marital equilibrium. Justus is a young man intent on sublimating his romantic impulses into art, and Lily a rather self-contained medical student who finds him physically unattractive but a wonderful companion. It is a strength in Vanderkelen's writing that she refrains from making obvious criticisms and instead allows her characters to be themselves in all their failings and pretensions.

The second section deals with the painful subject of Vanderkelen's own failure to find satisfaction in her relations with Colahan and Jørgensen. Colahan, an Irish charmer with a quick wit and considerable talent, is happy to have Vanderkelen on his arm and in his bed, but isn't interested in marriage. She, enough a creature of her times to fear the social stigma of being his mistress, wants—or knows she ought to want—the security and status of a wife. Her ambivalence is important; she shares much of the contempt for bourgeois respectability that characterises her bohemian friends. But her natural tendency is to blame herself for her equivocations. Vanderkelen's insight into character and motive is acute and convincingly realised, especially in respect to herself, where she is devastatingly honest.

The final section is about the Skipper family, and how a hypochondriacal Mervyn Skipper and his wife Lena were drawn into Justus Jørgensen's orbit. Their young daughter Helen is commandeered, both educationally and sexually, to form the basis of the 'understanding' marriage between Justus, Lily and Helen that was prefigured in section one of the novel. It is a disturbing story, again told without authorial moralising, but creating the picture of an egotistical figure whose power over others remained enigmatic and ambiguous: was it for good or ill? If it was cruelty, was it the sort that proved ultimately to

be kindness? *The Cruel Man* doesn't hand us answers, but it does deepen our understanding of the questions posed by this unruly group of moderately gifted artists.

Issued simultaneously with this novel is a collection of Michael Jørgensen's own autobiographical pieces, *More Hats*, an expansion of his *Men in Hats and Other Tales* pub-

lished in 2000. There are parts of Jørgensen's memoir that complement the Vanderkelen novel in fortuitous ways, particularly where he gives us insights into the man even he recognizes as both 'semi-tyrannical' and a successful guru to many people. ■

Garry Kinnane is an academic and critic.

BOOKS: 3  
JOHN SENDY

## On country

**Words for Country: landscape & language in Australia**, Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths (eds).  
UNSW Press, 2002. ISBN 086840 6287, RRP \$39.95

**A**S WRITERS AND editors, together and individually, Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths have published many valuable books on Australian environmental and historical issues that demand debate, understanding and resolution. *Words for Country* keeps up their good work as public intellectuals. Its 15 essays, by a range of authors, cover most parts of the country and a lot of its history and popular attitudes—delving, arguing, describing, as well as discussing language.

A wide variety of language has delineated, praised or affronted our landscape. One piece of doggerel from the mallee country of north-west Victoria has stuck in my mind since the 1930s Depression:

Bugger the road  
Bugger the track  
Bugger it all the way there and back.  
Bugger the drought

Bugger the weather  
Bugger the mallee altogether.

More sedately, Barron Field, the legal man who spent a few years here and returned to England in 1824, referred to Australia as 'this prose-dull land'. James McAuley called it a 'land of smiles', and on another plane A.D. Hope saw it as 'The Arabian desert of the human mind'.

Joseph Furphy, in *The Buln-buln and the Brolga*, has his alter ego, Tom Collins, in bitter and nationalist mood, pronounce that anyone 'who disgraces an Australian river, or mountain, or town-site, or locality of any kind, with the name of his own insanitary European birthplace is guilty of a presumption which amounts to unpardonable impudence'. Tom Roberts thought our bushland had witchery rather than the melancholy so many saw in it—'a witchery all of its own'.

Ten years ago in *Towards Lake Eyre* the

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poet J.R. Rowland found country strewn

With the wreck of human passage: sand-  
logged bottles,  
Blown paper, ruined plastic, blackened  
fires,  
Gifts to the land of tourists, like our-  
selves.  
Now no one lives here. Wheeltracks, not  
footprints,  
Mark the edges of this world with fading  
scars.

However, 'Politics is ... at the core of this book,' the editors tell us on page 2: 'Conflicts over land ownership, control and use—whether between cotton growers and pastoralists, pastoralists and Aborigines, Aborigines and archaeologists—loom large.'

And so they do. In a fascinating piece about South Australia's Kangaroo Island, its history and attractiveness, Rebe Taylor raises what she believes is the exclusion of Aboriginal presence and achievement. Interestingly, the Aborigines referred to here are descendants of Tasmanian Aboriginal women kidnapped and taken to Kangaroo Island by sealers well before white settlement in Adelaide.

Four of the essays explore the subject of the Murray-Darling basin and the problems caused by excessive irrigation. Heather Goodall considers the effects of cotton farming and the consequent huge drain on the Darling in 'The River Runs Backwards'. Kirsty Douglas' 'Scarcely Any Water on its Surface', Paul Sinclair's 'Blackfellows Oven Roads' and Tom Griffiths' 'The Outside Country' widen the topic.

Tasmanian issues are canvassed by P.R. Hay's piece about the blasted, naked, eroded and multi-coloured hills surrounding Queenstown, and Tim Bonyhady provides an intriguing commentary about the saving and naming and renaming of Fraser Cave on the Franklin, which the archaeologist Rhys Jones described as one of the most important 'prehistoric sites ever found in Australia'.

Michael Cathcart's 'Uluru' relates attitudes of past and present, the progression from Ayers Rock to Uluru, the fascinating story of William Gosse's discovery of the Rock and the subsequent writing-out of the participation of his 'Afghan' partner in the feat. (Cathcart applied for—and got—a four-wheel drive from his university for his fieldwork in search of, as he put it, 'adjectives'.)

## Matchwork

Emphysema prevents him from hobbling much further than the door. Not that there's anywhere else to hobble beyond the well worn pathway to the fence. Instead he builds boats from matchsticks and loads them with daydreams of high adventure—the roaring forties, petrels in the updraught circling over gravid sails. This one, for instance, a finely crafted replica of some ship'o'th'line with workable cotton rigging constructed from 4816 dead matches collected during wheezy shufflings to the doorway's patch of sunlight. Builds them for his nieces and nephews, (see, he's making good use of his time). These days he's too exhausted to dawdle over to Visits, so he doesn't know that all the ships sent out to be retrieved by the nieces and nephews are still there in a darkened room off to the side, doesn't know they're all grown up, probably wouldn't recognise him anyway.

Mark O'Flynn

Perhaps some of the essays are occasionally esoteric. The following is posed on page 71: 'So what are the connections between a teleological explanation of a regional geomorphology employing deep time, sea-level change and cyclic regional aridity as transfiguring influences, and a cosmological outlook which already has an exegetic frame for the shape of the land?' Yeah, good question, but dunno. And I wouldn't try to quote it aloud to the family on a black Saturday evening after Melbourne had been thrashed by Collingwood.

The authors, largely tertiary lecturers, researchers and students, have gone out to do fieldwork in landscapes, memories, stories and archives. This is exemplary. Nevertheless, out there are many people living and thinking, part of the landscape for all or most of their lives: naturalists, farmers, environmentalists, local historians, land lovers with capacity to write

and argue. They have no need to borrow or beg four-wheel drives and know the adjective scene well. Perhaps future such works could be enhanced by some first-hand presence to augment the necessary and invaluable research and prognostications of scientific experts.

Unfortunately, it is hard to be sanguine about the outcome of many of the issues discussed in this book. The present world climate is dominated by global economic lust, and racism and xenophobia are still healthy beasts. The war against fanatical terrorists being led by fundamentalist hawks wielding gigantic weapons of mass destruction presents great dangers for peace and stability. Hardly the space for an improved environment or for race relations to blossom—even though that is no reason to stop striving for such goals. ■

John Senny is a freelance writer.



# Feeding the habit

Theatre critic **Geoffrey Milne** took time off this summer to write two books on Australian theatre. What has drawn him into theatres more than 100 times a year over the past three decades—as a journalist and as a theatre historian? His excuse is that his university teaching demands close acquaintance with actual performances. But that's not the whole story.

**F**OR MANY ACADEMICS, libraries and laboratories are the main sites of primary research. But to contemporary theatre scholars, theatres and performances are *the* places for investigation—sites of incalculable value.

Any scholar in any field is bound to spend long periods in the presence of the unspectacular or unremarkable. But in theatre valuable discoveries often emerge precisely from close-up examinations of trends in the humdrum, workaday activities of one's field. One has to be across the breadth and minutiae before one can see the big picture, the changes in fashion and style. It's the notable deviation from the norm—the spectacular exception to the day-to-day routine—that is likely to trigger closer re-examination of the field and, in turn, feed the deep personal satisfaction that comes from knowing one's theatre.

This is as true for the performing arts critic and scholar as it is for the genuine theatregoer. Night after night in the subsidised and in the fringe theatre we are presented with formulaic essays in naturalistic spoken-word drama, Australian and foreign—the equivalents of television and literature on stage. We also routinely get so-called radical interpretations of the classics alternating with attempts to

preserve the cultural authenticity of our heritage repertoire. Then there are post-modern projects conceived to forge 'a new theatrical vocabulary' based on the drama of our past (often little more than exercises in reinventing the wheel). More mundanely, the commercial music theatre, which wins our reflex standing ovations, too often oscillates between facsimile versions of the latest overseas revivals of shows from the past and facsimile versions of new overseas shows.

So, unless we are professional theatregoers of one kind or another, why do we keep going back night after night, year in and year out?

Three reasons. Every now and then something genuinely new and exciting comes along or something old comes back and it's so freshly re-thought that it's new again, like a startling *Hamlet* or a *Romeo and Juliet* done in mime like a Buster Keaton silent movie.

Second, we love a good story (whether from here or abroad, old or new) provided it's a very good story very well told—and belongs in the theatre rather than in the pages of a library book. Ronnie Burkett's *Tinka's New Dress*, a one-man marionette play seen at last year's Melbourne Festival, was a classic example.

Third, what's undisputably defining about the experience of theatre is that it's live, in real time and essentially mutable: it's never exactly the same every night.

Another trio of factors: there have been three hugely important structural changes in Australian theatre since the 1950s and in turn they have influenced our appreciation of it.

First came the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust-dominated years after 1954, which essentially professionalised the so-called 'little' or repertory theatres and eventually gave us what is now the State Theatre network and other companies dedicated to the production of mainstream theatre. What appealed to theatre patrons in this first wave of Australian theatre renovation was less its local content (*The Doll* and *The One Day of the Year* et al) than the fact that here were Australian artists performing the best plays from the world's repertoire at high professional standards, albeit under mostly English directors.

Fifty years on, a significant nerve in our national theatre psyche still responds most strongly to the kind of theatre that gives us great stories with high production values and truthful acting.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s came



the new wave, which effectively 'Australianised' our theatre. However cringe-worthy some of the male-dominated, Anglocentric plays of the 1960s and 1970s about Australia's and Australians' growing pains might seem when read today, there is no doubt that the shock of the new voice (of the Australian playwright as much as the newly-ascendant Australian director) had huge appeal for a growing audience of affluent young theatregoers. They relished hearing *our* stories and *our* actors on stage and seeing *our* landscape and *our* clothes as backdrop and costume for the new drama in the new theatres like Nimrod, La Mama, The Pram Factory and countless others throughout the country. And when the newly formed Australia Council rewarded their efforts with subsidy, the first wave companies had no option but to Australianise their offerings as well.

**O**NE INDISPUTABLE LEGACY of this second wave is the fact that our repertoire is now dominated by Australian content—about 65 per cent on a sustained national average since the mid-1980s. While the state theatres might be changing their priorities—fewer new works but TV stars in anything in one notable case—it is still clear that there is rock solid audience demand elsewhere for content that is broadly definable as Australian.

But audiences of the 1970s also warmed to another new phenomenon: new wave classics. It must be remembered that Nimrod (as one example) was almost as much interested in giving a new voice to the classic authors (Chekhov and Shakespeare especially) as it was in providing a stage for the new local writing. Thus we got the kinds of larrikin, knockabout 'Shakespeare is fun' and historically updated 'Shakespeare is relevant' productions for which John Bell still finds strong and committed audiences today with his own company. Rex Cramphorn, Bryan Nason, James McCaughey and Raymond Omodei were other notable second wave directors who found audiences in different parts of the country willing to enjoy the classics in newly thought and newly dressed ways.

What I discern as the third wave in Australian theatre (dating from the beginning of the 1980s) has seen change in many areas but it has also seen some groundwork. One of the most obvious achievements of this

period has been to consolidate the strength of the major performing arts organisations since the early 1990s, thanks as much to changing policy patterns within the various government funding agencies as to the Nugent Report's outcomes over the last two years. The future is certainly secured for first wave-style repertoire companies like the state theatres, the Australian Opera and Ballet companies and the Bell Shakespeare Company, who have no apparent need to do anything startlingly new or even Australian—apart from the occasional bankable show from established artists or from people migrating upwards with strong alternative and fringe circuits.

Outside the subsidised sector, the third wave saw the almost unprecedented prominence of the new English musical (notably the big three—*Cats*, *Les Mis* and *Phantom*) which almost shook revivals of American music theatre (and some new works) off their throne. Sadly though, most of these productions were, as I have already remarked, Australian reproductions of overseas shows. They took our theatre back to the bad old days of the Trust and J.C. Williamson. But there were incidental benefits, notably the development of new Australian performing talent and, to some extent, technology. Here is clearly one industry sector in which audience taste, as far as it is measurable by attendance figures, defied the national trend towards an appreciation of Australian arts on stage.

Elsewhere, the third wave had its impact in practically every area of the performing arts. Puppetry, for example, appeared to reach its peak of innovation and audience capture—of children and adults alike—in the 1980s, as the sexy, youth-appealing and highly skilled theatre form calculated to bridge national boundaries and become one of our major arts exports. Then in the 1990s, physical theatre—contemporary circus particularly—took over as the growth sector. At the same time, orthodox, Anglocentric alternative spoken-word drama of the second wave kind fell away. Filling the void was a vast expansion in DIY professional co-operative theatrical activity on the Fringe, which is where much of our most exciting—but sadly underfunded—work has been seen in the past 20 years.

In the meantime, a number of new alternatives to the mainstream (and to second

wave alternative theatres) came to prominence. These included the European voices of companies like Australian Nouveau Theatre in Melbourne, Thalia in Sydney, and the Indigenous presence increasingly asserted by the likes of Kooemba Jdarra in Brisbane and Yirra Yaakin in Perth. A broader kind of multiculturalism has manifested itself in the work of standing companies like Doppio Teatro and Teatro Oneiron in Adelaide, while a vigorous women's theatre movement has found its voice in Adelaide's Vitalstix and many other smaller scale companies. We're now getting a bigger picture of Australia on stage.

Audiences for these smaller and more diverse kinds of companies and their work grew prolifically during the course of the third wave and the funding bodies paid attention to them. A valid question, then, is whether audience taste is *reflected* in arts policy decisions or whether content is increasingly being *dictated* by changes in government funding policy.

A further phenomenon that has gained particular momentum during the third wave is the multi-arts festival, especially the almost discrete kind of show known as the 'Festival piece'. This kind of work often embraces several forms of performance; it's often short and punchy (like the recent *Theft of Sita*) or an epic blockbuster (like *Cloudstreet*). More often than not its production values are high and elaborate (as in Nigel Triffitt's *Fall of Singapore* and *Moby Dick*). Every major arts festival has its big sell-out production, which suggests that audiences really go for this kind of special-occasion theatre.

**B**UT AT THE end of the night, it doesn't matter whether the show be abstract or narrative-based, classic or modern, Australian or foreign. I still think the single most important factor that gets people out of their homes and into the theatre is the performance. Yes, we all know the old expression 'the play's the thing', but the truth is, it's really the players—whether the great Shakespearean strider or the naturalistic actor, spectacular circus performer, gifted puppeteer or good clown—they are the lure, they're the artists whose skills I long to see and whose magic will draw me out for the next 100 nights. ■

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# FLASH IN THE PAN



## Stiff Schmidt

*About Schmidt*, dir. Alexander Payne. Jack Nicholson (above) must have been born with an ironic twist in his brow. I mean, how many people can make the sweep of their receding hairline appear as though it's laughing at you, or at least having a lend? It's an enviable talent and one I'm happy to pay to see, but here it's not about Schmidt, it's about Jack.

Warren Schmidt is moments away from retiring. The clock on his office wall counts down the final seconds of a well ordered, efficient but boring professional life. Unmoved by the moment, Schmidt collects his coat and goes home to his well ordered, efficient but boring domestic life.

Schmidt would like to stand while he urinates, but his wife won't allow it. Schmidt wonders why his daughter is about to marry a moron, but he can't involve himself enough to stop it. Schmidt's wife dies while she's vacuuming and he enquires whether it would be cheaper if he drove the hearse himself. Life's pretty bleak for this recent retiree.

*About Schmidt* is never moving and that is its downfall. It's all very well to laugh at the limited lives of others but to

laugh too loud from the outside is risky. Payne might want to think a little about casting the first stone. Or he might just need to go see *The Castle*.

—Siobhan Jackson

## Shades of Motown

*Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, dir. Paul Justman. Ever wondered who created the sublime and unforgettable guitar riff that kicks off 'My Girl'? His name was Robert White and he played with the Funk Brothers—a loose collection of Detroit session musicians who created the unique Motown sound during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Underpaid and anonymous, the Funk Brothers provided the backing tracks which made the likes of Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson and Diana Ross into household names. The Brothers are now either old men or gone forever—White, for example, died in 1993—and *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* is an act of belated recognition for these unsung heroes of popular music. It is Motor City's answer to the Buena Vista Social Club, but unfortunately director Paul Justman doesn't display the same sure touch as Wim Wenders.

Whenever the Funk Brothers themselves are on screen—whether playing from their seemingly endless repertoire of hits with the verve of much younger men or rapping humorously about their days spent slaving away in Motown's legendary Studio A—the film instantly lifts.

It is fascinating, for example, to see them re-create their version of the classic 'Ain't too Proud to Beg' from the ground up. Starting with the drums, then adding guitars, keyboards, bass and finally tambourine, that elusive, special quality known as 'Motown' materialises as if by magic.

Sadly these sorts of moments are rarer than they should be, given the material and talent that Justman has at his disposal. Overall, the film is confusingly structured, and marred throughout by a clichéd narration. (If I hear about the 'innocence of America' one more time ...)

Lovers of Motown will love the film. For those who have never danced with abandon to 'Heatwave' it might drag a little. Mind you, if the film doesn't quite do the Funk Brothers justice, I bet the CD does.

—Brett Evans

## Side lines

*Taking Sides*, dir. István Szabó. Why didn't great music civilise the Germans? Or, try the puzzle another way: are human beings so adept at compartmentalising themselves that their noble chamber is just along the corridor from the chamber that leaks moral putrefaction? And there is a connecting door.

Director István Szabó has made a career out of pursuing such questions about art, compromise and corruption. This is not his best film on the subject (*Mephisto*, with its mercurial star Klaus Maria Brandauer is hard to beat) but it is a tight one, with a courtroom intensity about it. But perhaps that is what is wrong with the film: from Szabó we have come to expect range and a narrative ease that verges on the epic. There are gestures at visual/historical sweep in *Taking Sides*, but they have a (computer generated?) flatness about them. The real action takes place within the echoing baroque interior of a makeshift interrogation room, where a miscast Harvey Keitel (as American Major Steve Arnold) grills the once revered German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler



(Stellan Skarsgård, not miscast) about his alleged collaboration with Hitler and his musically sophisticated co-murderers.

The close confines would not matter if the dynamic between the two men worked. It doesn't. Keitel is scripted like a poor man's Spencer Tracey in *Judgment at Nuremberg*. He twangs rubber bands with his teeth and is folksily vengeful. Skarsgård's Furtwängler is a subtle, occasionally towering, triumph, but the performance keeps ricocheting off an implacable Keitel, who seems to be in a different film—certainly not a European film.

Newcomer Birgit Minichmayr, as Emmi, the co-opted German secretary and daughter of a dead German officer is, like Skarsgård, a sensation. You follow her every move. So too with Oleg Tabakov as the gloriously swaggering and venal Russian Colonel Dymshitz. Their incidental moments—like inspired variations—provide a glimpse of spiralling human tragedy, not just a set of acting or scripting exercises. It should all have been like that.

—Morag Fraser

## Killer moves

*Chicago*, dir./choreographer Rob Marshall. As ever, the wrong people got the awards. Golden Globe winners Renée Zellweger and Richard Gere exceeded my expectations as Roxie Hart and Billy Flynn, but those most deserving of recognition must surely be the army of sequin sewers and Brazilian waxers backstage at *Chicago*.

*Chicago* is sex, murder, gin and jazz—all writ large in neon lights. The plot may unfairly be dismissed as an excuse for great music. But when you consider the contemporary culture of celebrity murder trials (O.J. Simpson, etc.) and of ambitious, self-absorbed, fabulous nobodies invading our lives under the guise of reality TV, it's hard not to draw some striking comparisons. While *Chicago* can hardly claim a moral imperative, the execution by hanging of the poor Hungarian inmate at least rings familiar in the Australian climate of persecuting those with little means of defence.

Translating from stage to screen is always a risk—even more so with musicals. The move here is made possible by the use of sharp editing and other filmic devices not available to the stage. The music of John Kander and Fred Ebb profits from

the theatre experience, and there remains clear evidence of Bob Fosse's brazen choreography.

The ensemble of Richard Gere (Flynn), Catherine Zeta-Jones (Velma Kelly) and Renée Zellweger (Hart) works surprisingly well. The success of Kelly and the hungry 'wannabe' of Hart is reflected physically in the more seductive shape of Zeta-Jones and the aching thinness of Zellweger.

Gere is readily believable as the media savvy lawyer. He may lack the natural grace and flair of a Gene Kelly, but Gere's rendition of 'Razzle Dazzle' is, in the old language, a show-stopper. And for the first time in my experience, a film audience broke into applause at the end of each big number.

Queen Latifah as Mamma Morton is as big and bawdy as they come, and Lucy Liu as Kitty exceeds her cameo allotment. John C. Reilly as Amos Hart, 'Mr Cellophane', hits just the right note of pathos and realism.

*Chicago* may be a film for believers, but the combination of music, dance and cinematography make for a heady mix. How can you say that murder's not an art?

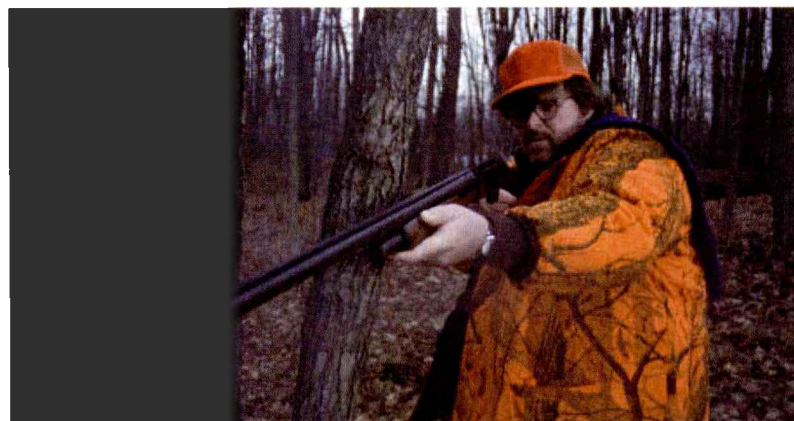
—Marcelle Mogg

## Guns in the gun

*Bowling for Columbine*, dir. Michael Moore. Have you ever wondered why so many Americans kill each other with guns? I always thought the answer was obvious; they have so many guns they can't help but kill each other. *Bowling for Columbine* suggests otherwise. Canada has 7 million guns across 10 million homes, but the statistics on gun related deaths plummet, literally, as you cross the border from the US into Canada. Gun ownership is not the problem, according to Moore (above)—it's fear; Puritan fear of persecution, settler fear of Native Americans, fear of retribution from the slaves, fear of emancipated blacks, fear of ... everything. And that fear is assuaged by violence, not just against each other, but against the world. At one point Moore lists (to the backing of 'It's a Wonderful

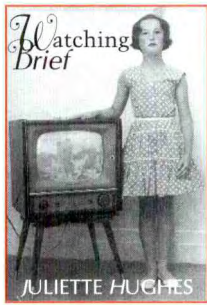
World') US funded and instigated atrocities outside its borders from the '50s on, right up to Osama Bin Laden's use of his CIA training to murder 3000 people in the September 11 attacks. This montage of US atrocities is paralleled in the film with another long sequence of violence—security camera footage from the Columbine High School massacre. He is, he says, 'trying to connect the dots between local violence and global violence', suggesting that these events, large and small, share the same ultimate cause—a culture and history of fear and paranoia that is specific to the United States.

Moore has a knack, not only for personalising the political, but for translating



that personal impact into a media event—as for example when he takes two of the survivors of the Columbine tragedy to the K-Mart where the ammunition used to shoot them was bought, to 'return' the bullets still lodged in their bodies. This translation of politics into emotion can, however, lead him into pathos and melodrama, to the detriment of his own arguments. In the conclusion to *Bowling for Columbine* he sheets home the blame for the gun murder of a six-year-old girl by another six-year-old to Charlton Heston as head of the National Rifle Association—which only makes sense if you think that gun ownership is the problem, and not the national culture of fear and violence. Moore propping a photo of the murdered girl on Heston's driveway makes for a wonderfully weepy end to his film, but it tells us nothing about the fear that drives Heston to lay the blame for the United States' murder rate on its 'mixed ethnicity'—or why George Jnr. is insisting on a war no-one else wants or sees the need for.

—Allan James Thomas



# Could their telly be worse than their soccer?

**D**O TRY AND get out a bit when you're there,' said a concerned friend. 'You know what you're like about British telly.' 'Quality with a capital Kwer, wasn't it?' said another, sipping the cuppa I'd just made her. I quelled her with a glance before launching into a list of all the things I expected to see in Britain that were not actually bounded by a TV screen. Then I started putting them right about the British TV thing. Unbiased news coverage, I said. Free and independent commentary, I said. Intelligent quiz shows, said I. Brilliant new comedies and adaptations of great works, I continued. I must have gone on a bit about it because when I eventually finished they were in deep conversation, being horribly kind about an absent friend, something I was also about to become quite soon.

Well, they're being reasonably kind to me now I'm back: they love being vindicated. To put it mildly, most of British TV makes you understand why they like *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* so much. There is a kind of bad TV that is compulsively watchable, and there is a kind of bad TV that sends you out to look at the tourist sites even when you are only there to visit relatives: British museums and monuments and markets are doing great business.

First the good stuff. Patrick Kielty's *Almost Live* was a clever, vicious *Backbencher* type of show that flayed Bush and Blair with a potted history of the bin Laden/Taliban/CIA/Bush Snr./Gulf War/oil connection that any child could understand. And I was able to save about 40 zillion dollars not going to Covent Garden because the Royal Opera House's latest (David McVicar) production of the opera I wanted to see, Mozart's *Magic Flute*, was televised on BBC2. There was some really good singing, particularly from Simon Keenlyside (a fantastic Papageno) and Dorothea Roschman as a bang-on-accurate Pamina—and Colin Davis was conducting. And it was fun to sit there and bag John MacFarlane's truly awful po-mo ragbag costumes and the dreary black stage sets while appreciating Davis' wise, singer-friendly tempi making Mozart's music even more humane and gorgeous. But Roschman should never forgive MacFarlane for putting her well-rounded soprano form into a boned bodice which was strapless and kept threatening to become topless whenever she took a deep breath. In 'Ach, ich fühls' it was touch and go. And the skirt was of layered grey-brown tulle that looked as though it had been through a dogfight. The effect was very much the battered ballerina, a sylphide down on her luck. The Three Ladies were all done up in drag-artist ballgowns. The Queen of the Night (sung competently but rather thinly by Diana Damrau) was more of the same but was allowed a pointy

vampire hairline. Papageno was dressed as a 20th-century Amsterdam hooker, while all the blokes were allowed to swan around in 18th-century brocade dressing gowns and knee breeches—except for Papageno and the Three Boys, whose garb was puzzlingly and tastelessly Warsaw ghetto. But Thomas Allen was the Speaker of the Temple and it doesn't get much better vocally than that.

**B**UT OH DEARY ME, the debit side. The really old movies at prime time (*Dances With Wolves*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Last Action Hero*); the terrible morning shows; the witless cooking shows; the interminable soaps; the scarily boring game shows; the endless array of reality TV shows. One of the last-mentioned was called *Wife Swap*. Two families, hand-picked for deep emotional incompatibility and class conflict, swap their wives and mothers for a fortnight. In the episode I saw, a legal secretary with a nerdy sort of spouse and a spoilt and needy four-year-old daughter was swapped with a breezy mother of six whose husband was a nightclub bouncer. I hasten to add that there was no sex, but to say that decencies were observed would be to assert that indecency is only about inappropriate genital activity. There is no decency and no kindness in these programs. Unfortunately it was a great success, and will be copied in America, which means that it will probably get here unless we're very lucky.

We also had the doubtful privilege of seeing the Martin Bashir interview with Michael Jackson before anywhere else in the world. It was harrowing and awful and disturbing, but hardly more so than some of the commentary afterwards: one expert on a chat show next morning asserted that the real problem was that Jackson must have a yeast infection making him irrational. Did he or didn't he molest the children he slept with? The question was thrown around endlessly by press and TV pundits. All that came of it was a feeling of decadence and wasted words: we were no nearer to the truth than when we began.

*The New Yorker* seemed to say it best in its own elegant way: the following week carried a Leo Cullum cartoon of Peter Pan in court. The judge was saying to his lawyer, 'Your client's refusal to grow up does not preclude him from being tried as an adult.' And while we're on cartoonists, the legendary Bruce Petty has a series of short animations coming up in March on ABC. Watch out for them: their reality is a damn sight more real than reality TV. ■

**Juliette Hughes** is a freelance, and peripatetic, writer.



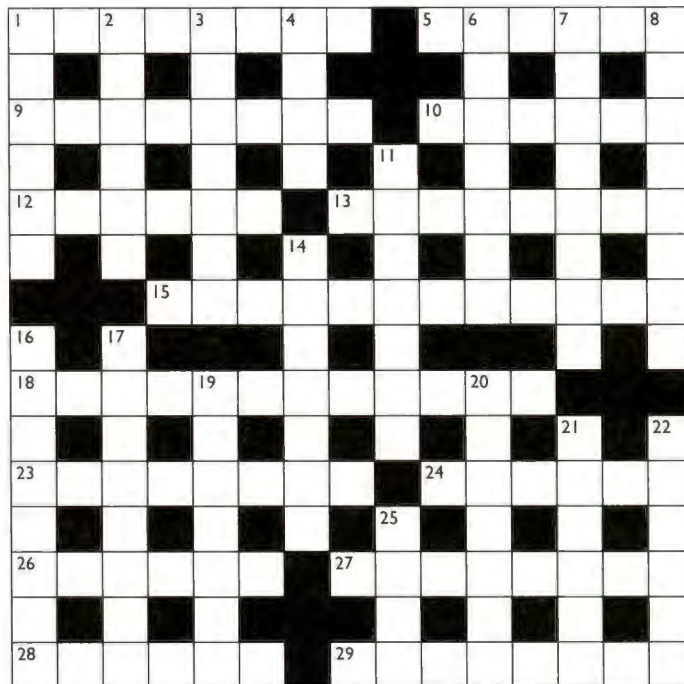


## Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 111, March 2003

Devised by  
Joan Nowotny IBVM

### ACROSS

1. Ruched lace on canvas shelter, complete with antenna? (8)
5. Father, after parking, tries to change. (6)
9. He likes to go to the court with Sue in mind? (8)
10. Initially Pamela found herself on the shelf, but then she showed promise. (6)
12. Extorted an admission, perhaps, but became attached. (6)
13. Went off and married again? (8)
15. We had Ned, say, to spread the cinders at the start of the season. (3,9)
18. National patron who favours the Greens, perhaps. (5,7)
23. The sort of ridiculous statements uttered by 2-down—when struck by moon madness? (8)
24. Does he seek his beloved along winding road, with some hesitation? (6)
26. In spite of having this sort of foot I am bicycling rhythmically. (6)
27. Bridging the spring Ann has no right of way. (8)
28. Painter at work on lathe? (6)
29. Money received from the principal authority. (8)



### DOWN

1. Potentially demonstrating a latent ability. (6)
2. In going up to taunt one, he shows himself to be a fool likewise. (6)
3. Their points of view are about right, if sometimes a bit fishy! (7)
4. What one did to borrower for the season. (4)
6. Hire again for the book delivery? (7)
7. Golden lode, perhaps, at the end of rough road to the fabulous city. (2,6)
8. We sometimes have pancakes on them when they come before 4-down or 15-across. (8)
11. Some improper duress which could last a long time. (7)
14. Someone who may get damp wearing this. (7)
16. David writes verse where ornamental lamp sits. (8)
17. Scrooge, for instance, holds no money originally? That's an incorrect reference. (8)
19. Diplomacy I'll reportedly use when speaking about ability to make contact. (7)
20. I possibly can cede the point about voice modulation. (7)
21. Turn up by a river as arranged. (6)
22. Full of promise as a tourist town. (6)
25. Sort of doctor to put a favourable slant on the bad diagnosis? (4)

### Solution to Crossword no. 110, January–February 2003



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