

# EUREKA STREET

A MAGAZINE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS,  
THE ARTS AND THEOLOGY  
Vol 15 no 4 May 2005 \$7.50 (inc. GST)

The man of La Mancha

Grace Cossington Smith

Gillian Bouras *Lost for words*

Peace in Northern Ireland?



A new award for young writers

*Eureka Street* is delighted to announce the inaugural

## Margaret Dooley Young Writers' Award

One of the distinguishing features of *Eureka Street* is its encouragement of reasoned ethical argument based on humane values. These arguments ideally address people who own religious belief, and those whose view of the world is secular. To reflect ethically on public issues is a demanding discipline. **The Margaret Dooley Award is offered in order to support the development of young writers who will carry on the contribution of *Eureka Street* in this field.**

Margaret and Brendan Dooley have longstanding connections to the Jesuits and Xavier College. Margaret always appreciated the value of communication and education for young people, based on spiritual and personal values. She graduated from Sacre Coeur College in 1950, commenced nursing at St Vincent's Hospital and, with Brendan, raised four children. Margaret died in 2004. The Dooley family are pleased to support this initiative.

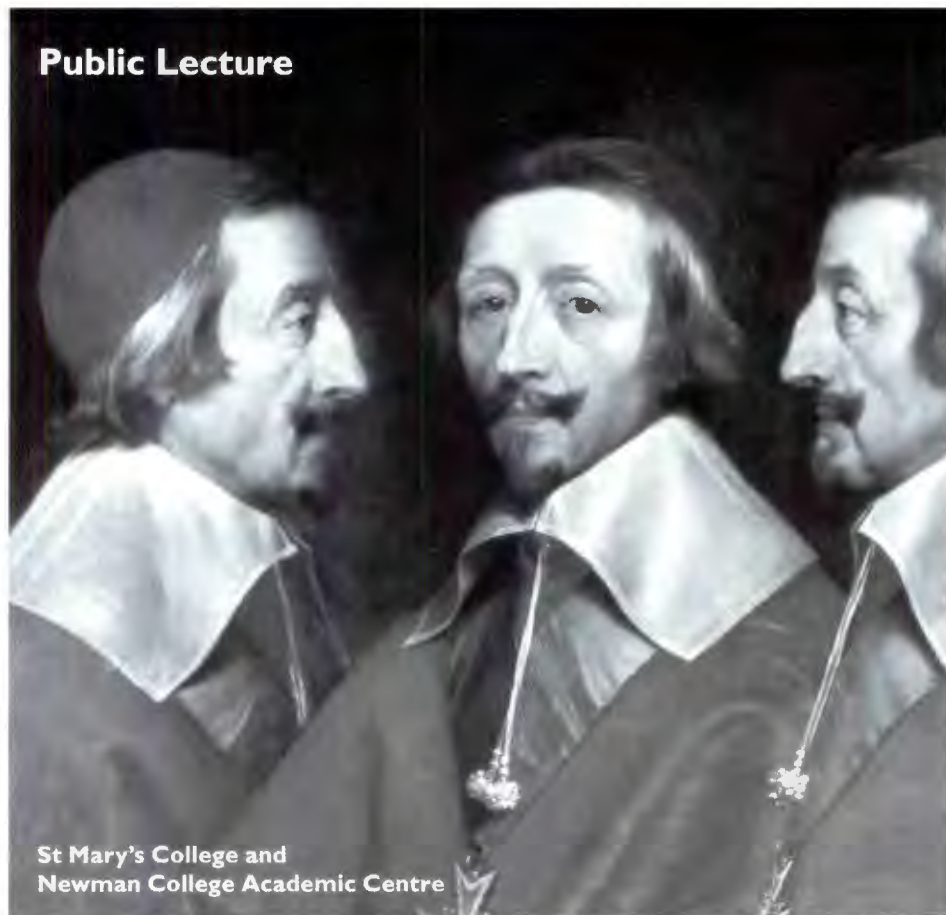
**The annual award of \$2000 is open to any writer**, previously published or unpublished, under the age of 40. Entrants must submit two previously unpublished articles that offer: **ethical reflection** directed to a non-specialist audience on any serious topic, **appeal to humane values**, such as those that are found within, but are not exclusive to, the best of the Christian tradition, **clear argument** and elegant expression, and a **generosity** and courtesy of spirit **animating forceful argument**.

One article should be of no more than 800 words. The second should be of no more than 2000 words. They may take up the same, or different, topics.

**Entries** are to be submitted by **5pm Friday, 29 July 2005**, to:  
**Margaret Dooley Young Writers' Award, Eureka Street, PO Box 553, Richmond VIC 3121.**

The award will be made only if the judges believe that the best entry is of sufficient quality. The winner will be published in the September issue of *Eureka Street*. For more information and an application form please go to [www.eurekastreet.com.au](http://www.eurekastreet.com.au)

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Professor Peter Steele SJ

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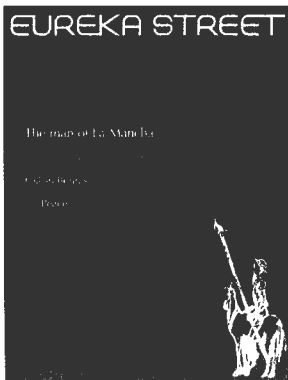
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*Eureka Street* magazine, ISSN 1036-1758, Australia Post Print Post approved pp349181/00314, is published ten times a year by *Eureka Street Magazine Pty Ltd*, 300 Victoria Street, Richmond VIC 3121 PO Box 553, Richmond VIC 3121 Tel: 03 9427 7311 Fax: 03 9428 4450 email: eureka@jespub.jesuit.org.au <http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/> Responsibility for editorial content is accepted by Andrew Hamilton st, 300 Victoria Street, Richmond  
**Printed by** Doran Printing 46 Industrial Drive, Braeside VIC 3195.  
© **Jesuit Publications 2005**  
Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned. Please do not send original photographs or art work unless requested. Requests for permission to reprint material from the magazine should be addressed in writing to the editor.

This month  
**Cover:** Illustration by Lucille Hughes, celebrating the 400th anniversary of the first publication of *Don Quixote*. Story p20.  
**Cover design:** Maggie Power  
**Cartoons:** Dean Moore p18 and p28

# A radical faith

**D**EATH BRINGS US ALL back to earth. So Pope John Paul II has died and has left his responsibilities to others. Christians believe that the God who loved him as Karol has now welcomed him to share Christ's life. For them nothing that the Pope did is more important than his adamant faith in this Good News. They will find an adequate response to his death in prayer and gratitude.

Fallen human beings, however, look for the epithets, sound bites, places and events that sum up a life and a papacy. Some search in Poland. I find it in Assisi, the town to which in 1986 the Pope invited leaders of the world's religions to join him in praying for world peace.

As more generally with Pope John Paul II, what he did in Assisi was more important than what he said. He was a master of the symbolic gesture. We need to think only of his practice of kissing the earth as he arrived in each land he visited, and of his meeting

found many new gestures: he was the first pope to preach in a Lutheran church, the first pope in recorded memory to visit a synagogue, the first pope to enter a mosque, and almost certainly the first pope to kiss the Qur'an.

But what he did at Assisi was different because it was uncontrolled. There the Pope was seen as one of many religious leaders. They were invited to pray in their own way in Catholic churches of the city. The sight of the Pope in Assisi to pray as one Christian among other Christians, as one theist among other theists, disturbed many Christians both within and without the Catholic Church. Its consequences are vast and have yet to be articulated. But he was unperturbed.

He chose the town of Assisi deliberately. He wished to associate the event with St Francis of Assisi, on whose life he often reflected. Francis had gone unarmed to the Muslim king in Syria at a time when the dominant form of Christian contact with Islam was at the point of a sword. The life and simplicity of Francis, too, appealed beyond Catholic and Christian boundaries to people of many faiths and none.

But Francis also embodied the way in which the Pope believed that he himself was called to engage with the world. At a time when the Church was widely regarded as out of touch both with the Gospel and with peoples' lives, Francis offered a way of reconnection that was wild and beyond rational planning. He offered poverty—selling everything, poor living, celebration of God's creation, and encouragement in popular language to live the Gospel. Francis' gesture was new and unpredictable—a circuit-breaker. It was a model for the meeting at Assisi.

But as described by the Pope, Francis' radical gesture comes out of a radical faith. At its heart was a deep following of Jesus Christ and acceptance of his path of suffering. It also rested on solidarity with the Catholic Church and the Pope. His gesture was a gift to the Church, where it could be radical and powerful in its effects.

Underlying John Paul's invitation to Assisi was the same radical commitment to share the passion of Christ, to live within the Church, and to reach confidently out beyond the predictable and safe. Their welding together marked his whole papacy.

For John Paul, the popes are the ones providentially appointed to make such gestures. For others, the Spirit breathes in the Church more eclectically. But, one would hope, no less radically. ■

**Andrew Hamilton** sj is the publisher of *Eureka Street*.



John Paul II during his Australian tour of 1986 participating in the school of the air. Photo: John Casamento.

with his would-be assassin. The gestures spoke more powerfully than any explanation could.

The gesture at Assisi gave shape to two major emphases of the Second Vatican Council. The council committed the Catholic Church to share the desire of ordinary human beings for peace and a decent life, and to reach out affectionately to the members of other churches and religions. John Paul II



# The human side of poverty

**A**S MANY IN THE LEAFIER suburbs of Australia become 'relaxed and comfortable', they may find it difficult to believe the difficulty and the hardship that others face. West Heidelberg represents one of the poorest postcodes in Victoria. It was named in the Henderson Poverty Inquiry of the 1970s. It was also the site of the 1956 Olympic Village, a history that gives much pride to the locals.

I run a clinical legal education program for students who provide legal services under my supervision. Over the years that I have been working in West Heidelberg I have heard rank-and-file police describe the people as 'West Heidelberg scum' and departmental officials describe them as 'hopeless'.

I would argue that, on the basis of my day-to-day contact with the locals, these stereotypes of low-income or marginalised people are wrong and misplaced. Further, I would argue that in one of Melbourne's most disadvantaged areas, the locals are ordinary people like those elsewhere. They demonstrate the usual positive traits of humanity, but they struggle against extraordinarily difficult odds and life circumstances to survive.

A student of mine once said, in the first week of the clinic, 'Poverty is a state of mind. If people made the right choices or saved their money, their lot could be different.' Similar views are promulgated by many, including the Centre for Independent Studies and talkback radio participants. Rather than argue with the student, I decided to let his experience and contact with clients inform him. Three weeks later, in one of the daily debrief sessions,

he said, 'This is so unfair. How can the system fail this woman so badly? How can she be expected to cope, to assist the children and to go on in a state of crisis with minimal social support?'

The student's client was a single mother who, after her husband's death, moved with her three children to West Heidelberg to reduce her living expenses, as a two-bedroom house had become available. She had large debts which had accrued on the joint credit card, and a loan she shared with her husband, who at the time of accruing the debt had been employed. Some years later, the client's brother committed suicide.

Our client decided to take in his three children, as they had no other home. Her hope was to keep the siblings together and with family who loved them. The client applied for another house with more bedrooms but there was a two-year waiting list. Then the Department of Human Services told the client that it was inappropriate for a 14-year-old to share a bedroom with a six-year-old. She was told that if she did not find a bigger house, all the children could be taken away. The department knew of the waiting list but became more insistent. The client's stress increased. This is when she came to see us. Her story is similar to that of so many other clients with whom, and for whom, we work.

Recent studies in the United Kingdom and Australia have found that being a lone parent is one of the surest ways into poverty. This client's experience of how one event can trigger an accumulation of problems is a well-documented phenomenon in recent studies by Cardiff University and the Legal Services Research Centre in England. This client was brave and generous despite her own adversity. She was stoic about

her circumstances, only becoming exasperated when she was up against strong external forces. Her attributes are like so many that one sees in West Heidelberg, but over time people's resilience is worn down.

So often in the poverty debate the actual human stories have been lost. With the current discussion around social welfare reform and the tightening of eligibility for the disability and sole parents' pensions, the battles faced by families on a day-to-day basis can be lost. Great care must be taken not to penalise the most vulnerable members of society.

In Victoria, as part of a Victorian Government Justice Statement, a great opportunity presents itself in the Government's proposed intention to start a community discussion on how our human rights can better be protected. Human rights are great because they attach to all of us by virtue of our being human. How they relate to society's most vulnerable would be the topic for a timely and much-needed discussion.

So many people, like our client, struggle with unsympathetic bureaucratic processes, experience a shortage of social supports and have difficult and compounding life circumstances which are not of their choosing. They often lack any voice, as they can be sidelined by interests with more power and money who can make their presence felt.

I look forward with optimism to a conversation that can include all Victorians, especially those who never get asked, about how we can create a better and more respectful society. ■

**Liz Curran** is a lecturer in the School of Law and Legal Studies at La Trobe University and runs the student clinical legal education program at the West Heidelberg Community Legal Service.



## Population time bomb

EUROPE'S IMMIGRATION  
CONUNDRUM

**I**T IS THE QUESTION that haunts European politicians: how to tell their anxious citizens that without massive immigration, the European way of life is under threat.

The issue has reached critical levels at the same time as, across the continent, the clamour among governments to demonstrate their populist anti-immigration credentials has become dangerously mainstream. Europe's pride in its multicultural diversity has been transformed into a fear for the future, a demand that the numbers of immigrants be reduced in order to ensure the cultural survival of Europe.

There are two fundamental flaws with the current populist approach. The first is that Europe's belief in its own tolerance—one of the cultural norms that immigrants are expected to adopt—is in danger of becoming a myth.

In this respect, the brutal murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam on 2 November proved something of a catalyst, giving licence to the voices of intolerance and prompting governments to respond in kind. In Holland, long regarded as a model of generous European multiculturalism, the patina of tolerance is all but disappearing, with Muslim immigrants—Van Gogh was killed by a Muslim extremist—increasingly alienated from mainstream Dutch society by a climate of fear and suspicion. The catchery 'Holland is full' has become the defining issue in debates over immigration.

According to Edwin Bakker, of the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 'Islam is the most hated word in the country at this point.' Rita Verdonk, the country's minister for immigration, has announced that would-be residents must first pass an integration exam before being granted permission to stay permanently, and that immigration numbers are to be slashed. The influential former European

Union commissioner Frits Bolkestein similarly advocates compulsory integration of immigrants and a huge reduction in immigration numbers, warning the Dutch that their culture is under threat. According to Bolkestein, 'The most common first name registered at birth these days is Mohammed. This, they say, is the Europe-to-be.' Such is the world of perceptions driving the immigration debate in much of Europe, instilling the fear among citizens that immigration represents a fundamental threat to the existence of Europe as they know it.

The second problem with the argument that immigration threatens the future of Europe is that, in a purely economic sense, it could not be more wrong. Indeed, if Europe's cultural survival is calculated in terms of standard of living, large-scale immigration is one of the few avenues open to governments keen to keep their countries prosperous.

According to recent studies commissioned by the European Parliament and the OECD, Europe's ageing population, increased life expectancy and plummeting birth rate ensures that, by 2010, its workforce will begin to shrink. Indeed, if current trends continue, over the next 30 years there will be 14–20 million fewer Europeans of working age, a phenomenon that will cause a fall in GDP of seven per cent and result in pension and health-care bills increasing by eight per cent of GDP. The proportion of the population over the age of 65 will rise to more than 50 per cent of European citizens.

The potential consequences are dramatic. Without immigration, Italy's population will decline by one-third by 2050. The Bank of Spain has estimated that 350,000 immigrants are required every year in order to save Spain's tax-financed pension system from bankruptcy within 20 years.

Even as governments across Europe seek short-term electoral gain through anti-immigration populism, a host of studies by those same governments reveal that immigrants are essential to economic growth. In the UK, the Home Office has found that immigrants contribute ten per cent more to public funds than they take out. In Spain, the spending power of immigrants increased employment by 27 per cent between 1999 and 2002 and foreign workers—net contributors to the Spanish welfare system—generate twice the tax revenue that they consume.

A green paper released by the European Commission in March was more blunt: 'Never in history has there been economic growth without population growth.'

Claude Bébéar, head of a French government-commissioned study of equality of opportunity in the French labour market, argues that Europe must urgently find more people to work and pay taxes and hold down the average age of the continent's population. He warns that 'if Europe wants to keep its place in the world, it needs a younger population, and that means more immigration'. This view is echoed by Claude Moraes, a Labour member of the European Parliament: 'What a number of politicians have done is to pretend that migration is a population problem when this document says that it is one important solution among many.'

Most analysts agree that immigration alone will be insufficient to maintain prevailing standards of living. Europe's birth rate has been declining since 1965, and in 1975 the fertility rate fell below the population replacement level of two children per fertile woman. The EU average now stands at 1.29 births per fertile woman. Ireland, the EU's best performer in this regard, produces just 1.98 children per fertile woman. Even if current levels of immigration are maintained, and taking into account the recent addition of ten new member states, the European Union will have fewer citizens in 2050 than it does now, and most of them will be much older.

Despite the weight of evidence, however, politicians are not telling their citizens that if they do not start having more children—and perhaps even if they do—the countries of the EU will need to collectively accept an average of 6.1 million immigrants a year from 2015 to 2040 simply to maintain the current ratio of three working-age adults for each retiree. They also have not been told that if this doesn't happen, people will have to work longer, possibly into their 70s, and that government welfare benefits—pensions, health-care subsidies and maternity leave—will have to be drastically reduced.

Instead, what they are being told is that increasing the number of immigrants by the required levels will ensure that, by 2050, 40 per cent of the EU's population will be recent immigrants or the offspring of immigrants.

That would indeed remake European identity, but it would also ensure the long-

term prosperity that has become an essential pillar of that same European identity.

In the meantime, many politicians prefer to look the other way in their desire to preserve an idea of immutable cultural and national identity. By doing so, they ignore the fact that only by becoming more multicultural can the Europe, in which all its citizens believe, survive.

## Beyond the screen of sight

JAMES GLEESON RETROSPECTIVE

**T**HROUGHOUT HIS LONG LIFE, James Gleeson has been intrigued by the processes of change. From the inconstancy of surfaces to life's oscillation between ripeness and decay, his work is filled with examples of the tension existing between established shapes and new realities struggling to be born. For more than 60 years, Gleeson's palette, composition and scale have evolved. But his quest is the same: to see reality undiminished by logic and the restrictions of our senses. Gleeson's creations invite us to look at the world in a different way, and likewise he transported 'beyond the screen of sight'.

The exhibition *Beyond the Screen of Sight*, at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra until 13 June, features paintings, sketchbooks, collages and drawings. Quotes from Gleeson about the nature of his work and examples of his poetry are interspersed throughout. The retrospective is arranged in chronological order, allowing us to trace a sequence of ideas and techniques that are continually tested, discarded and discovered anew. The abiding impressions are of the wealth of material ploughed into Gleeson's endeavours and the miraculous metamorphosis into his own style.

An early painting displays a city in miniature on a mighty tongue. The influence of Dali is obvious—the tongue rises from a plain of muted earthy colour, offers up the city and then trails off into the blue yonder. The focal point is the city, drawn in thin black lines, nestling on the bubblegum-pink tongue. A billboard in profile looks down upon the city, masking a face that is framed by long strands of hair. It is a wasteland.

# Cultural consolidation

**I**T IS A HAPPY ACCIDENT that brings together in 2005 the anniversaries of three Jesuits who worked in German: Peter Canisius, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner. The theologies of Rahner and von Balthasar, each born 100 years ago, and the Catechism of Canisius, first published 450 years ago, represent different styles of address to changing cultures.

The Catechism, commissioned by Emperor Ferdinand I, was a decisive act of consolidation in a time of religious fragmentation, enthusiasm and confusion. It presented the Catholic faith in relatively simple terms for priests, teachers and lay people. The Catechism was focused on issues debated in the Reformation, and made clear the difference between Catholic and Reformer. It became a symbol of Catholic identity. At last count, it has appeared in 1161 editions.

Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar were both born in a Catholic world. They engaged in different ways with the forces that have made Christianity marginal in contemporary Western culture. Rahner took seriously the philosophy of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on human subjectivity. He looked for connections between the longings characteristic of all human beings and the Good News offered in Christian faith. His theology was open to culture, while taking human tragedy seriously.

Von Balthasar, who left the Jesuits after being ordained a priest, engaged with high European culture, and its roots in early Christian literature. He presented Christian faith in a richly symbolic and highly elaborated form, appealing to the richness of texture of Christian truth in a thin cultural world. If Rahner treated persuasively the relevance of Christianity to the contemporary world, von Balthasar described the attractiveness of Christian identity in a world that had lost its bearings.

The Catechism and the theologies of Rahner and von Balthasar have their place and their moment. But anniversaries remind us that theologies and books are the creations of quirky people—the eirenical Canisius, the passionate Rahner, the devout and irascible von Balthasar.

But catechisms and theologies also have political dimensions. They gather groupies and goon squads. In seminaries, to take a course on Rahner or von Balthasar can be a gesture of theological partisanship. Nor do all who bury them understand them. Rahner can be used to endorse an uncritical accommodation with all aspects of contemporary Western culture. Von Balthasar can be used to insinuate that threadbare church practices are handsomely clothed.

Catechisms are also political documents. They make statements about Catholic identity in a changing world. In the Netherlands city of Nijmegen, an exhibition has been mounted to celebrate the anniversary of the Catechism. The exhibition also displays many other catechisms, among them the Dutch Catechism written shortly after the Vatican Council. It was later printed with corrective notes. Too much Rahner, perhaps, and not enough von Balthasar! ■

**Andrew Hamilton** SJ is the publisher of *Eureka Street*.



## Of life and death

**A**S HUMANS, WE SEEM TO LOVE putting things into boxes, sorting them into categories—black and white, horses and zebras, living and dead. But biology isn't like that. It's a continuum.

One of the simplest images of life is that of a cell dividing. One minute, there is a living cell; the next, it has split into two. But where is the original cell. Is it dead? Or is it still alive in its offspring? In fact, what are the points of the beginning and end of life? Life is a cyclical process. All of us had ancestors. Some of us have or will have children. So when did our lives begin? And when will they end? Do we, in some way, live on in our offspring?

As far as Archimedes knows, there is no good scientific answer to these questions. He knows of no foolproof scientific definition, for instance, of what constitutes living and non-living. Quite the reverse. Science, in the form of technology, seems these days to be muddying the water.

It all used to be so simple. A person was dead if they stopped breathing or their heartbeat ceased. Then came life support systems which could take over the job of pumping the blood and the lungs. Was a person dependent on life support living or dead? If you switched off a respirator, were you killing someone, committing murder? Respirators are integral to the process of organ donation, as kidneys and lungs and livers need to be kept alive with oxygenated blood while awaiting transplantation from donor to recipient. And so the legal concept of brain death came into being—the idea that a person was legally dead if they were on life support, but their brain was medically determined by doctors to be incapable ever of controlling independent existence.

Science is about to complicate things further. There are now researchers trying to assemble simple forms of life by combining (dead) off-the-shelf chemicals. These life forms would be separate from the environment in which they existed, and able to support some form of chemical reaction to maintain and reproduce themselves. If we could produce such entities, would we have made life?

A growing body of researchers into the process of ageing now look at death as an engineering problem—a barrier that they will eventually overcome. As they find out more about the causes of ageing and death, they are becoming more and more confident that it might be possible for an individual to live forever.

All of which brings us to where we started. When does life begin and end? These are significant questions which stir the very depths of our humanity. The point at which a new human life begins, for instance, is central to any discussion of the ethics of abortion and stem cell research. Those who believe humanity begins at conception have a completely different view from those who think that humanity implies the existence of some sort of organised nervous system.

The sad, sorry and protracted battle over the fate of Florida woman Terri Schiavo, revolved around the point at which human life ends. The resolution of this question so stirred some segments of American society that their representatives in Congress tried to assert control over the courts, whose independence from such action is supposedly guaranteed in their Constitution.

What has become clear to Archimedes is that science offers little assistance in the determination of the points at which life begins and ends, so important to our concept of our own humanity. These are legal, social, ethical and, yes, religious decisions. Life itself flows on. ■

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

*The Agony in the Garden* (1948) is another early gem. It addresses 'the agony of accepting how little we know of ourselves and the conflict brought about by the restrictions of a cruel world'. A conglomeration of machinery is operating in an overgrown Eden. Paired faces, proximate and estranged, are embedded into the overall structure. It is a complex vision seething with the malevolent energy of the furnace and the jungle.

In 1957 Gleeson took a lengthy sabbatical, working as an art critic, curator and lecturer, and also travelling. In his spare time he experimented with collage and pen-and-ink, producing only an occasional painting. By the time he returned to full-time painting in 1983, Gleeson was almost 70. Following the trail of his work, we have come to appreciate his love of literature, the word games in his titles, his promiscuous attention to all forms of life. What awaits is still a shock

The new canvases are physically imposing. Over three metres wide, with a height nudging two metres, they envelop the viewer. Like the forms they present emerging from chaos, the paintings have also ventured from the obscure well of birth and rebirth into the bright world of our gaze. Watery blues grapple with bleached whites, an ambivalent red haze accompanies bald patches of black, arrays of yellow recur. Until this point, Gleeson's work has concerned itself with structure. Now he leaps into an elemental realm.

Gleeson's mature paintings descend like a flock. One striking example is *The Arrival of Implacable Gifts* (1985). Its sea-shore and the sky are a tangle of muddy white, virtually interchangeable. The enmeshed objects are part of what surrounds and yet distinct. Are they treasure or debris? Gleeson himself makes an appearance, a bemused onlooker with an avuncular demeanour.

*Beyond the Screen of Sight* manages to capture all the horror and beauty, mystery and history that lives in James Gleeson's work. It is a provoker of subsequent reflection and a fitting tribute to Gleeson's persistent curiosity and the longevity of his creative vision. ■

*This month's contributors:* **Anthony Ham** is *Eureka Street's* roving correspondent. **Steve Gome** is a freelance writer and actor.



# What crisis?

**T**HE POPULATION IS AGEING. In 40 years, seven million Australians—a quarter of the population—will be aged 65 or older. The number of people aged 85 or older will have reached about 1.4 million, up from about 300,000 today. Children will be a far smaller proportion of the population.

So what's the answer to this as a public policy dilemma? Start building more health facilities and nursing homes to deal with the demographic shift? Or build more schools and increase one's investment in the education that the younger people have?

The second answer is the logical one, though not necessarily the one that leaps to mind. So far as the ageing of the population means that there will be greater pressure on the community to look after the old, the ones who will be bearing the burden will be the working population.

But that's not the answer invited by those who are putting demographic shift on the agenda, and seeking, in the process, to fashion themselves as far-sighted politicians thinking of the longer term rather than short-term gain. The answer for them is that the slow, if steady, shift to an ageing population represents a 'crisis', requiring that government pull in its belt now so that it will have the money on hand later to deal with the massive costs and changes to the system that will be necessary. Otherwise, the implication is that there will have to be higher taxes, uncontrolled costs running far faster than economic growth, and, of course, an increasing burden placed on an ever-diminishing workforce.

It's all 24-carat, copper-bottomed, ocean-going nonsense. The best thing to do about the ageing of the population is nothing. Or at least nothing on *that* account. There is no crisis in prospect, no threat of a burden that the community or the economy, as we know it, cannot absorb, and much more to look forward to about an ageing population than there is to fear. And that is assuming that we can safely forecast the future, based on what we know today, or that projections about the size and composition of society and the economy based on what is happening

Indeed, one of the greatest problems of the new, older society, is scarcely mentioned. Even now, most of the wealth of Australia is in the hands of the old. As we get older and live longer, the proportion increases at a rate faster than ageing itself—the old, by and large, will be accumulating wealth at a rate faster than they (or government) is dispensing of it by way of higher costs, particularly in health or pensions. For about two or three generations, Australians have become accustomed to the idea of their natural right to pass on that wealth, by gift or by will, to their children. In the new society, those children may, on average, be of pensionable age and asset-rich themselves, by the

time they inherit. In time the pressure to liberate some of these resources, probably by land taxes, will become unbearable, one might think.

Of course, about 30 per cent of the older population will never have bought their house, or put any substantial asset away, and will have no money to leave. But even less does their more modest consumption, even if financed by the state, represent any enormous burden on public resources.

But an older population is by no means a threat. Nor is there any serious prospect that most of us will be Alzheimic dodderers gibbering away in nursing homes. The general population will be ageing, after all, because our society is healthier and living longer, and because modern technology makes active living easier. The modern nature of work, moreover, means that we still can work easily enough, if we want, long after a time when, previously, we were simply past it. The pensionable class of 2045 will in any event be, on average, well-educated, well-travelled and engaged with the world. What bliss to have some spare time, at last, and what an impertinence to call the personally productive use of it a burden on society.

**W**E ARE ALSO AGEING BECAUSE a significant proportion of my generation and an even greater proportion of the generation below me has decided to have no kids, or fewer kids than their parents, or have decided to have kids, but later, then never got around to it or found that they no longer could. That's sad, and probably beyond the power of any immigration program to remedy. But even the prospect, further down, of an actually declining population, hardly presents a crisis either.

Fewer than one per cent of Australians now produce about five times more food than Australians can consume, and many more commodities than we need. Even before 2045 we may reach a stage where we have more televisions, mobile phones and motor cars than we want, and can think only of services, or things such as education and travel, as a way of spending the money burning holes in our pockets. Some of us may even think of sharing our wealth with some of our brothers and sisters not so well off.

Those who are raising the question as a problem, or as an impending crisis, are softening us up for a broader agenda, of cutting the social welfare bill as a way of diminishing the size of government, now as much as in the future. That might be a good thing in itself, but whether it is or is not does not turn on whether the composition of the population will change over time. ■

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



# Portuguese invasion

**I** SUPPOSE THAT, in evolution's daring script, the millipede has a role, but intense scrutiny has failed to reveal it to me, and it's not as if I've lacked opportunity for research, because our house has been the Hindenburg Line to wave after wave of this many-footed army.

Before Christmas, with a few millipede scouts and guerrillas appearing on the verandah, I called in my mate Les, of Southern Flinders Pest Control (SFPC)—not to be confused with Ron Scholar, sole proprietor of the splendidly named Academic Pest Control, who, when we lived in Little River, would regularly rid our eaves of swarming bees. He would, no doubt, have obliterated academic pests too, if we'd reported them in any numbers. Anyway, Les of SFPC came straightaway, laid down a heavy artillery barrage, and the enemy subsided, patiently planning a major assault in cooler weather.

It will not have escaped your notice that I'm referring here to *Ommatoiulus moreletii*, the Portuguese millipede, which, inspired no doubt by compatriots Vasco da Gama, Ferdinand Magellan and Bartolomeu Dias, made the long journey from its native shores to Western Australia in the 1980s and quickly colonised most of the other states. Whether it actually has a thousand legs may be still in doubt, but it is unquestionably well endowed in the matter of limbs, forelegs, hindlegs, 'pins' and general undercarriage support. Thus equipped, *Ommatoiulus* achieves a sort of gliding motion, like a Georgian dancer.

Remember the Georgian dancers? The women wore hooped dresses that just touched the floor and completely concealed their feet. They would cross the stage taking rapid, short, unseen steps. To the onlooker, they appeared to be on hidden wheels. Many of them, when their dancing careers ended, were employed by the BBC as Daleks in *Dr Who*—the Daleks, of course, being noteworthy not only for their obsessive desire to EXTERMINATE but also for sliding across the often visibly shuddering set as if on a cushion of air.

*Dr Who* first hit the television screen in 1963. Two years later, a mate of mine gathered together all his resources—well, he sold his battered FJ Holden and did a runner on the previous month's rent—and sought acting fame in London. Within a few weeks he wrote to tell us of his stunning breakthrough—a job with BBC drama. The role, it turned out, was as a Dalek, but still it was a start. He left the BBC only because he felt that an acting career in which he never charged urgently up or swept splendidly down a staircase was perhaps too monochromatic. But I digress.

*Ommatoiulus moreletii* has a smooth black cylindrical body and proliferates in compost, leaf litter and mulch, where, helping—but only *helping*, note—to break down organic matter, it makes a thin and, in my view, highly contestable claim to be part of the great scheme of things. It enters houses for no

reason that either it or the inhabitants understand. As an eater of mulchy matter, it finds no nourishment under domestic roofs and, along with hundreds of its mates, having invaded a house, it quickly dies in corners and under couches and mats.

But this is precisely why, as a domestic pest, the old *Ommatoiulus* is hard to combat. Its superior numbers are mitigated by confusions, ill direction and vague individualism in the ranks (in sharp contrast, for example, to ants); its physical presence is diminished by the tendentious nature of its claim to a place in the evolutionary parade. When millipedes come multi-legging their way under your doors and through hitherto unknown gaps in your castle's defences, they *don't know why they're there*.

Likewise, potential predators become puzzled by the millipede's apparent irrelevance, its palpable consciousness of its own irrelevance, and lose heart. European flies, developed specifically to attack and extinguish *Ommatoiulus* in South Australia, disappeared completely after their release and were never heard of again. *Rhabditis necromena*, a parasitical nematode, has had some success against millipedes but takes years to make an impact, as if undecided how to act. Obviously neither the European fly nor *Rhabditis* could cope with a prey so apparently uninformed about its place in the mysterious game of Nature. *Natura naturans* was the medieval phrase for this game:

'nature naturing'. The secret of *Ommatoiulus* is: it refuses to nature.

**P**ERHAPS MILLIPEDES HAVE come to recognise their ancestors' immigration from Portugal as a terrible mistake and, consumed with atavism, are trying to return home. But all the evidence suggests a simpler explanation: millipedes don't know what they are for. They are evolution's senior moment.

This is good news for creationists. They should study *Ommatoiulus moreletii* and, above all, seek to find other species that, like *Ommatoiulus*, seem to have slipped below the evolutionary radar. If successful in this quest, they would gradually build a case *against* the logic of evolution and *for* the idea of a God playing with toys he has only recently returned his attention to after being so thoroughly pissed off by the erratic behaviour, just a few thousand years ago, of Adam and Eve.

Meanwhile, I fight on: with sprays, slippery surfaces, thick towels across doors. I will fight them on the verandah, I will fight them in the kitchen, I will fight them on the patio and in the toilets. I will never surrender.

LOOK OUT! Here they come again ... ■

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## Riding the bicycle

Nothing stirred except mosquitoes,  
and in the midst of a three largactil night,  
they bit the mind hard.

There was cold sand  
troubling his bed and on this beach  
his feet tightly tapped

to *Radio Loopy*,  
his every hiccup, his every nit  
rummaged the air –

he dreamt of discovering  
a vast continent where rain storms  
between sea and sky

were like the strings of a harp.  
His very gift was to remain invisible  
whilst riding a Malvern Star bike,

one of two priceless possessions;  
and he rode around upon it  
wearing platform shoes,

along roads beyond mapped margins  
where the thrust of muscles reminded him  
that nightmares were no longer required.

In wide paddocks were rocks  
shaped like cows and sheep imitating hay bales,  
and hills so pointed he always looked up

to crimson smears and squirts  
of yellow / and past fencing wire and ochre land  
he pedalled into prehistoric light

upon two circles of silver,  
and nothing (not even dread)  
stirred, except

wild orange daisies,  
like crazy bees swimming  
in the October wind.

## The abyss

for Peter Booth

At midday in the bar  
I sit and sip and suck  
ice from a long glass.

In the bar on Foxtel  
a baby boomer rock star  
singing about cold rain

and snow / the way  
it falls. Hear the cry  
from narrow streets –

*aussie aussie aussie !*  
Walking outside into wind  
people stand and walk

and talk. The sky  
is riddled with turbulent  
clouds / so I walk back

to the bar with the wind  
inside of me. People sit  
here and stand and talk

and watch other people  
sit and stand and talk  
inside the plasma screen.

I decide to leave  
to go walking again  
to the art gallery

to find relief and to  
stare at the black painting  
for quite some time.

# Getting real in Ulster

Real peace is likely to come to Northern Ireland only when a new generation sets aside the long-dead icons of 1916 and 1922

OPEN THE WEBSITES of the major Northern Irish political parties and the first thing you set eyes on is a sea of smiling Paddies, indistinguishable from one another by their looks, their clothes, their haircuts. The smiles are for the unobserved observer. They are, of course, the richly unctuous smiles of Central Casting politicians everywhere, but in Northern Ireland these insincere grins are more chilling than encouraging.

As in all polities, they are saying, 'We are the good guys, the ones you can trust.' They want swing voters to believe in them. The difference here, however, is that the swing voters come from their own side—the smiles are only for other nationalists or unionists. Sinn Fein tries to claw votes from the constitutional nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP); Ian Paisley's hawkish and misnamed Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) strives to capture the supporters of the moderate Ulster Unionist Party. The factional political warfare so familiar to Australians is brought to a fine pitch in Ulster politics.

The events of September 11, 2001, swept the Irish peace process off the international pages of the world's newspapers until the massive robbery of an Australian-owned Belfast bank and the hideous murder of a Catholic Sinn Fein supporter by drunken IRA men in a pub fight brought to life a protest movement in Belfast this European winter. Those stories are still unfolding as police investigations advance, but behind those terrible crimes lies the troubling issue of what is happening in the Irish peace process. The question must be asked whether the two sides in the North see the peace process as an end in itself, a perpetual work-in-progress, or as a route to a final resolution of four centuries of conflict.

Among the many paradoxes apparently inherent in Irish politics are the facts that, as the peace process has progressed since the IRA ceasefire in 1994 and the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the power of the moderate parties has waned and the radical parties have achieved majority support within their own camps. If the Northern Irish Assembly, which has been suspended for about two years, was now to take control of the internal affairs of Ulster, Ian Paisley would become chief minister with Gerry Adams his deputy. Shortly before Christmas 2004, it appeared that just such a deal was about to be made. It came to nothing in a bout of hissy fits by both sides, Paisley insisting on Sinn Fein wearing 'sackcloth and ashes' and Sinn Fein standing on their pride. A week later the IRA carried out the biggest bank robbery in British history and the peace train entered a very long tunnel.

During the course of the so-called 'Armed Struggle'—in

reality a nasty, inglorious period of sectarian gang warfare—moderate voters in both the nationalist and unionist camps clung together in the middle of Ulster politics, adhering in their mutual disdain for violence to a belief in constitutional politics. Gerry Adams and Ian Paisley could only attract hardliners in each community. Following the Good Friday Agreement, with Adams being invited into the fold, it seems that significant numbers of Ulster Protestants shifted their allegiance from the Ulster Unionist Party, which ruled Northern Ireland from Partition in 1922 until the Stormont Parliament was dissolved during the Troubles, to the DUP because they saw the power of Sinn Fein rising and feared it.

PAISLEY IS EASY TO MAKE fun of, and often is, but he is a serious politician and, more importantly, he carries with him a majority of the majority in Northern Ireland. Like Pauline Hanson in Australia, he attracts many who do not agree with all his ideas because he stands for one big idea. In his case it is *Protestant identity*.

Since the time of the Home Rule campaigns in the late 19th century, but especially since 1922, when Ireland was partitioned, a wall of invincible ignorance has divided Protestants and Catholics culturally. I first met an Ulster Protestant in 1972, a mathematician tutoring at the University of NSW. When I remarked how odd it seemed that most of his Australian friends seemed to be from Catholic backgrounds, he said that he imagined that if he had ever met Catholics in Belfast he would have liked them too, but that the two communities never mixed. He said that, strangely, he was learning more about Catholics and Catholicism in Australia than he ever had at home, where the questions were far more important but rarely asked or answered rationally. Northern Irish Catholics in Australia had similar experiences with Protestants.

The Good Friday Agreement marked an extraordinary turning point in the fraught history of Ireland's relations with Britain. Among other things, the Irish government agreed to alter the republic's constitution to remove its claim of jurisdiction over the North and the British government agreed to leave Ireland for good upon a majority of Northern Irish citizens democratically making that decision. For nationalists, the political battle now, as it has been since 1922, is to persuade the northern Protestants that it is safe for them to make such a decision and in their interests to do so.

In his awkwardly titled but luminous book *Enough religion to make us hate: reflections on religion and politics*,



Victor Griffin, the distinguished ex-Dean of St Patrick's (Church of Ireland) Cathedral, Dublin, makes the case that Irish Protestants made strategic errors, first, in opposing Home Rule ('Home Rule is Rome Rule') and, second, when some form of Irish independence became inevitable, in demanding partition.


**T**HE TITLE OF Griffin's book comes from Jonathon Swift's aphorism, concerning Ireland: 'We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.' Despite this, in Griffin's view:

Irish Protestants, it now seems, would have fared much better in a united Ireland. There, as a significant minority with increased numerical strength and influence and the support of liberal Catholics and others, they would have presented a serious challenge to the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in political affairs, thereby giving a lead to many liberal Roman Catholics and others who were unhappy with the Roman Catholic ethos of the state and who wished for a more pluralist, tolerant and open society. As an integral part, and fully supportive of the state, Irish Protestantism would have received more respect and favourable attention from the Irish people as a whole than at present is enjoyed by the northern Protestants among the people of the United Kingdom, for many of whom, perhaps a majority, they are an enigma and embarrassment. The UK would shed few tears at the departure of Northern Ireland.

Partition—and all that it brought in suffering—was probably inevitable once the link was made between Irishness and Catholicism. De Valera, the Catholic clergy and the Vatican so keenly pursued the goal of a 'Catholic state for a Catholic people' that, in the republic, to be Irish and Catholic were virtually synonymous notwithstanding the long history of nationalism among many Irish Protestants. The reactionary combination of nationalism, Catholicism and Gaelic romanticism was a sharp rejoinder to centuries of Protestant ascendancy. It was, nevertheless, Ireland's misfortune to be liberated not by Irish equivalents of Mandela and Tutu but by violent revolutionaries imbued with primitive, tribal notions of religion and culture, utterly illiberal and authoritarian in outlook.

In 1920, ten per cent of the population of what shortly afterwards became the Irish Free State were Protestant. By 1990, only three per cent of Irish citizens identified themselves as Protestant. A sort of ethnic cleansing had taken place. The Catholic Church, by allying itself so closely with De Valera and the nationalist politicians who sought Home Rule and then full independence from Britain, bears great responsibility for dividing rather than uniting the Irish people. This is remembered in the North.

In different ways, some dramatic, some virtually unnoticed, progress towards unity in Ireland seems to be coming, like it or not. The bank robbery before Christmas has caused the British and Irish governments to stop tolerating IRA criminality and to place pressure on Sinn Fein to disband



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You still believe

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the IRA. Perhaps even more important, has been the overwhelming support among nationalists for the McCartney sisters whose brother, a lifelong republican, was murdered by IRA men in full view of 70 people in a Belfast pub. For the IRA to kill a Protestant is one thing, but for them to sadistically murder one of their own led to a powerful revolt in the nationalist community, leading Gerry Adams to declare, 'I am not letting this issue go until those who have sullied the republican cause are made to account for their action.' Sinn Fein's electoral support has not collapsed, but its credibility within its own community is now under question.

Whether real peace can be brought to Northern Ireland by politicians like Adams and Paisley and parties like Sinn Fein and the DUP is highly dubious. They are forever manoeuvring within the 'peace process', stringing it out to gain an advantage, never wishing to see it end because, as they perceive the world, when it does there will be a winner and a loser. Neither can face the prospect of 'losing', but neither wants to return to the abyss of sectarian conflict, if only because each community has now grown so used to the contingent sort of 'peace' that the current settlement has brought that it would revolt against leaders who reignited a shooting war.

Sinn Fein, at its party conference in February this year, published a discussion paper, grandiosely described by Adams as a 'roadmap', on Irish unification. It said all the right things about 'the unity of the people of Ireland' and 'national reconciliation'. Nestled away on the party's website, however, is its online shop where memorabilia glorifying dead IRA volunteers is advertised. Elsewhere on the website we find banal genuflections to the sainted rebel James Connolly, the party's inspiration. The discussion paper declares that it is the duty of democrats to persuade unionists to join in reunification of Ireland. Does Sinn Fein seriously think it is the party to do that?

**T**HE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT means that the old war between Britain and Ireland is over. At some time in the future, northern Protestants may come to view the south with far greater benignity, but the decades of beleaguered tribalism, bolstered by memories of the Battle of the Somme, IRA atrocities, Catholic triumphalism in the south and English perfidy, will not easily be swept away or whited over.

As Adams and the IRA apparently do not understand, but any outsider can, they are the principal obstacles to peace and, ultimately, the reunification of Ireland. The Protestants are too weak to do anything except retain their own patch, but they are strong enough to defend it, no matter how many guns the IRA holds or self-aggrandising books Gerry Adams publishes. The peace process cannot be driven by men of violence. Sinn Fein and the IRA cannot bring about peace and reconciliation—the preconditions of reunification—much less reunification itself, because no unionist can trust them.

A cold war is probably the best solution Adams, Paisley and their cohorts are capable of. Real peace is likely to come only when a new generation, which has grown up without seeing gunmen as their protectors and heroes, replaces them and, respectfully but decisively, sets aside the long-dead icons of 1916 and 1922—Pearse, Connolly, Carson and Co. (Where else in the democratic world are political leaders still mired in the debates and ideologies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries?) Genuine peacemakers will bring about a paradigm shift, building not on religious difference and antique brands of nationalism but on a common ground of economic development, liberal-democratic values and human rights. Their authenticity will be proven by an insistence that paramilitaries in both communities disband and disarm. ■

**Hugh Dillon** is a Sydney magistrate with ancestral roots in Ulster.

# Rancour in the rank and file

Poor morale among organisers and shop delegates of the Victorian branch of the SDA is said to be seriously impairing the union's capacity to service its members

**F**ROM THE MOMENT Prime Minister John Howard won his fourth election in October last year, with the bonus that the Coalition would gain control of the Senate after July 1 this year, he made his intentions very clear: industrial relations reform would be a high priority. The Workplace Relations Act, which former Employment and Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith ushered through the Senate after lengthy negotiations with the Democrats in 1996, was always just a starting point for the Howard Government. For the Coalition, and its business supporters, a freer labour market is an article of faith.

To say such legislation has made it difficult for unions to operate, even survive, would be an understatement. For example, the 1996 Act made it harder to recruit, especially in non-union workplaces. Changes to the Act now being proposed will make it even harder.

At its core the legislation reflects a fundamentally different mindset about how the workplace operates. For the Howard Government, most employers can be trusted; the Scrooges of the world are few and far between. Employers and individual employees can amicably negotiate mutually beneficial arrangements. Third parties, for which read unions, simply impede the process, not only to the detriment of the employers but often employees.

For unions, employees are best protected in a collective agreement; if their thinking has progressed from the simplistic 'all bosses are bastards' rhetoric of yesterday, they still believe that many employers see employees as a cost, not an asset. Myriad annual reports that describe employees 'as our most valuable resource' is simply sophistry.

In such an industrial environment for unions, it is easy for organised labour to lay all its woes at the doorstep of the Howard Government. Falling union numbers (in the private sector they represent less than one worker in five), faltering wage campaigns in some industry sectors, and failure to prevent management exerting its prerogative over workplace change without negotiating can be too easily attributed to the legislation and employers who have been emboldened by it.

Unions, however, have been far less willing to reflect on their own weaknesses. Industrial and

political cultures that reflect yesteryear remain unchallenged; authoritarianism, factionalism and nepotism still afflict the unions. In the past, when many employers acted as unions' recruiting officers and the closed shop was an accepted norm, it hardly mattered. Today, they are exploited by employers and used by employees as a reason for not joining.

In this vein is the Victorian branch of the Shop, Distributive & Allied Employees Association (SDA). On paper, it is one of the strongest divisions of one of the more powerful and successful unions in the country. It is Victoria's biggest union, with an estimated 54,000 members spread across the main retailers. All-embracing enterprise agreements with large retailers that are relaxed about union involvement mean it has a growing membership.

**P**OLITICALLY, IT IS POWERFUL inside the state Labor Party, where it boasts about eight per cent of delegates to the state conference. One issue where the Victorian branch has been publicly—and successfully—active has been to 'encourage' the Bracks Government to limit trading hours for large retailers (more than 20 employees on a site or 100 across the group) on major public holidays, evidence of the power it wields inside Labor.

But the power of the collective, of a democratic union marching as one, is not the story of the SDA. Instead, it is a union that still 'exists' to largely nurture the ambitions and ideological agendas of its officials, and, in this particular instance, state secretary Michael Donovan. Reflecting its anti-communist past, it is a union that has always stressed unity. Loyalty is paramount. Organised tickets for elected office are the norm. It does not mean the union ignores the wishes of its members; it does mean the union knows best what those wishes are. Power flows down, not up.

Going hand in glove with an authoritarian state of mind is a union where real power predominantly lies in the hands of men although more than 70 per cent of members are female. It reflects, in strong part, the union's strong Catholic roots: men lead, women follow.



Donovan, who became state secretary in 1996, is very much in this tradition.

For much of the past nine years, Donovan's position has been unchallenged. Today, however, that situation is changing. This is not to argue that he is about to lose his position; he remains firmly entrenched. But there are a growing number of critics inside the union who are making life harder for Donovan. (Employers, the Labor Party and other unions are either unconcerned or blithely ignorant of this state of affairs.)

The focus of the attack has centred on two former delegates to state council and branch conference—Kay Marks and Judy Cotter, a vice president of the branch—who are fighting to be reinstated to these two governing bodies. (Branch conference has 40 delegates and meets annually. State council has about 20 delegates and meets every two months.)

**A** DEAL WAS DONE IN FEBRUARY 2002 between Marks and Cotter and Donovan and the federal secretary of the SDA, Joe de Bruyn, for the two delegates to step down from office on 31 May last year. Their resignations were signed in February 2002 but postdated to 31 May 2004.

But Marks and Cotter decided to withdraw their resignations, and in an open letter to fellow councillors and members late last year wrote that they had legal advice saying they are 'entitled to attend and participate in branch conference'. Their letter said: 'To stop an election happening [more than two years ago] Michael did an agreement that meant we would be able to stay on branch conference only for two more years. We did not want to sign this agreement, but felt we had no choice. We had to sign a resignation dated two years into the future.'

'We spoke to a lawyer who said we had the right to withdraw our nomination at any stage up to 31 May 2004. When we received this advice we both wrote to Michael, withdrawing our postdated resignations. When we turned up to state conference we were shocked and humiliated by things that occurred to us. After many years of loyalty (they have been on state council and conference for more than 20 years), we felt we were not shown courtesy or loyalty in return.' Legal action is an option both women are considering.

For his part, Donovan says Marks and Cotter 'resigned earlier this year from their positions on state council and branch conference. Those resignations have been accepted so





state council has appointed people to fill the casual vacancies according to the rules. They attended branch conference [in June] as observers.' He adds that the resignations 'were received here this year and we processed them ... in accordance with the law'.

**M**ARKS AND COTTER WILL NOT comment beyond their written statement. That is left to Mark Clarke, an organiser and training officer before Donovan showed him the door in late 2002, who has become the unofficial spokesman for the anti-Donovan forces inside and outside the union. He says the 'harsh way' Donovan has treated these two loyal servants of the union is symptomatic of the way he runs the union.

'Donovan had his good points. He was hard-working. He was dedicated. But he has become paranoid about his position. Any disagreement with staff, organisers or delegates is seen as directly challenging his authority. Typically these people are forced to resign. If Michael suspects he hasn't got your total loyalty he pushes to the outer.'

Supporting Clarke's contention is an employment contract in which loyalty to Donovan is a condition of the job. It says, in part: 'The unity of the union is very important to ensure that the interests of the union members take priority. Therefore loyalty to the elected secretary of the branch must be maintained at all times.'

Donovan does not see anything wrong in such a loyalty clause. He makes no distinction between expecting loyalty and demanding it. He says: 'Part of the letter of offer makes plain that loyalty to the branch secretary is part of their job. That is something every single union secretary in Australia would expect of their staff. And that's expected of staff here.'

Former and current organisers and staff members say this loyalty clause has nothing to do with protecting members and everything to do with enhancing Donovan's authority. They speak of a culture of fear in the office, of people being afraid to speak their minds. Says one current organiser: 'Staff are scared. When we go out on the job we talk to our members about it and they say, "How can the union treat you like this when its job is to protect employees?" There really is no answer to that.' They also note how Donovan strictly controls divisional meetings, limiting questions to a few 'Dorothy Dixers' from his supporters.

Clarke cites other reasons why there is a growing anger at Donovan inside the union. Some organisers are on individual contracts despite the fact they are anathema to the union movement. Donovan denies they are general policy, saying these contracts are used only to replace people on maternity or long-service leave. 'This is unlike the employers we deal with. They just make their employees work harder,' he says.

Other factors cited by Clarke include shutting down a women's bureau in an organisation where more than 70 per cent of the members are female, and abolishing a counselling service for staff and members. To Donovan's critics, this was an appalling decision. (This position has now been reinvented as an equity officer, an ironical title in a union where women are in the majority and men wield the power.)

The SDA was the first union to have a women's officer, the position being established nearly 30 years ago. One example

of how it helped women members was to run free self-defence courses. Clarke says the courses, which cost the union only \$30,000 a year, were 'very empowering, very popular, especially in regional Victoria'. He adds: 'Violence against women working late hours and domestic violence are issues for the female membership. The program said to members that this is your union working for you. So why stop the program?'

But Clarke's biggest complaint focuses on how poor morale among the organisers and shop delegates is 'seriously impairing' the union's capacity to service its members. 'Take the case of Margaret Muscat, who was a union delegate at the Coles store at Williamstown. The company dropped an allegation of harassment against her after an investigation. But Donovan still removed her as a delegate in the workplace. Members are furious. They want her back, but Donovan will not see them and explain his decision.'

When shop assistants at the store heard this story was being written, several made the effort to ring and confirm Clarke's version of events. Says one: 'Muscat's a tremendous delegate. Even when she's not at work she comes in if there's a problem. We don't understand why the union has got rid of her—and they won't tell us.' The shop assistant begs to remain anonymous. 'It wouldn't be worth my job,' she says plaintively. She is not referring to any management threat. Rather, her fear lies with possible repercussions from the union. Donovan says he will not discuss individual cases.

**K**AYE WILLIAMS, AN OFFICIAL for nearly six years, lost her job late last year after allegedly being seen 'clapping' a delegate who had the temerity to criticise Donovan in a public forum. A pay offer has been refused and she is considering her legal options.

Three years earlier, Natalie Lupton, who Clarke describes as an 'excellent organiser', was dismissed after 16 years of service. The dismissal allegedly resulted from Coles Supermarkets threatening to ban Lupton from their stores, and the loyalty demanded by Donovan was not reciprocated to this long-serving staff member. Her services were terminated. This resulted in the SDA staff taking the extraordinary step of holding a stopwork meeting and calling in an official of the Australian Services Union (ASU) to address staff grievances. The stopwork meeting called on the ASU to negotiate a grievance procedure for SDA staff, a request Donovan has still not agreed to.

It reflects an attitude where attempts by officials or employees to raise issues with Donovan are ignored. Similar approaches to de Bruyn have received expressions of sympathy—but no action. According to Clarke, an office that once prided itself on the stability of its staff now has a high turnover.

An office that should bubble with enthusiasm, ideas and debate is more akin to that of a Dickensian employer. It reflects a leadership more concerned with its own position, especially politically, than a vulnerable rank and file working in one of the lowest-paid industries. To date, employers have not exploited a union that must be vulnerable. Perhaps they are simply waiting until July 1. ■

**Nicholas Way** is a senior writer with *Business Review Weekly*.

# Morning in East Timor

Traces of Rome have become part of the scenery

**D**ILI, SATURDAY 2 APRIL. The phones in the Canossian convent at Balide have been ringing since dawn, but Rome is a faraway place. We dodge the inevitable house dogs and head out to Tasitolu before the implacable sun rises any higher.

It's hazy out on this flat wetland wedged between sea and the guardian hills. Cynics and old hands call Dili a swamp. Here, 8km to the west, on the road to Kupang, the merging of sea and shore has a benign logic. Birds flock here, some flying from as far away as Russia. The tang in the air is salt, not from frying palm oil or open city drains. The hope is that this place of salt lakes and swaying grasses will become a peace park and conservation area.

In 1989, ten years before the independence referendum that bought (dearly) East Timor's freedom, Pope John Paul II came here. Where the morning winds now blow, thousands upon thousands of people once gathered. The Pope said Mass from the traditional house, or Uma, built for the occasion. The palm roof thatch is now home to opportunistic ferns (in East Timor even stones nurture orchids). The pink and white wash on the walls (a breath of Portugal) brushes off on our fingers as we try to decipher the graffiti that now marks the steps leading up to the Pope's balcony. FATIN NE SANTO RESPEITO NIA TEMPAT (This is a holy place, respect it) ... The balcony is modest but elevated. A breath of the Vatican. But from here you can see clear across deserted lakes and plains to the mountains which were the only refuge in 1999, when the pro-Indonesia militias and military went on their murderous rampage. At the Dili tais (weaving) market some days later a young man in camouflage gear sells me a rust-red shawl from Suai and boasts at the same time of being a freedom fighter. 'Fretilin?' I ask. 'Yes'. He points proudly to the badge on

his beret. 'Where did you go in '99?' 'To the mountains', he answers, smiling and pointing to the tropical buttress that rises behind the city. He might be telling me about a weekend picnic—the East Timorese smile is beguiling—but we both know he is not.

At Tasitolu, a plain cross stands hammered into the crumbling cement forecourt of the Pope's open house, its white wood reflecting light like bone or washed coral. In the cool under the house the goats wander. One milks. Others spring nimbly up the steps to the balcony. We are the only creatures here. Four humans and a few dozen bibi—the Tetun seems the gentler language for these delicate deft creatures which have the freedom of the island. At the other end of the bay we see one bearded fellow standing sentinel on a rock just below Cape Fatucama's huge statue of Christo Re. Indonesia's President Suharto unveiled the huge statue in 1988. Pope John Paul blessed it in 1989.

## Baucau, Sunday 3 April

Dogs and roosters sing the foreground song. Nuns lilt in the background. The sky is clear but the dawn sound is watery as dozens of women and girls splash themselves clean. I fill my plastic bucket under the outside tap and extravagant scarlet and yellow *Heliconia rostrata* flowers drop pollen in the water. Deprivation and luxury live side by side here.

Mass is at 6.45am. The Tetun Mass that is. If you want the Portuguese you can stay longer in bed and walk down at nine. 'Hardly anyone goes' we are told. Portuguese is the officially adopted language in East Timor, the language of administration, of law, of education. In schools many of the teachers can't speak Portuguese, let alone teach it. Every conversation we have turns eventually to the language problem. Or avoids it. We learn to interpret the diplomatic evasions and side-turned smiles when we ask questions.



The phones at Baucau have brought the news. At mass the priest (the Bishop is busy) begins his sermon with sentences that are, even to malae (foreigners) like us, recognisably about the death of the Pope. Many of the older women in the church are wearing black mantillas. In the courtyard outside they unfold the lace or tulle from careful creases and cover their heads, their arms, sometimes their whole form with them. The wall behind them is laced with orange-pink bougainvillea and drops hundreds of metres to the sea below.

But it is not the Pope that these women are mourning. In every village between Dili and Baucau we have seen bamboo stakes driven into the side of the road, black or white shreds of material fluttering from them. Black for adults. White for children. There have been many dengue deaths this season we are told.

The priest is a rhetorician and soon warms to his theme. The sermon, all remaining 35 minutes of it, is about new government proposals that would effectively secularise education in schools. As we leave the church an English translation of the policy is pressed into our hands. 'Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport ... a policy in favour of the neediest'. Vatican II language, but it soon blurs into the universal jargon of professional educators: 'millennium developments, rationalizing, equality of opportunity'. The churchyard gossip becomes political, with government and church criticised even-handedly.

We read the policy and discuss it with Baucau locals, with aid workers, with Marist educators. But more memorable are the children we saw near Xanana Gusmão's hometown of Manatuto, walking in the dust to church in sparkling white dresses and shirts. A First Communion? Or just the regular pride of people who have survived and want to thrive? We never find out. But we do see the blackened stumps of houses that line the road out of Manatuto. Even the vines and trees that now grow through their dirt floors and gaping window do not rescue them for humanity. Yet.



### Dili, Friday 8 April

The morning *Journal Nacional* gives its front page over to last night's 'Misa ba Amo Papa iha Catedral'. Dr Mari Alkatiri, one-time Fretilin leader and a Muslim, sits in the front row. From Balide we can hear the singing well into evening. By morning the city is focused on the visit of Indonesian president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Boys in a ramshackle ute stake out the presidential route with cruciform bamboo flagpoles. The Indonesian president stays in the hills at the home of East Timorese president, Xanana Gusmão. A few people kneel at a shrine near the harbour and pray. For the Pope. For East Timor. For all of us? ■

East Timor's future in Sunday best, Manatuto (top), and ready for school in Ossu (above). The Pope's Uma, Tasitolu (above left), with friendly locals.

**Morag Fraser** was in East Timor with a Brigidine group investigating established links between East Timorese and Australian schools.

Photographs by Mary Stack.

# dream lives on

Spain is celebrating the 400th anniversary of its most famous novel, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*

*In a village in La Mancha whose name I cannot recall, there lived long ago a country gentleman ...*

This year, some 400 years after the first part of *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* was first published in 1605, Cervantes' picaresque tale is once again enjoying a revival, thanks in part to the 400th anniversary celebrations taking place in Spain.

Seemingly every bookshop across Spain is in danger of being overwhelmed by new editions of the work. Tourism in Castilla La Mancha—Spain's central plateau and the home of *Don Quixote*—is booming, with visitors seeking windmills at which to tilt. And the appearance on Spanish television of the fantasy lifestyles of Spanish celebrities is frequently interspersed with more contemplative readings of *Don Quixote*, the ultimate and most lovable fantasist of all.

The secret to *Don Quixote's* enduring appeal—it is at once popular with a mass readership yet has endured through the centuries as a seminal work in the canon of world literature—lies in Cervantes' rare gift of blending in one character so many brilliant and earthy eccentricities with equally plentiful and elegant pearls of wisdom.

At times the story's hero lectures his faithful sidekick, Sancho Panza, with words of universal application:

Do not let your own feelings blind you to other opinions, because most of the mistakes you make will not be reversible and even if they are, it will be at the cost of your reputation or of your purse.

Or, he is waxing lyrical on themes that are as unrespected now as they were in Cervantes' time:

Freedom, Sancho, is one of the most precious gifts that heaven bestowed on mankind; all the treasures bound within the earth nor covered by the sea can equal it; for liberty, as for honour, you can, and you should risk your life.

And yet, as if almost in the same breath, when Sancho becomes convinced that he is the ruler of a non-existent island, Don Quixote offers the following advice as to the central pillars of his rule: 'Clip your fingernails, avoid onions and garlic and walk slowly'.

In *Don Quixote* country, windmills of Campo de la Criptana, Castilla La Mancha, Spain. Anthony Ham

**T**HUS BEGINS *Don Quixote*, arguably the greatest single work of literature in human history. No book—with the exception of the Bible—is more widely read or often translated than the masterpiece of Miguel de Cervantes. In 2002, the book which is widely acclaimed as the world's first modern novel was voted the greatest work of fiction of all time in a poll by the Norwegian Nobel Institute. The judges included 100 eminent writers from 54 countries, among them Salman Rushdie, Norman Mailer, Milan Kundera, Carlos Fuentes and Nadine Gordimer. *Don Quixote* polled 50 per cent more votes than any other book, including the works of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Cervantes' contemporary, Shakespeare.

No less an authority than Vladimir Nabokov summed up the legacy of the errant knight in the following terms, 'He looms so wonderfully above the skyline of literature, a gaunt giant on a lean nag, that the book lives and will live through his sheer vitality ... He stands for everything'.

William Faulkner undertook the monumental task of rereading the novel every year. The former Spanish prime minister Felipe Gonzalez is said to read a little of it every day. It acted as the muse for painters as diverse as Goya, Picasso and Dali.

This combination of wisdom and absurdity is indeed central to Don Quixote's charm. At the same time, it is in the storytelling, with all the power of the Arabian Nights, that Cervantes' unequalled mastery of language truly resides.

Inspiration for the disastrous escapades which befall Don Quixote undoubtedly came from Cervantes' own life—the writer was wanted for the murder of a royal architect, lost a left hand in battle in Italy, was imprisoned by corsairs in Algeria for five years, joined the Spanish Armada, ended up again in prison, this time in Spain, and died in poverty in 1616 (the year after he completed his masterpiece).

His creation, Don Quixote, begins life as the very ordinary Alonso Quijano. He is a true man of La Mancha, that unending and desolate plateau in central Spain with its rolling hills, scorching summers and bitterly cold winters spent in isolation. His journey commences in a village without name, although ten Spanish academics recently completed a two-year quest to follow the clues left by Cervantes and identified the knight's starting point as the village of Villanueva de los Infantes, now home to 5839 inhabitants and a pretty town square, 225km south of Madrid.

Obsessed by tall tales of chivalry, Señor Quijano announces that he shall thereafter be considered a knight with the title of Don Quixote, whereupon he begins his quest to right wrongs and rescue the oppressed from distress.

Among Cervantes' many achievements is his extraordinary evocation of the landscape through which his knight travels. With extraordinary skill and authenticity, Cervantes brings alive the mundane signposts of 16th-century Spain, landmarks taking shape as characters in an irresistible marriage of travelling and storytelling, making *Don Quixote* perhaps the first work of magical realism.

**W**INDMILLS, WHICH STILL STAND sentinel above the plains of La Mancha, become 'monstrous giants' against whom battles must be fought in the name of honour. Roadside inns for weary travellers take on the character of enchanted castles. Flocks of sheep transmute into armies. Even the humble horse trough is mistaken by the lovable Don Quixote for a baptismal font.

The evocative and unrivalled brilliance of Cervantes' pen in painting a vivid visual image, in transforming a real landscape into a canvas for utterly believable flights of fancy, is highlighted by the numerous failures—from Orson Welles to Monty Python's Terry Gilliam—to faithfully recapture on film the genius humanity of Don Quixote and the territory which he traverses.

That Cervantes' rendering of La Mancha was recognisable to the people who have inhabited the land since he described it is evident in the fact that, until recently, almost every inn across central Spain possessed a leather-bound copy of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. At night, as travellers from all social strata gathered around a meal of manchego cheese, wine and the shepherd's staple of breadcrumbs with grapes, those few who could read found the book pressed into their hands, urged to read to an eager audience, to offer entertainment to pass the long La Mancha nights.

But that it should be an ordinary person like ourselves—he bickers with Sancho as would an old married couple, dreams into existence Dulcinea to whom he swears undying love and

fidelity, and travels on the faithful if faltering and bony old nag Rocinante—who is capable of such adventure, such escapism, such impossible dreams is what has ultimately made us love the deluded knight for so long.

Indeed, the Spanish writer Cesar Antonio Molina claims that '*Quixote* is like our Bible, a secular bible. And like the Bible it tells us a lot, how to behave, how to dream, how to love, how to be just. More than a book of adventures it is a book of wisdom. It shows us all our human defects in its mirror. And it is written by a loser, about a loser, yet both of them illustrious.'

Illan Stavans, Professor of Latin America and Latino Culture at Amherst College in Massachusetts and renowned Cervantes expert, similarly argues that the reason for the knight's timeless resonance lies in the fact that he 'moves across history, presenting different masks, and being appreciated—sometimes as a madman, sometimes as an idealist. He really transcends the circumstances into which he was born, or created'. More mischievously, he wonders if we love Don Quixote simply because we 'adore the fact that the most enduring of literary characters is a madman'.

Added to these qualities to which we are drawn is Don Quixote's innate goodness, a characteristic highlighted by Jan Morris, who says:

I accept his madness, but I believe it to be the madness of a Holy Fool. I am grateful for the delightful examples he gives us of fancy's truth and reality's delusions. And most of all I love his kindness—Don Quixote was never mean, never ungenerous, and suffered fools gladly.

Thus it is that this seemingly simple man, armed with nothing more than a trusty lance and an ancient shield, has, in the totality of his contradictions, come to represent a caricature of all who believe in miracles and dream of the impossible. He offers in equal measure hope and despair for those who would fight injustice but who find the path to a better world confusing, as it is beset by obstacles of the mind. He tilts at those who proudly possess pretensions to grandeur and at once mocks and celebrates the idealists among us. Don Quixote is a monument to absurdity, a hymn to the inspiration and futility of the romantic anti-hero.

Indeed, Don Quixote is humankind contained within a single character. Paul Donnelly, lecturer in Hispanic Studies at Glasgow University, agrees: 'Cervantes is the person who has in my view the most complete and sympathetic understanding of human nature.'

That it is the most widely read work of fiction in history does not mean that it is an easy book to read. Martin Amis once dismissed it as unreadable. Juan Victorio, Professor of Medieval Literature at Spain's National Open University, says that 'everyone has it on their bookshelves but not even a minority get through it'. At more than 1000 pages, it is indeed a daunting undertaking.

But as Spain celebrates 400 years of *Don Quixote*, the best piece of advice comes, somewhat improbably, from a politician. Spain's Minister of Culture, Carmen Calvo, recently launched the celebrations with the words: 'The most important tribute you can pay the book is to read it.' ■

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# The power of the word

Ulm Minster is a testament to the eternal longing humans have always had for understanding.

**T**HE INHABITANTS OF ULM an der Donau, Ulm on the Danube, the charming German city that straddles the border of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, have always been very proud of their minster, which was 500 years in the building: by 1890 they could boast that the minster's spire was the highest in the world. It so happens that there are steps inside that spire, and I have climbed all 768 of them. Twice.

In 1980 I thought the whole business was simply a testing climb; nearly 25 years later I soon began to wonder what happens to people who collapse during the ascent. While panting up the wind-tossed tower, I realised that I did not know the German word for *help*, and wondered whether a cry of *au secours* might do. But a minute later, such considerations became purely academic, because by then I could not have got a phrase or word in any language out: speech was a secondary consideration. While gargoyles leered from various levels and the town unrolled below me, all I knew was the rhythmic thumping of my heart.

Somehow I made it to the top, and then not unnaturally wondered how I was going to get down again. While resting and gazing at the view, and doubtless suffering simultaneously from altitude sickness and oxygen deprivation, I found myself pondering the complicated matter of language, for it is not difficult to see the building itself in terms of the speech of symbolism and architecture. It seems reasonable enough to assume that when the foundations of the minster were laid in 1377, ordinary people translated, almost unconsciously, the words and symbols *church* and *spire* into the phrase *desire for Heaven*. With the eternal longing that humans have always had for understanding, these people of the 14th century tried to make sense of this world by concentrating on the concept of another, using the language of architecture to the greater glory of God.

My ignorance of German did not stop me from going on to think about this city's more literal associations with languages of many sorts. Breathing deeply and peering out through intricate stonework, I told myself that I just might be viewing the distant scene of the Austrian Army's 1805 defeat by Corsican/French Napoleon. The luckless Austrian general forced to surrender eventually found a place in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as 'the unfortunate General Mack', whose unexpected arrival with the disastrous news startled, depressed, but also ambiguously thrilled officer Prince Andrei.

At this point my thoughts were meandering, much like the Danube below me, and I remembered that at the age of 16 I had begun to develop a more than sneaking feeling that mathematics and physics were harder languages even than Russian. But still, decades later, I was impressed to learn that Ulm is the birthplace of the genius Einstein, who is commemorated in a cheeky gargoyle, stone tongue poking out, in the minster.

As a child, Einstein was thought by some to be mentally retarded. In fact he was dyslexic, did not start speaking until he was three, and struggled with language right through primary school. His original doctoral dissertation was initially rejected by the University of Zurich because it was too short, but was passed after he added a vague and apparently rather waffly sentence.

It is now a hundred years since Einstein had his 'miracle year', during which he published three astounding papers, and so radically changed the world's view of post-Newtonian physics. And all this on his own time. Thus, 2005 has given rise to a spate of writing about the man, his work and his life. Even though I know I am not alone, I am ashamed to admit that the famous equation  $E=mc^2$  baffled me for years; now, however, I know that Einstein maintained it simply answered the question he had asked himself when he was 16: *What would it be like to sit on a beam of light?* And the theory of relativity can, I have also recently learned, be richly but not gaudily summarised in under ten words: *Action at a distance happens in time*.

In addition to all this, *Granta* author and editor Graham Farmelo has pointed out to mentally lopsided people like me that an equation can be easily compared to a sonnet. And here's



another beam of light: Shakespeare's sonnets are beautiful in only one language, but Einstein's equation is beautiful in all of them. (Ah, but it has to be added that there are different sorts of beauty, and that the consequences of the application of sonnet and equation are surely in stark contrast.)

Like most geniuses, Einstein could be difficult, but he famously had God always in mind; he was also a pacifist and an internationalist who worked constantly to help Jews escaping from the Nazis and from the Soviets. Some 50 years after Einstein's non-observant Jewish parents produced him, Hans and Sophie Scholl were born, although not in Ulm. Their parents moved there not long after, however, so that Hans, Sophie, and their three siblings grew up in an apartment on the minster square. I might not have been sure about the scene of

General Mack's defeat, but there was no doubt about my view of the square.

**T**HE SCHOLL FAMILY WAS NOT Jewish, but devoutly Christian in the best sense of the word, in that the parents actively encouraged faith, intellectual freedom, a love of discussion, and a sense of responsibility towards others. The Scholls were also patriotic Germans, and for a brief period both Hans and Sophie were involved in Hitler youth movements. Once having learned about Hitler's views on the subjects of eugenics, euthanasia, and what turned out to be the Final Solution, however, they became committed to drastic resistance action. The whole family read 'forbidden' books as a matter of policy, and Hans and Sophie, undergraduates at the University of Munich, were foundation members of a small non-violent resistance group known as the White Rose. The choice of the name, which still has great symbolic value, remains obscure, but the rose is generally thought to be a symbol of secrecy, and a white one can stand for innocence.

The members of the White Rose fought the Hitler regime with words. They typed their flyers, mimeographed and then distributed them; they painted slogans and graffiti on prominent walls. But on a fateful day in 1943, Hans and Sophie tipped a whole load of pamphlets from a tall building; later, commentators remarked on the similarity between the drift of paper and the petals of a white rose. Events then proceeded inexorably: the caretaker of the building informed the authorities, Hans and Sophie were speedily tried by the Nazi People's Court, and summarily sentenced to death by guillotine.

Brother and sister met their deaths with outstanding courage. And with words. Sophie shouted defiantly at the judge as she and Hans were taken away. Her mother had already said to her: *You know, Sophie, Jesus.* And Sophie had nodded in agreement. Claudio Magris, author of that mighty work *Danube*, writes that the siblings *knew that life is not the supreme value ... They went serenely to their deaths, without a tremor...*

Magris is not as kind to Field Marshal Rommel, despite believing him to have been a man of unassailable integrity. The Desert Fox had been badly wounded on July 17, 1944. Three days later, Hitler narrowly escaped a botched assassination attempt, and Rommel was alleged to have been involved in this plot, although such involvement has never been proved.

From the time Rommel began his convalescence in Germany, the Gestapo had the family home under constant surveillance. Then, on 14 October, two generals arrived and spoke to Rommel, accusing him of being a conspirator against Hitler. They gave him the choice, and the phial of poison: he could commit suicide or agree to stand trial for treason. He chose the former, having spoken to his wife, whom he loved greatly, and having shaken his 15-year-old son Manfred by the hand. With quite staggering verbal economy, he said, *I will be dead in twenty minutes.* And he was.

Four days later, a state funeral took place in Ulm, during which a huge crowd paid their respects to the late Field Marshal in the belief that he had died as a result of his wounds. The hero image was carefully fostered: the doctors knew that Rommel had taken poison, but put it about that he had died from a stroke, while Hitler, dishonest showman and evil hypocrite to the last, sent a wreath. Magris is unforgiving, asserting that the funeral was a sham, and that the tragedy of a man of honour had been stage-managed to become a lie.

Magris, great scholar and critic that he is, concentrates on ethics and semantics. It seems to me that Rommel concentrated on his family, and also understood that the power of the word would be used against him in a rigged trial. The 'lie' enabled Rommel's adolescent son to keep on believing that his father was the hero and patriot that he surely was, entitled Rommel's wife to a pension and her pride in her husband, and also saved three people and the German public from the degrading spectacle of court proceedings, which, like those of Hans and Sophie Scholl, could have had only one ending. Magris does concede that Rommel could never be accused of lacking physical courage and so did not fear execution.

Fast forward to George Orwell and Big Brother and double-speak. And still faster forward, factoring in *spin* along the way, to the invasion of Iraq, the whole dubious matter of reporting on WMD, and the atrocious treatment of British expert Dr Kelly. Another suicide as a result of unbearable pressure, 60 years later, and not a very great distance from Ulm minster. This death, however, was followed by a so-called inquiry: millions of words, and for what?

I retrieved my breath somehow and made a slow but safe descent to the interior of the minster. Perhaps some things are seen and understood more clearly from a great height.

Months later, quite by chance, I happen to read a snippet in the English papers. Iraq again. It seems that the word *suicide* is not acceptable to people such as Donald Rumsfeld, particularly not when the actual rate of this kind of death is rising among 'unlawful enemy combatants'. Such a trend causes questions to be asked by troublesome bodies like the misnamed United Nations. Words again. Just call *suicide* 'manipulative self-injurious behaviour', and see how attitudes and statistics change.

The slipperiness of language; the ambiguous power of the word. Buildings are safer. ■

**Gillian Bouras** is a freelance writer whose books are published by Penguin Australia.

Shakespeare's sonnets  
are beautiful in only  
one language, but  
Einstein's equation is  
beautiful in all of them

# Torn between art and activism

Judith Wright was not just a much greater writer than most of the artist-activists who had preceded her, but also a much greater activist

**'A**RT' AND 'ACTIVISM' ARE NOW OFTEN paired together. The *Two Fires Festival* in the New South Wales country town of Braidwood in March celebrated their connections. Its focus was the late Judith Wright, one of Australia's great artist-activists. But for all her pursuit of environmental and Aboriginal causes and belief in the importance of political engagement, Wright did not think of herself as an activist for most of her life. It was neither part of her vocabulary nor used as a term for her.

The reasons are historical. When 'activism' emerged as a term in the early 1900s, it was used either to identify a brand of philosophy—a theory which assumed the objective reality and active existence of everything—or to describe any form of energetic action. It was only later, perhaps after World War II, perhaps only in the 1960s, that it became a term for a form of political activity, almost always on the left, dissenting, the stuff of a fervent minority, starting, it seems, with union activists and anti-war activists, and followed only later by environmental activists, Aboriginal activists and even judicial activists.

*The Coral Battleground*, Wright's book about the campaign to stop mining of the Great Barrier Reef which occupied her from the mid-1960s until the early 1970s, fits this trajectory. She records how the advocates of protection of the reef began by being dismissed as 'cranks' who were 'anti-progressive'. Before long they were known as 'vocal' and 'obdurate protectionists', a label they wore with pride. Soon they were known as 'conservationists'. 'Activist' was not used at all.

Wright's one major use of it was in *The Writer as Activist*, a lecture delivered at the University of Western Australia in 1988. While she discussed many writers in that lecture, her prime subject was the early colonial poet Charles Harpur, whom she celebrated because of his political writing. She lauded Harpur for wanting to inspire colonial New South Wales 'on its course towards democratic freedom', his advocacy of universal suffrage, social justice and equal rights to education and opportunity.

That lecture raises the question of whether the creation of art—whether poetry or prose, painting or photography—can be enough to make someone an activist. Is it sufficient to write with political intent, with persistence and passion, even with the intention of challenging attitudes and changing actions? I think that activism requires more direct social and political engagement—which made Wright an activist where Harpur was not.

She had some natural advantages. If she was 'born of the conquerors', as she first put it in the early 1970s, she was also bred to be a conservationist. Her father Phillip was a life member of Australia's first Wildlife Preservation Society, and

was primarily responsible for the creation of New England National Park in 1931. He was also at the forefront of combating soil erosion—experimenting with a range of measures to stop erosion gullies destroying his property Wallamumbi outside Armidale in northern New South Wales.

Nature itself contributed to her activism—above all, the phenomenon we now know as El Niño, which was unusually intense in the early 1940s. When Wright returned to Wallamumbi from Sydney early in 1942, New England was drought-stricken. A year later, when she again went south, 'fire and erosion were more obvious than ever', heightening Wright's 'conscience over the treatment of the land'. Late in 1944, she was in Brisbane when it was struck by one of Australia's worst series of dust storms.

Little wonder that, when Wright began writing seriously in 1942, dust became one of her key symbols and erosion one of her recurrent subjects. Little wonder, too, that, 20 years later, she played a key role in establishing the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland and then served as its president. By 1970 she was one of Australia's foremost environmental campaigners. With good reason, *The Australian* identified her as the person who had 'done more to arouse conservation anger in Australia than any other'.

**H**ER PURSUIT OF ART AND activism—the landscape a source of inspiration for her art, environmental protection the focus of her activism—was far from new in Australia. The writer and artist Louisa Anne Meredith, who arrived from England in 1839, has strong claims to being Australia's first environmental activist. In addition to writing about an array of environmental issues with passion and persistence, Meredith also secured new environmental laws through her husband Charles, a member of the Tasmanian parliament, and established Tasmania's first society for the protection of animals.

Wright may well have been a great campaigner without her status as 'the greatest [then] living poet of the Australian landscape', 'Australia's greatest woman poet', and even 'the greatest woman poet since Sappho', but her literary identity helped. As she observed in *The Coral Battleground*, she had 'curiosity value', 'the special advantage of being a kind of ... showpiece in the conservation movement'. 'News' had 'to be made, and it was easier to make it with some figure well known beyond the environmental movement itself'.

Yet Wright's activism posed particular problems for her because she was not just a much greater writer than most of the artist-activists who had preceded her, but also a much greater activist. She, more than anyone before in Australia,



perhaps more than anyone since, was torn between the two. While she wanted to do both, she often found she could not. Day after day, week by week, year after year, she had to decide which would take precedence. Was it possible for her to campaign in the morning and write at night? Should she put her poetry before her politics? Should she abandon poetry for politics?

The possibility was there in 1970 when there was a by-election for the Queensland state seat of Albert, traditionally a safe Country Party seat. Just a few months earlier, Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen had dismissed protection of the Great Barrier Reef as an election issue. Albert offered the chance to prove him wrong because it included the Gold Coast, where there was a very active branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society. But when Wright's fellow conservationists pressed her to stand, she declined, at least partly 'out of respect for her true vocation'.

Even so, Wright had almost no time for poetry as an activist. 'I was quite unable to do much of my own work,' she wrote of 1969 in *The Coral Battleground*. Through 1970 she was, by her own account, 'a full-time conservationist'. In mid-1971 Brisbane's *Sunday Mail* reported that she had not written a poem for months. A year later she finally had a new collection in manuscript but poems were still only occasionally 'squeezed' out of her. The reason was that, unlike many other writers and artists, she was not just an intermittent activist who confined her political engagement to occasional high-profile performances, a figurehead for causes she supported. Instead, she bore the grind of daily campaigning.

**W**RIGHT HERSELF BEGAN DWELLING on these costs late in 1970. 'I am a writer and all I want to do is write,' she declared. 'You can't write a poem on the run.' In one interview after another, she emphasised her desire to abandon activism. 'I will be thankful when the end of my conservation work is in sight,' she said. 'I'll be grateful when I'm no longer a conservationist.' It was 'no fun,' she wrote, being 'an office-bearer in a small, voluntary, spare-time organisation' which had no money to employ a secretary, let alone rent an adequate office. 'No Christmas holidays for us!' she exclaimed, overwhelmed by how 'every night meant work'.

Wright, however, also believed that these were 'crunch' years when political engagement was imperative. To begin with, she did not want to quit until the Great Barrier Reef was safe from drilling for oil. Before long, new environmental threats were also occupying her. In 1972 she declared that stopping the Concorde—because of its impact on the ozone layer—would be her 'last effort'. A year later, as old-growth woodchipping emerged as a major issue, she became national



Judith Wright in 1998. Photo: Dean McNicoll, courtesy *The Canberra Times*

president of the Campaign to Save Native Forests.

Many of Wright's friends believed that she was wasting herself. Australia's finest literary critic, Dorothy Green, wrote to her in 1970 that she hated to read of Wright 'vanishing under the wild waves of conservation'. A few years later, Wright's literary agent, Alex Shepherd, implored her not to become a member of the Hope Inquiry into the National Estate established by the Whitlam government. 'There are plenty of good horses, Clydesdales even, to do that,' he declared. 'It isn't a job for a thoroughbred.' Patrick White added that there were 'enough Clydesdales, they just have to be prodded into work'.

Wright responded by advising White, who shared many of her environmental concerns, that he should remain a novelist instead of becoming, as she was, 'too harassed and driven by the battle to concentrate on writing'. When they both spoke at one rally, she warned White, 'Once you put your foot on the flypaper you'll never shake it off.' Meanwhile Wright joined

the Hope Inquiry and edited its report, which immediately resulted in new federal legislation creating the Australian Heritage Commission. She only curtailed her activism after turning 60 in 1975. Her birthday resolution was, as usual, to find more time for writing and gardening, but finally she acted, as part of quitting Queensland for Braidwood in New South Wales.

**T**HIS NEW LIFE DID NOT HELP Wright's poetry. *Fourth Quarter*, published in 1977, was one of her weakest collections. When the poet Robert Gray reviewed it for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, he recognised that her political poems had 'a flat, complaining, nagging tone', and suggested that she might have done better had she written 'full-blooded "crude" broadsides'. A year later, the Queensland academic Peter Abotomey declared that Wright, the conservationist, had become 'destructive' of Wright, the poet, bringing her 'to a standstill'.

Wright, however, was still a major writer. *The Coral Battleground*—first published in 1977 and reprinted in 1997—is the best extended account of an Australian environmental campaign. *The Cry for the Dead*, her family history, is a great book. Written in lean prose without any histrionics, it is one of the most compelling accounts of the destructiveness of the pastoral frontier.

Wright dwelt on the significance of this writing at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature in 1985, around the time she abandoned poetry altogether. Wright maintained that prose—including her own devoted to environmental and Aboriginal

issues—was ‘as important ... as poetry, and indeed indispensable to the writing of poetry itself’. It was time, she suggested, to adopt ‘a wider and less primly exclusivist approach to the study of Australian writing’.

Wright’s academic audience was deaf to this argument. Too many of them had based their own careers on the established hierarchy in which political writing was suspect—lucky to occupy even a bottom rung on the literary ladder, excluded from school and university syllabuses, ignored in literary journals and histories. While the usual practice of the association was to publish the opening address at its conferences, it failed to print Wright’s paper.

*The Writer as Activist*—her 1988 lecture in Perth—was one of the many occasions when Wright returned to this argument, as she deplored how ‘partisan and activist art’ had no place in the literary canon. She reminded her audience that Charles Harpur had written that his poetry had ‘never been a mere art with me, but always the vehicle of earnest purpose, the audible expression of the inmost impulses of my moral being’. Harpur reinforced her argument that writing ‘was a seamless whole, not to be divided into separate strands, the one allowed to be true art’, leaving the activist ‘other to be disregarded’.

Before long, Wright was arguing that activism was at least as significant as art, however one defined it. When *The Sydney Morning Herald’s* Richard Glover interviewed her in the early 1990s, he asked again why she had not stuck to poetry. ‘There are so few great poets and so many activists,’ he ventured. ‘But there aren’t,’ she instructed him. ‘I get poetry flooding my desk every day, most of it no good, but a really good activist ...’ Just a week before she died in 2000, Wright was even more extravagant in her deprecation of poetry, if not her applause for activism. Having just taken part in Canberra’s Walk for Reconciliation, she declared: ‘Anyone can write poetry, but to be an activist is far more important.’ ■

**Tim Bonyhady** is director of the Australian Centre for Environmental Law at the Australian National University. His books include the prize-winning *The Colonial Earth*.

## Just neighbours

**O**N THE DAY Timor-Leste became a sovereign nation, the new government signed a deal with Australia. The 2002 Timor Sea Treaty resembled the earlier Indonesia-Australia treaty in place since 1989, with one fundamental difference.

Whereas the earlier arrangement ignored Timorese interests, under the new agreement 90 per cent of the earnings from the Joint Petroleum Development Area (JPDA) went to Timor-Leste, with the remaining ten per cent going to Australia.

‘It will give East Timor an opportunity to build itself into a truly successful nation,’ Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said at the time. While some international law commentators lauded the deal as a good compromise, others are more circumspect.

Geoffrey McKee, a chemical engineer with more than three decades of experience in the Australian oil and gas industry, is one of them. The treaty will deprive the Timorese of a ‘swathe of important benefits’ especially down-stream infrastructure development, he says.

The Timor Sea’s real prize was not the joint development area, otherwise known as Timor Gap, but oil and gas fields on its fringes: especially, the Greater Sunrise. In August 2002, a Shell spokesman told the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties that the Greater Sunrise expected to return \$30 billion in export revenues, with approximately \$8 billion in taxes for the two countries.

McKee says it could earn much more. ‘At that time the expected earnings were based on US\$20 a barrel for crude, now it’s around US\$50,’ he says. ‘The \$3 billion offered to East Timor by Australia is far too low, if it is intended to settle a dispute over a gas field that could yield about \$90 billion in export revenues.’

More on the \$3 billion payment later, but let’s return to our starting point. One of the mysteries, among many, is why Timor-Leste signed the treaty with Australia three years ago. McKee suggests Timor-Leste was badly served by

inexperienced negotiators. The country also needed an income.

A Commonwealth parliamentary library research note puts it this way: ‘Australia had refused to agree to a new seabed boundary, and new talks on a final agreement might have brought both immediate and future investment in exploration and production to a halt.’

At stake for the Timorese was \$8 billion over two decades. ‘With the East Timor government having no other major source of revenue (except foreign aid),’ the note continues, ‘it was in no position to stand on a point of principle.’

Move forward to March 2005: officials from Timor-Leste and Australia meet to resolve what has become a bitter fight over access to resources in the Timor Sea. How did it come to this after the diplomatic backslapping three years ago? The answer depends on whom you talk to.

Pro-Timor-Leste advocates allege that Canberra’s aggressive negotiating position is denying the region’s poorest nation the right to determine its economic future, while the Commonwealth says it refuses to budge on what it claims is rightfully Australia’s.

Two things that are clear through the conflict is the uncertain place of international law in an era of growing bilateralism, alongside the need for greater transparency in Australian foreign policy.

Coming only a few months after accusations of stand-over tactics by Canberra, the talks in March were quickly deemed a success—by the host nation. ‘I’ll only say this,’ said Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. ‘I think we’ve made progress.’

A framework for an agreement had been ‘nuttled out’, he said. This ‘creative solution’ would delay boundary negotiations, in favour of revenue sharing. If Timor-Leste dropped its claim to a median line between the two nations it could reportedly receive \$3 billion over three decades.

In February a senior Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) official said the nature of the ‘sovereignty offset’

was unclear, as was whether the payments would be in the form of aid. 'How it is characterised, how it is paid and how much it is will need to be worked out in our negotiations,' the official said. DFAT says the 'creative solution' offers fiscal certainty, without jeopardising either country's future legal claims.

A similar clause was included in the 1989 Indonesia-Australia Timor Gap that allowed the two sides to set aside the issue of the maritime boundary, while the exploitation of resources went ahead. This was carried over into the 2002 treaty signed between Australia and Timor-Leste.

But what does this mean? The DFAT briefing includes this explanation, 'Our position is that [determining] the permanent boundaries should be put off for quite some time. At least until the resources have been exploited.'

**T**OM CLARKE, of the Timor Sea Justice Campaign, argues that this is already happening. The Laminaria/Corallina oil fields are claimed by both nations, but Australia exploits about 150,000 barrels daily from this area.

'Every day that goes by, the Australian government takes an average US\$1 million contested royalties,' says Clarke. '[These] gas fields will be depleted in the next few years, before any boundaries are set.'

In late March, Timor-Leste formally protested against Canberra's issuing licences over areas that it claims as its own. 'International law requires that Australia exercise restraint in disputed maritime areas,' said Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. If only it were that easy. There is little convergence in terms of how the law should be applied. Australia claims sole seabed jurisdiction in areas outside the JPDA because of a treaty signed with Indonesia more than three decades ago.

And yet notes for new exploration contracts for areas outside the jointly operated zone suggest that Canberra acknowledges that these areas are contested. 'East Timor has declared an exclusive economic zone and continental shelf extending 200 nautical miles from its baselines which include this release area.'

The note continues, with the justification, 'Australia has exercised exclusive sovereign rights over this area for an extended period of time, and has notified East Timor that it will continue to do so.'

Gillian Triggs, of the University of Melbourne's Institute for Comparative and International Law, endorses Australia's position. 'The fact is that the co-ordinates were impeccably and fairly drawn out 32 years ago,' she said in a January article. 'So unless Australia also believes there is a dispute, there is really no dispute about those lines.'

(More recently, Professor Triggs wrote in an email that her central point is that 'both states have arguable legal positions at international law and that joint management of the resources is a sensible way to unlock the oil to the mutual benefit of East Timor and Australia'.)

These co-ordinates followed international law that determined Australia's maritime boundary in terms of its continental shelf. From the early 1950s, Australia has argued that its maritime boundary follows its shelf that reached as far as the Timor Trough (at times only 9.3 nautical miles from Timor-Leste's coast). East Timor's former colonial power, Portugal, meanwhile, called for the establishment of a median line. Indonesia tried the same in the 1970s, with no success.

Some ask whether referring to a continental shelf argument is a meaningful way to determine maritime boundaries. Charles Scheiner, a chemical engineer from the United States who has worked to support Timor-Leste's political and human rights since 1991, dismisses the idea. 'East Timor is on Australia's continental shelf,' he says. 'If you look at geological history going back tens of millions of years, Timor has always been part of Australia's continental shelf. It doesn't make any sense.'

Geoffrey McKee, meanwhile, says it depends whether you are talking law or geology. In terms of international law, Australia's continental shelf could end where Australia says it does; but in a geological sense, the issue is open for debate. Citing the research of Dr Tim Charleton, an expert on tectonics of the Timor Trough, McKee says that Australia's continental shelf extends beneath Timor-Leste.

Dr Clive Schofield spent 11 years at the University of Durham's International Boundaries Research Institute in the UK, but has recently taken up a post at the University of Wollongong's Centre for Maritime Policy. Recent developments in international law, he says, have in any case largely relegated the continental shelf argument to the past.

Since the 1982 signing of the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) came into effect, around 80 per cent of all disputes have enacted the principle of equidistance where the two countries were separated by less than 400km, he says. More pointedly the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) judgment in 1985 in a dispute between Libya and Malta found that geophysical factors were 'completely immaterial' when deciding maritime borders.

For Jeff Smith, a Vancouver-based oceanographer and expert on international maritime law, the situation is simple: 'The existing maritime boundaries are not binding on East Timor.' None of the previous treaties signed by Indonesia and Australia apply to Timor-Leste, he says, and the nation has the right to negotiate its own boundaries as it sees fit. 'It's simply a matter of international treaty law,' he says. 'Two parties contracting in a treaty situation cannot bind without the consent—generally expressed that is positively declared at the time of the making of an agreement—of the third party state.'

The third party at the time of the 1989 Timor Gap Treaty, where Australia's foreign minister, Gareth Evans, famously clinked champagne glasses with his Indonesian counterpart, Ali Alatas, in an airplane above Timor Gap, was the occupied state of East Timor.

'It's no more than the common law principle,' Smith adds. 'If I agree to buy a car from you, the sale is not binding on third parties.' Thus any treaty Australia-Indonesia treaty does not affect Timor-Leste. 'It's a contract—albeit in treaty terms—made in the absence of a third party.'

**W**HERE THAT LEAVES Timor-Leste in 2005 is unclear. Two months before Timor-Leste's independence, Australia withdrew from the International Court of Justice's jurisdiction on maritime issues and the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea—the two main arbitration bodies for resolving such issues, which leaves the country few options.

Timor-Leste's chief negotiator, Jose Texeira, made no comment after the talks in March. Yet the country's foreign minister, Dr Jose Ramos Horta, has previously shown interest in the so-called creative solution. 'Without prejudicing either side over sovereignty claims, we should focus

on revenue and resource sharing,' he said last year.

News of the revived talks between Australia and Timor-Leste would be welcomed by Woodside Petroleum and its international partners, as its proposed development of the Timor Sea's largest gas field—the Greater Sunrise—stalled when both parties failed to reach an agreement by the Christmas deadline.

Tomas Freitas, from La'o Hamutuk (Walking Together), a Dili NGO that has advised the government on petroleum law, is unconvinced. 'We do not care how much money we're going to get from the Timor Sea,' he says. 'We will be proud if we can tell our children and grandchildren that the border between Timor-Leste and Australia is a median line, rather than a line to [Australia] ... If our leaders prefer money, rather than sovereignty, I think they will lose their people in the future.'

Yet money is a major concern for a nation where many live on less than 55 cents a day. An open letter signed by more than a dozen US politicians and delivered to the Australian prime minister in March made this clear. Urging speed, the politicians called for the establishment of a permanent maritime boundary and revenue from disputed oil and gas fields to be held in trust. East Timor's citizens, the letter

said, 'continue to struggle against illiteracy, poverty, preventable diseases and a lack of basic services'.

Particularly concerning to the politicians were reports of preventable deaths resulting from food shortages and dengue fever outbreaks. 'An equitable sharing of oil and gas reserves would enable Timor-Leste to provide better health care and other essential services to its citizens,' they wrote.

While acknowledging Australia's generosity to East Timor following its independence in 1999, the politicians said that the US\$2 billion Australia has received from the Laminaria/Corallina fields had repaid the debt. Oxfam released a report last year that argued that Timor-Leste risked becoming a failed state if Timor Sea resources were not shared more equitably.

Charles Scheiner agrees, and then offers the following example. Soon after the 1999 referendum Scheiner moved to Dili, where he worked at La'o Hamutuk. Two colleagues of his were expecting a child. 'By economic and education standards, they're among the top ten per cent of East Timor's population.'

Endah, originally from Indonesia, moved to Dili after meeting her Timorese husband at university. Scheiner later wrote in an article: 'At 4pm Sunday

afternoon, as Endah began to bleed, the couple scrambled for medical care.' They went to the nation's central hospital in the capital. 'One midwife was trying to care for five birthing mothers. No doctors were on duty.' Endah's baby, healthy before its birth, died soon afterwards. Of the five children born to office-mates during Scheiner's first year, four babies died within days of being born.

'There's two issues,' he says. 'One is East Timor's legal entitlement to resources within its territory that would be the same whether East Timor were rich or poor. Then there's the moral question [whether] Australia—a huge, rich country—wants to allow people to live in these kinds of standards.'

The Final Report to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee reached the same conclusion in 2002. It urged policymakers to help Timor-Leste move on from its status as a 'mendicant state'.

Timor-Leste's poverty, Charles Scheiner suggests, differs from the question of legal boundaries. 'One is for governments to work out,' he says, 'the other is for people to work out in their own consciences.' ■

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Victorian teenagers participating in the annual Youth Week Parliament. AAP/Julian Smith.

youth

Tim Martyn

# Advancing Australia fair

Young people have become increasingly wary of the hard sell, especially when pitched by the major political parties

**I**N HIS 2005 AUSTRALIA DAY address, the Governor-General identified a crisis currently threatening democracy in this country. No, it wasn't truth in government; nor did the interference of foreign powers get a look in. Rather, Australia must find new ways to get its young people engaged in the democratic process, or else.

At first glance, the Governor-General is right. One only has to look at the declining numbers of young Australians joining political parties to discover that something is afoot. Yet this trend does not illustrate that younger generations are apathetic towards Australian democracy—far from it.

While I cannot profess to be the voice of young Australia, I can identify one reason for their retreat from the major parties: as vehicles for change, the parties have lost sight of the big picture. The Australia Project—who we are and where we are going—has been all but abandoned over the last decade and a half.

Australia's democratic process has entered a political era in which the aspirational voter is king; where it pays to be acquisitive, not inquisitive. As a nation, we're debt-laden but looking to own more, leaving the vast majority anxious about house prices and interest rates.

The youth voice, if it can be surmised, is one largely unburdened by mortgages and 2.4 kids. Rather than the next interest-rate hike, younger Australians have their gaze fixed on bigger issues. What sort of country is Australia becoming? What is happening to our environment? How can something morally wrong be economically right?

The commitment by both major parties to maintaining continuous budget

surpluses has effectively rendered them incapable of nation building. The policy horizon, already firmly fixed within a three-year election timetable, has been constrained further by an aversion to public investment. Young people are starting to figure out that in such an environment, the only way to work towards a better Australia is from the outside.

Australia's mainstream political parties have become increasingly divorced from the very concerns that once defined them—and their membership. They have become amorphous, private institutions with private agendas. People with passionate positions and policy ideas no longer join them. Into this void has stepped a succession of representatives motivated more by the possession of power than what to do once they possess it.

Instant democracy is at the heart of the problem. As the parties have become steadily more focused on winning the next election, phone polling has replaced considered debate or community consultation as the preferred method for taking the community's pulse. Marginal increases or decreases in popularity, as expressed by a phone poll, set the policy course on which a government heads. Thus, policy development becomes something conducted with the needs of the party, rather than the nation, in mind.

It is therefore no surprise that when young people get politically active these days, they are more likely to join a social organisation or environmental group, for it is there that they are able to engage with the big issues. It is there that they are able to sidestep factional infighting, cynical politicking and deal-making and get straight to the point: imagining Australia.

**P**OLITICS IS ABOUT communicating with voters. At election time, communication is most important. The Coalition spent a whopping \$123 million on disseminating 'political information' in its 2004 campaign—a 175 per cent increase on its

advertising budget for the 2001 campaign. Yet despite the increase, did we really learn more about their ideas for the nation?

Young people have grown up with aggressive marketing campaigns. They know advertising when they see it and have become increasingly wary of the hard sell. They're suspicious of the tricks, and alert to the fine print.

Advertising may be an effective method of selling a brand image, but at what cost to the product itself? What does the Coalition represent to Australia beyond keeping interest rates low (though they've subsequently been raised)? What does the Labor Party represent to voters now that we've entered the Beazley era (again)?

Shaped by their public-relations consultants, the two major parties seem to offer voters little more than a choice between Fruit Loops and Coco Pops—both saccharine, hollow in the middle and of dubious nutritional value.

If only more Australians would become more engaged with what sort of country they would like their children and grandchildren to live in, instead of the houses they would like to live in. Perhaps then we would get the democracy we want, not deserve.

Being an Australian citizen, young or old, demands more than merely barracking for a particular political party. Citizenship demands that we imagine what sort of Australia we want to create today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, next century and on into the future. It involves giving voice to matters of community concern, of working for change at the local level. In short, purposeful engagement in Australia's democratic process demands that we think of ourselves as citizens before shareholders, mortgage owners, employees or members of a party. That's our challenge as Australians. ■

**Tim Martyn** is the policy and research officer at the Ignatius Centre for Social Policy and Research, Jesuit Social Services.

# Not beating about the bush

The Australian Bush Heritage Fund is quietly securing important areas of biodiverse bush to preserve and manage for future generations

**W**HEREAS SOME PEOPLE can't see the wood for the trees, the Australian Bush Heritage Fund (ABHF) glories in its vision to conserve Australia's rich biodiversity. CEO Doug Humann says the group's slogan is, 'We don't beat about the bush, we buy it!'

'The ABHF is a national, independent, non-profit organisation committed to preserving Australia's biodiversity by protecting the bush, and is Australia's most widely supported national organisation dedicated to protecting species and habitats through the creation of reserves on private land,' says Humann. It's a hell of a mouthful, but then the ABHF is quite an organisation.

Thirteen years on from when Dr Bob Brown founded the ABHF by going into debt for \$250,000 to buy two blocks near Liffey, in Tasmania, the much-vaunted organisation now has an annual turnover of more than \$3 million, a highly skilled staff of 15 and a multi-talented board of unpaid directors.

ABHF reserves are now protecting some 345,680ha of Australia's conservation lands, which include examples of 131 vegetation communities, 50 vegetation communities of conservation significance, 64 species of plants of conservation significance and 43 species of birds or animals at risk. However, rather than simply make purchases, the ABHF administers an extensive land-management program that includes ecosystem restoration, feral animal and weed monitoring and control, fuel-reduction burning, maintenance of firebreaks, tracks, fencing, revegetation, flora and fauna surveys, native bird research, vegetation mapping, repairs and improvements to infrastructure, and maintenance of walking tracks and signage. The group is that it is effectively taking over from the state and federal governments in preserving large-scale natural heritage areas of Australia that might not otherwise be protected.

'The ABHF is a brilliant idea and is being brilliantly executed,' says patron

Phillip Adams. 'Why spend half a million on a landscape painting when, for a lot less, you can help buy the landscape? And save it from destruction!' The broadcaster reckons that we should all get behind it and then hang a photo (or painting) of the salvaged landscape on the wall.

'I hate to think how few of the landscapes painted by Streeton, McCubbin and the rest exist today, in recognisable form,' he adds. 'Think about it. Bush Heritage actually saves the bush, not just a dead painter's impression of it, and that makes it as important as the National Gallery.'

It's a leviathan task by any measure, and the man at the helm of this dynamic organisation combines a passion for the bush with a stalwart level of professionalism.

Passionate about the bush since he was a child, Doug Humann has spent the greater part of his life working towards its preservation. 'My family had a long history of going to the bush and camping,' he recalls.

**F**ROM 1990-97 HUMANN was director of Victoria's largest member-based nature conservation organisation, the Victorian National Parks Association. During that

time he worked primarily to improve the public reserve system in Victoria. In 1997 he was named Wild Environmentalist of the Year and is currently a member of the World Conservation Union Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas.

When he left school for university and teaching, Humann volunteered with the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Victorian National Parks. After graduating with honours in geography, he taught for a decade at a Melbourne secondary school. He was working part-time and house-husbanding full-time when an opportunity came up with the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA).

'The VNPA is a lobby group for state-run parks and reserves and I was their first paid director for seven years,' he explains. Humann's role during that time was centred mostly on advocacy, as the VNPA is Victoria's leading independent member-based conservation organisation. During his time there, Humann helped the independent, non-profit, membership-based group to realise its visions by facilitating strategic campaigns and education programs and developing policies—and through hands-on conservation work.

Doug Humann at left, CEO of the Australian Bush Heritage Fund.



He was approached early in 1997 to apply for the newly created role as executive officer of ABHF. The ABHF had made the decision to assume a higher national and international profile and to broaden the scope of its work. Recently relocated to Melbourne, it attracts staff, volunteers and supporters who are genuinely motivated by the organisation's aims.

**T**HE ORGANISATION'S WORK IS vital, as Australia has not only one of the most biologically diverse landscapes in the world, but also, according to UN figures, one of the world's highest rates of land clearing—comparable to the worst Asian, African, and South American deforestation rates.

'Many important areas of native vegetation and wildlife habitat are on private land and are under threat from clearing or degradation, which is endangering the survival of Australia's unique native species,' says Humann.

ABHF's aims resonate with many Australians. According to a recent annual report, it raised more than \$5.58 million through donations and bequests, an increase of 131 per cent on the previous year.

The number of donors increased by 31 per cent on the previous year, and more than 12,000 people have now supported Bush Heritage. Its patrons include broadcaster Phillip Adams, musician Roger Woodward, country singer John Williamson, designer Jenny Kee, peace activist Jo Vallentine and Dr Bob Brown. The Australian Greens' Senator for Tasmania who founded the ABHF in 1990, was its president from 1990–96 and a board member until 1997.

So why is the ABHF so popular? 'Generally people are looking for alternative and practical and efficient ways of conserving biodiversity,' says Humann. 'We feel that, in general, people have been discouraged with what the Government is doing, and what we have demonstrated through mass media and word of mouth is that we can very radically affect outcomes by buying back the bush.'

'We have a set of processes to be able to identify, assess, then acquire, and people see that the land is ensured a long-term survival of the species. People respond to the practical aspects and there is considerable respect for the organisation's

ability to manage these properties as they should be.'

Humann says the ABHF currently has 18 reserves in five states, ranging from small pockets of just four hectares to one vast spread of more than 200,000ha, but all contain highly sensitive species and habitats.

'Our newest property is the 344ha Judith Eardley Reserve located in north-central Victoria from the foothills to the summit of Mt Kerang,' he says with enthusiasm. The reserve was the result of a generous gift from the Judith Eardley Save Wildlife Association and hosts an array of threatened species that now have a much brighter future.

'These grassy woodlands are one of the most threatened plant communities in Victoria, and home to an array of woodland birds such as hooded robins, brown treecreepers, diamond firetails and black-chinned honeyeaters.'

As well as purchasing larger properties such as Ethabuka, a reserve of 213,000ha on the northern edge of the Simpson Desert National Park in western Queensland, ABHF also looks to acquiring smaller areas.

'We have bought some smaller-scale reserves of less than 1000ha in strategic habitats,' says Humann.

'We seek to obtain areas with high conservation values that the government either can't or won't act on to preserve.'

However, the ABHF does relinquish some land. The Deal and Erith islands, in Bass Strait, which were both lease-purchased, were later relinquished to the Tasmanian government to facilitate the declaration of the Kent Group National Park, which manages these areas.

'It's a conundrum when you have a private organisation acting in this way,' Humann agrees. But he believes that it's the only way to achieve adequate nature conservation between private and public organisations.

'It's always a concern that we are taking away responsibility from government,' Humann admits, although he acknowledges that the government does not have the resources and ability to do it all. 'The national conservation reserve system still needs to be enhanced because if we were not active, then important natural values would be lost.'

Humann stresses that the ABHF seeks to build and maintain positive

relationships with state governments to deliver good conservation management across different areas.

'It's not about one part of society taking ultimate responsibility, it's all about everyone taking a joint responsibility,' he says. 'It's vital to avoid the "us and them" paradigm. Therefore we work with other partners when we can to share information and knowledge to create better natural landscapes.'

**H**UMANN AGREES THAT other conservation organisations provide valuable work and are considered allies rather than competitors. 'We all need to work collectively to ensure our different skills are used in the most effective manner,' he says.

As well as the hands-on work, ABHF has established dialogue with many interested parties. During 2003, it signed a memorandum of understanding with the Indigenous Land Corporation to establish a framework for the two groups to work together to conserve and enhance the natural environment and indigenous heritage sites of significance on ILC and ABHF properties.

ABHF welcomes volunteers in the field and maintains a register for those interested in participating in events on its reserves such as weed control, seed collection, revegetation and planting projects. It is a not-for-profit organisation, and people can make a tax-deductible donation. There are also a number of other ways to get involved.

All these years later, Bob Brown is as ardent as ever about ABHF's mission:

These hundreds of thousands of hectares across Australia are rich in rare fauna and flora: frogs, orchids, ferns, beetles, kangaroos and platypuses. Each reserve is part of a rapidly disappearing Australia which is under threat from land clearing, urban sprawl, global warming and introduced pests and diseases, and the ABHF properties are strongholds for the nation's wildlife, managed by a remarkably lively and dedicated staff who obviously enjoy their work. ■

**Alison Aprhys** is a freelance writer and photojournalist whose last article for *Eureka Street*, 'Page Turner', appeared in the October 2004 issue. For more information, visit [www1.bushheritage.asn.au](http://www1.bushheritage.asn.au)

# Hit and myth

In many ways Elizabeth Bennet was a far more illuminating role model for the women of her time than her twittery descendant Bridget Jones

**N**O TIME IS HARDER TO SEE than the present. The past we invent freely, fossicking for the bits that make the right stories. But the present is brimming with what Roland Barthes called the 'what-goes-without-saying'—the stuff that's so persuasive, so important to our sense of ourselves, that we dare not speak its name.

I mention this on account of Bridget Jones, who gives me the irritis.

But her ancestor, Elizabeth Bennet, is another matter. I feel bad about it—Bridget is, after all, my contemporary—but I much prefer the begowned and beslippered Elizabeth to her twittery descendant. I understand Elizabeth; Bridget doesn't make sense.

It is, as Elizabeth would say, very vexing. Helen Fielding (who wrote the books and also has writing credits for both films) has acknowledged her debt to Jane Austen, so you'd expect to find both heroines likeable. In many ways they're cast from the same mould: Bridget and Elizabeth are single British women of marriageable age; they are middle-class, attractive, reasonably eligible. As Austen shone a light into the minds and manners of 19th-century England, Fielding exposes, and caricatures, the lives of modern single women. But where Austen's light illuminates, Fielding's grates.

Bridget is a baffling display of barely amusing foolishness. She ditzes her way between men, whining about being a 'singleton', fretting about being 'fat' (at 60kg, I hardly think so), getting her geography wrong and spilling things. Elizabeth is poise and reason itself. She rarely complains, and keeps romantic conjecture to herself. Her tongue is as razor sharp as her determination not to be taken in by fools and worthless lovers.

All of which raises the question: surely two centuries after the pioneering feminists, we can do better than Bridget?

Perhaps you are now thinking: oh, please; they're just stories. And there are those (many, going on the fact that *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Edge of Reason* both made it into the top ten at the Australian box office) who find Bridget funny and clever. Bridget's spin doctors declare her a 'heroine to singletons everywhere'; the *Times Literary Supplement* fell only a little short of declaring her the embodiment of her generation. She certainly does her best to send up the hopeless expectation that she will, by her early 30s, be happily married, wealthy, wildly successful on the career front, and ready to get 'sprogged up' with her first child. In her modern way—such as when she tells a roomful of 'smug marrieds' that 30-year-old women remain single because they're covered in scales—she does share Elizabeth's subversive turn.

But if Bridget's modern-girl self-deprecation doesn't

exhaust all of one's patience, then the tone of its delivery does. The films are the worst offenders here, and especially the last. In *The Edge of Reason* we're not laughing with Bridget, but—loudly, with a hint of disgust—at her. No acting skill on Renée Zellweger's part could compensate for all the close-ups of Bridget's wobbly belly and double chin. If, at the end of the first film, we were prepared to believe that the stuffy (but loveable, and powerful) Mark Darcy could like Bridget 'just as she is', by the end of the second film we're convinced that if he does love her, it's *in spite* of who she is.

This troubles me, because I don't subscribe to the belief that a story is just a story—stories, especially ones with the global reach of the Bridget Jones franchise, are powerful messages about who we are and ought to be. Advertisers know this, or they wouldn't spend millions weaving their products into blockbusters. Of course, not everyone will identify with every story (*Finding Nemo* made nearly as much money as both Bridget films put together), but Bridget certainly resonates, whether you like her or not.

Which brings us back to Miss Bennet. Elizabeth is not without fault—she admits to flights of vanity and prejudice. And hers is not a modern woman's tale—spirited as she is, her story boils down to her need for a husband. Yet she seems in other ways the epitome of progress: in an era when trifling accomplishments, dependency and limited rights were the female lot, Elizabeth demands to be heard as a 'rational





creature'. She is not the simpering specimen her mother has become, whiling away the hours with gossip and affected illness; nor is she the sneering, ambitious sort who flatters men in the hope of gaining advantage. Her body might feel the limitations of the times, but her mind is free.

Yet I wonder whether I would like her so much if she were my contemporary. Her misjudgment of the shameless Mr Wickham could be an unforgivable *faux pas*, and the 'conceited sort of independence' her haughty acquaintances abhor might seem a pointless display, given we know she is going to marry Mr Darcy. The key, I think, is having access to just enough context to put Elizabeth into perspective. It is easy to skim the past, read a little of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and see Elizabeth's rational manner as rebellion against the frippery of female life. The lot of the Misses Bennet is clear—they are dependent on men to survive. Without marriage, their situation would be desperate, so Elizabeth's level of resistance is just right, and the romantic myth Austen carves out of it lingers like something delicious on the tongue.

Back in Austen's time, Wollstonecraft made a bold prediction: 'Let woman share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man.' In other words, give women the right to vote, earn and think, and they'll be less foolish, more like blokes. In this light, the way that Fielding has updated Austen is revealing. While it's beyond our scope to speak of all women, the choice of Bridget as a heroine seems to prove Wollstonecraft more than a little wrong. Bridget is decidedly not like the men in her life, and she self-consciously yearns for Austen's romantic blueprint. She seems, while enjoying her independence and having a reasonably sensible head on her shoulders (a fact overlooked in the films), to need to defer to her hero (a wish fulfilled when her Darcy rescues her, twice). And on top of that, if the films are to be believed, she has little or no dignity. She's stupid, fat, an object of ridicule.

That Wollstonecraft's hopes for the future should be thus dashed is counter-intuitive, to say the least. Unless one flirts with the unthinkable (that women became the second sex because they *are* the second sex), it's hard to see how such widespread social change—women now are independent, strong, educated—can have produced such a confused character. But getting back to Barthes, the hardest things to say are those right in front of one's face. Putting a finger on Bridget's condition is difficult because so many of us are still living it.

There is another factor, I think, that makes Bridget what she is—and I am going to borrow boldly from Michel Foucault to try to show it. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the entry of the soul into the penal process. Where once people were physically punished for a crime, modern justice takes aim at the soul—placing social control inside the person. Perhaps Austen's romantic myth has taken a similar route. Elizabeth and Darcy's story is a powerful antidote to the reality of women in Austen's era. It fosters a belief not only that one's soul can be free from social limitation, but that this freedom can bring rewards within the system—namely, marriage to a wealthy man. It plants the idea of change without seriously undermining the status quo. By the time we get to Bridget, circumstances have changed so much that the myth seems useless. But it hasn't given up, just gone underground—into



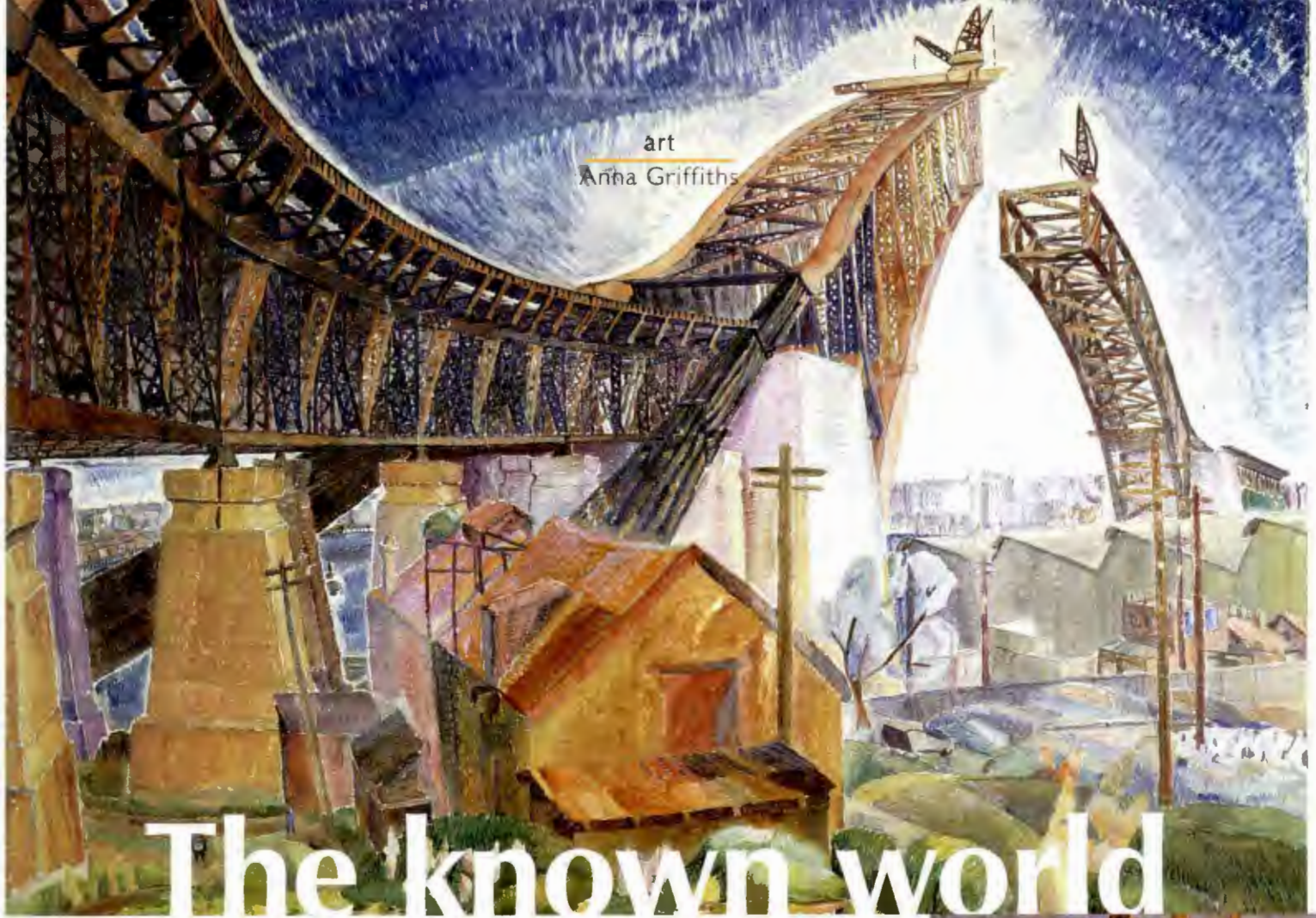
the hearts and minds of women. Bridget has therefore taken responsibility for the spirit of a system that was used to repress her ancestors—and this, in turn, allows us to laugh at her because she's still, after all, just a silly woman.

This theory puts Bridget into some perspective—annoying though she may be, she is, after all, as much a product of her time and place as Elizabeth is of hers. The myth remains, but has a new anchor. If, as Harold Bloom writes in *The Western Canon*, Austen 'understood that the function of convention was to liberate the will', then Fielding shows us that the function of Bridget's will is to cocoon her romantic inheritance.

Bridget makes us cringe because she resonates with what we know: that modern single women must battle to find a decent man, while apologising (in Bridget speak: 'Oops, sorry! Durr, silly Bridget!') for their fascination with such frivolous matters. It's hard to see this because it's in our faces all the time—in the popular press, on TV, at your local pub around 3am. There is, however, always hope—there will be more reworkers of the myth, storytellers who will help us glimpse the way things are, and could be. As the feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton said in 1888, 'The true woman is as yet a dream of the future.' She's also a dream of the here and now. ■

**Leah De Forest** is a Canberra writer. Images used by permission.

art  
Anna Griffiths



# The known world

ONE OF THE DELIGHTS of living in rural New South Wales, between the Illawarra and the Southern Highlands, is the possibility of an after-breakfast jaunt to Canberra, divided road nearly all the way, only four traffic lights and park outside the door when you arrive.

There is the oblique sunlight lying across the land, sometimes a rising moon on the way home, and the seasonal changes to note en route; fog on the escarpment, vineyards and elm-lined driveways on the highlands and drought on the plains.

Grace Cossington Smith (1892–1984) knew this land, so it is appropriate that we follow her route.

Neither her pencil sketches of Church Cottage, Bowral (1911), nor a painting of the bare Monaro—*Sunday morning: cows at Lanyon* (c. 1916)—defers to the picturesque, a quality you might expect of a privileged young woman dedicated to a career as a painter in the second decade of the 20th century.

Whereas her mostly male contemporaries would have put pretty tea parties on her verandahs and mythologised the Monaro, Cossington Smith is intrigued by the way light comes in through open doorways and slices through blocks of shadow. Her paddocks are dry, as they usually are, a single big tree plonked in the centre of the canvas, its leafless and broken limbs providing little shade to three blocky, two-dimensional cows.

These works provide signposts rather than hints to the way her long and prolific career would develop. The brilliant colour would arrive on her palette soon, but her preoccupation with light, of the relationship between the private domain and

nature, and of nature itself, are all here. Though some of her paintings contain people, even rushing, pushing crowds of them in her early urban subjects, the empty house and the farm corner indicate her chosen direction. These places are not abandoned, however; there is already the sense that someone has just left or is about to arrive in the room or come through a gate and into the paddock. Activity is not far away.

*Grace Cossington Smith: a retrospective* exhibition, currently at the National Gallery of Australia and touring until April 2006, is a thoroughly satisfying show on many levels. It contains about 120 paintings (though some will not tour) so there is that good feeling that the effort of going is well worthwhile. The sub title *retrospective* is well chosen because the



Top: *The bridge in-curve*, 1930.  
Above: *Sunny morning: cows at Lanyon*, c.1916.  
Reprinted with permission of NGA.

works range from 1908–1971, age 16 to age 79, and so provide a truly revealing insight into the development of the artist. They encapsulate many of the significant movements in 20th-century painting, though under her brush they are not so much ‘movements’ in the plural, like dodgem cars to be jumped on and off again, but more like a singular, individual journey along a philosophical pathway. There are lots of drawings and sketchbooks full of written notes as well as visual documentation; most importantly, the paintings are all either very interesting or brilliantly lovely or both.

It would be easy to see behind these paintings an independent urban sophisticate, but they in fact represent the life’s work of a woman who spent all her adulthood in the same house—Cossington, in the comfortable Sydney suburb of Turramurra—who never married, who looked after her parents until they died and who was devoted to her family.

Loved and encouraged by her parents, she attended art school in Sydney, was taken with one of her sisters on an extended trip to England, exhibited regularly and was provided with that object of the creative woman’s desire, a room of her own in the form of a garden studio. Life in a garret on a diet of paint scrapings was neither necessary nor desirable, and she had no need to paint for a living.

**Q**UITE DIFFERENT WERE the circumstances of two of her contemporaries, Jean Bellette and Stella Bowen, also subjects of recent retrospectives: all three studied art in the first decades of the century and went to Europe to widen their horizons.

Bellette returned to Sydney where, with her husband, art critic Paul Haefliger, she found herself in the centre of the city’s art world. An out-of-town base in the remote old mining area at Hill End and her final decades as an expatriate artist in Majorca ensured that fresh challenges and stimuli were constant.

Bowen was born a year after Cossington Smith but died in her fifties. She did not return to Australia until the end of her life. Her career was pushed and pulled by intellectual and emotional highs, love, betrayal and financial hardship which made painting a dire necessity, not a middle-class indulgence. Drusilla Modjeska’s book *Stravinsky’s Lunch* is an absorbing study of her and Cossington Smith’s paths.

Bellette and Cossington Smith, however, do have in common the fact that their philosophies, formed early and followed consistently, were inspired by Cezanne: the former’s concerned cubism, classicism and figures in the landscape, and the latter’s colour and light as they express form.

Grace’s middle-class Anglo-Australian life on the upper North Shore revolved around the church, social visits, charity work like selling flowers and knitting socks for the troops, gardening, doing the house, staying with friends in the country, visiting the city by train and ferry accompanied by her sketchbook and pencils. Nearly all her landscape subjects could be reached by train from Turramurra; others, particularly as she got older, were very close indeed, such as *Things on an iron tray on the floor* (c.1928).

This artist lived through two wars and a terrible depression. There is no social realism here, though, no cry to the heart. The painter’s eye is interested in the massing of forms and the colour of shadows as she watches troops marching, attends a memorial service, imagines a dawn landing.

‘Form achieved with colour is what I always wanted to express,’ the artist stated in her later life with a nod to Cezanne. The exhibition shows clearly how, after an early flirtation with tonal painting, this became the unifying factor in her paintings, whatever the subject. But as a committed post-impressionist her colour had to be handled in a particular way, to avoid what she called ‘a dead look’. She used her brush to lay it in feathery strokes, billowing arches or square slabs.

*The bridge in-curve* (c. 1930) shows the incomplete Harbour Bridge from below, towering rhythmically over rooftops, the brilliant blue of the sky applied in a mesh of pastel-like strokes echoing the arches as well as the struts.

Her colour is frequently used more than descriptively but not to shock; for example viridian green, mauve, turquoise and orange which are more like lollies than nature. In *Bulli Pier, South Coast* (1931) it is hard to see where the sea meets the sky because both are represented as waves of rolling unfamiliar colour and complex brush work.

Cossington Smith’s paintings were developed from her detailed sketches, not painted *en plein air*, and sometimes, as in the examples above, the coloured lines were simply translated into paint as it suited her, using it as a linear drawing medium. Thus they are actually enriched and enlivened by being one step removed from the subject.

The final room in the Canberra exhibition is filled with the later paintings of her room and studio, where ‘the sunlight did not come in in a definite way but was full of light’. Although large and filled with brilliant colour, particularly yellow, reflected from the garden and captured in shimmering, faceted strokes, they hark immediately back to that early Bowral sketch.

Her rooms are empty, and in such repetition they are eerie. The French doors and wardrobes are open, clothes and covers are left around as if someone has left, over and over again, in a hurry but not for good.

These interiors are more Matisse, decorative and unoccupied, than Bonnard. He frequently placed a nude female figure across his rumpled bed, whereas Cossington Smith allows only one person in, her friend Enid, draped on a chaise, elegant and decorous in a spreading red dress and a big dark hat.

Grace Cossington Smith captures the *genius loci* of her close environment as significantly as any painter of the grand sublime vista. Her small world is known and loved. The very ordinariness and order of this life was, for her, its strength. Its predictability, repetitiveness and security provided her with a disciplined routine; in its stasis the familiar was also the special and in its isolation there was ‘the chance of finding [her]self’; what could be a glimpse taken in passing or totally missed by one artist provided her with life long inspiration.

Form, colour and the time to express them were abundant. ■

**Anna Griffiths** is an art consultant.

*Grace Cossington Smith: a retrospective exhibition.* Curator: Deborah Hart, National Gallery of Australia until June 13; Art Gallery of South Australia 29 July–9 October; Art Gallery of New South Wales 29 October–15 Jan 2006; Queensland Art Gallery 11 February–30 April 2006. The quotes above are taken from a recorded interview accompanying the exhibition.

# Bracing for the five-ring circus

The Chinese people are conscious of the immense work involved in bringing a 'New Beijing' into being before the 'Great Olympics'

games—a 2001 survey showed that 95 per cent of the city's population supported the bid—they are now conscious of the immense work that is involved in bringing this 'new Beijing' into being.

A quick number crunch illustrates the size of the task confronting China's capital. According to figures supplied by the Information Office of the Beijing Municipal Government, as of June 2004 Beijing had 14.2 million registered residents, with an estimated further four million people comprising the floating, or migrant, population. The floating population refers to those who have come from other cities looking for short-term work and who have not procured official residency status. More often than not this workforce is involved in the hard labour of the construction industry, with very low rates of pay and tough living conditions.

It is these more than 18 million people who are feeling the effects of the pre-Olympic development program and who will also reap its benefits. A cornerstone of the improvement to the city's infrastructure is the development of large-scale intra-city transportation services. These have been designed to deal with two issues—the increase in tourists and the present-day traffic jams.


One example is the new fast-speed 27km railway line planned between Dongzhimen (in the city's inner north-east) and the Capital International Airport, which itself will build a new terminal to handle an extra 17 million passengers during the years before the Games. The half-hour ride in a taxi from airport to city, that can cost from 70–200 RMB (roughly A\$12–\$33), will be reduced to a 15-minute train ride for substantially less, and with greater comfort.

Anything that also helps to alleviate the nightmare that is the daily commute will be welcomed by visitor and resident alike. Beijing traffic is regularly at a standstill during peak periods, in large part due to the presence of more than two million registered



vehicles in Beijing, 1.28 million of which are privately owned, and more than 65,000 of which are taxis. It has been reported that in 2002 there were more than 16,500 traffic jams. This situation has been exacerbated in recent years by the construction work on a further eight subway lines, including the already mentioned airport service and services that go some way towards solving the long-standing problems of travelling between the north of the city and the southern suburbs.

THE NORTH-WESTERN section of the city is home to many of the prestigious universities and to Haidian, Beijing's technology district; the south has attractions such as the Temple of Heaven and various markets and speciality shopping districts. The two older subway lines comprise 95km of track and this will be increased by roughly a further 150km, with rail transport topping 300km of track by 2008. Improvements are also being made to the existing services, with platform vending machines and electronic ticketing systems being introduced. Once the new lines are built, bus interchanges enhanced and expressways further improved, there is



**F**LUX IS CHINA'S CONSTANT—and in pre-Olympic Beijing especially so. There is a Chinese saying that richly encapsulates this society's rapid changes. It goes something like this: 'In the 1980s everyone greeted each other by asking "have you eaten yet?"; in the 1990s the greeting was "have you got divorced yet?"; and in 2000 everyone asks each other "have you connected to the internet yet?'" Soon the question could well be 'have you got your Olympics tickets yet?' Even though the Olympics are three years away, it feels as though the five-ring circus has already arrived.

When Beijing's team proposed their city as the 2008 host they built their bid around three themes: hosting a 'Green Olympics', a 'Hi-tech Olympics' and 'the People's Olympics'. In order to implement each of these themes the city planners are undertaking an ambitious urban redevelopment program involving everything from building grand stadia to printing a new series of English-language textbooks for primary-school children. It is no surprise then that the motto for Beijing is 'New Beijing, Great Olympics'.

The July 2001 announcement of Beijing's successful bid was celebrated with great joy in the streets, bars and restaurants throughout the city. In recent times those same venues are feeling the ramifications of this success. On the whole, one senses that although the citizens of Beijing are still proud and excited to be hosting the

no question that it will be much easier to travel around the new Beijing. Again, the numbers illustrate what a feat this will be. Transport officials claim that by the year of the 'great Olympics', the capacity of Beijing's buses and trolley buses will reach 4.5 billion passengers a year and that there will be 18,000 vehicles in operation.

As construction grinds its way



Olympic wrestling champions could also well be identified in this process. Although repeated public announcements encourage passengers to let people alight first and then allow others to board—and indeed the majority try to observe this rule—the peak-hour frenzy means that often the sheer press of numbers pushing towards the door creates a maul as intense as any Bledisloe encounter. According to 'the first



through the areas of Dongdan and Xidan, for instance, buses inch their way through the clogged streets and commuters resign themselves to delays. Although people understand that there will be long-term gain from all the developments, this doesn't lessen the pain in the meantime. Any Olympic records will have been made possible by the stoic endurance of every Citizen Wang. Beijing commuting could indeed be one of the 2008 local events. Just as Sydney had beach volleyball, so too could the great Olympics have 'Beijing buses'. Medals could be awarded to both the commuters and the drivers. The drivers in particular could be judged according to a sliding scale of difficulty based on the number of jaywalking pedestrians they swerved to avoid and the number of meandering cyclists for whom they had to brake.

Competitive commuting has also produced its own etiquette. Although it is good form to look as though one is queuing for the bus or subway train, one's real form is revealed in the speed and ease with which one boards the vehicle of choice. Getting a seat is on a par with running 100 metres in under 10 seconds.

law of the subways', as intricate as any quantum theory, it is more often than not the stockier, grey-haired grandmother who first pops out the other side of the mass of bodies. (The second law states that it is the person carrying 20 bags who usually stands in the doorways, refusing to move.)

The journey can also be an endurance event in itself. Strap-hanging on the bus, commuters are joined together closer than a stack of Beijing-duck pancakes, with various interlocking elbows, hips, shoulders and groins making the ride home more like a game of Twister than a period of postwork down time. The concept of personal space is a Western construct, with the mores of bus etiquette demanding that, no matter how close the physical encounter, one keeps a show of outward passivity, a kind of Chan Buddhist-inspired sense of detachment.

For all the challenges and frustrations, however, outward expressions of tension are surprisingly low. As many locals comment, there is simply no other way, and whether one is patient or impatient, the journey won't go any quicker. It is this patience of the citizens and the

general acceptance of the efforts that must be exerted by all, as illustrated by the improvements in the transport system, that points to Beijing being able to fulfil its goals of building a new city and hosting a memorable Olympics.

In many ways, however, the Olympics can be seen as a distraction for China's leadership. Indeed, there are issues of far greater importance facing the world's most populous nation. For instance, on 3 December 2004 it was reported in *The China Daily* that last year saw the death of well over 4150 coal miners from floods, fires, explosions and other disasters. The article further stated that China 'reported 80 per cent of the world's total coal mining-related deaths, although it produced only 35 per cent of the world's coal'. Further, 'China has seen an annual average of about one million industrial accidents since 2001, according to the State Administration of Work Safety, with nearly 140,000 deaths each year'. Equally, issues of increasing economic disparities between the inland and coastal provinces, the size of the domestic rice and grain harvests, the rise in the incidence of HIV and AIDS, let alone ongoing tensions with Taiwan, all demand the attention of China's leadership. For all Jacques Rogge's enthusiasm, the Olympics are in many ways but a sideshow. This would be true according to all and any rational criteria.

Yet, even so, the sense of excitement in Beijing as it remakes itself and the sense of national pride evoked by being the Olympic hosts means that reason is not as much set aside as matched by emotion. The more than 400 million young people throughout China cannot wait to don their red, gold and white supporters' uniforms and cheer on their champions—be it the 2004 gold-medal women's volleyball team, the flew-from-afar hurdle champion Liu Xiang or the young boys and girls in the country's sporting academies daily diving and tumbling their way towards a new Beijing and a great Olympics. Only just over 1000 days to go! ■

**Jeremy Clarke** sj has recently returned from doctoral fieldwork in Beijing. He is undertaking a doctorate at the Australian National University in Canberra, researching the contemporary history of the Catholic communities in China. Images: Jeremy Clarke.



## Fascinating and disturbing mysteries

*Haunted Earth*, Peter Read. UNSW Press, 2003. ISBN 0 868 40726 7, RRP \$34.95

PETER READ'S *Haunted Earth* begins with the scholar in Gore Hill cemetery, settling down with a thermos of coffee for a nocturnal vigil. Read, an oral historian, chooses this Sydney graveyard, in all its physicality of weed-entwined marble and distant traffic noise, as the point of departure for his investigation of the 'enspiriting' of land. His book is based on interviews with a diversity of Australians: traditionally religious, New Agers and secularised, rural, urban, Indigenous, descendants of European settlers, recent immigrants. He sees no spirits at Gore Hill, but his meditation introduces a sensitive study of contemporary religious experience in relation to land in Australia.

This graveyard caper is sensational, but passionate scholars do go to extremes. The biologist in my household rises at 4.30am to record the dawn chorus of tiny birds, and I know another who lowered himself into unexplored limestone caves looking for blind crayfish. Yet these projects are deemed more acceptable, more rigorous, than an exploration of spiritual experience.

As scientist David Hay wrote in *Exploring Inner Space*, a major British study of religious experience in the 1970s, 'We ... confine ourselves to those parts of reality which are clear, distinct, measurable and therefore examinable by the methods of empirical science.' Hay notes a 'pressure to conform that is now not simply a matter of fitting one's deeper experience into a predetermined religious mould, but to deny utterly its validity or its existence'. Spiritual experience in contemporary Australia verges on a suppressed or even a shamed discourse.

*Haunted Earth* is the third in Peter Read's trilogy of studies on Australians' attachment to place. The first, *Returning to Nothing*, examined the experiences of people who had lost their 'place'—home, farm or suburban street. *Belonging* investigated relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the

context of Indigenous dispossession. *Haunted Earth* probes still more deeply into the spiritual dimensions of attachment to place.

READ'S HARVEST OF STORIES is rich and many-layered. A farmer recalls visions of 19th-century cottage-dwellers on her property; an Anglican priest describes the exorcism of a country church defiled by Satanists; a Wiccan draws energy from the land for healing animals; Cape Barren Island people express lives immersed in 'storied country'; non-Indigenous Australians speak of localised hauntings by Aboriginal spirit presences; Benedictines discuss belonging at the New Norcia monastery; Indian Australians combine Hindu and Australian rituals of death to secure the spiritual future of a deceased relative; Asian Australians make choices about the observance of traditional Taoist ceremonies to acknowledge spirits and mark births.

The informants in *Haunted Earth* are fortunate in having an interlocutor as skilled and respectful as Read, whose major contribution must include giving them the confidence to speak and to allow publication of their narratives. The 1970s British study found that of the many people who had religious experience to report, few had dared to tell anyone. Hay notes 'the regular admission by our informants that they will be thought mad'.

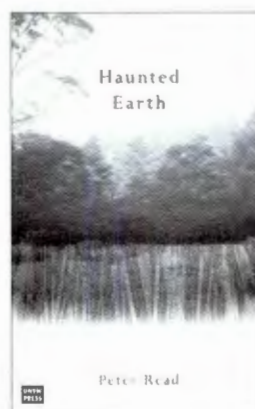
What I miss from *Haunted Earth* is a sense of Read's major 20th-century predecessors in the scholarly discussion of religious experience. When William James (brother of the novelist) lectured in Edinburgh on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1901–02, it would have surprised him to know that a century later Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor would choose James as subject for the same distinguished lecture series, offering

an insightful analysis of contemporary spirituality. Rudolph Otto's famous phrase describing religious experience as an encounter with the '*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*', roughly translated as 'the disturbing yet fascinating mystery', has relevance for Read's oral narratives. Several Australian studies are also pertinent, including Geoffrey Lilburne's *A Sense of Place*, Ferguson and Chryssavgis's *The Desert is Alive* and work by Veronica Brady and David Tacey.

Christine Watson's *Piercing the Ground*, published after *Haunted Earth*, importantly conveys the impact of Indigenous spirituality on a non-Indigenous scholar's consciousness. Watson has worked closely with one of Read's informants, the gifted young scholar Minoru Hokari, whose recent death gives poignancy to his views so carefully considered in *Haunted Earth*.

In *Belonging*, Read frequently illustrated his themes with examples from poetry. Reflection on the relationship between land and spiritual experience in *Haunted Earth* leads him to reconsider the nature of poetry itself: 'I thought once that the poetic and the supernatural were two different conceptions of reality. Now I suspect that they share the same dimension.' With his interdisciplinary approach, Read has moved into an experiential domain opened up by the European Romantics. Minoru Hokari struggled with Aboriginal teaching that the land knew him in advance. Baudelaire wrote: 'Nature is a temple where living pillars sometimes release indistinct words; man passes there through forests of symbols that observe him with intimate glances.'

**Rosamund Dalziell** is a visiting fellow in the Faculty of Arts at the Australian National University.



# The quintessential storyteller

*Morris West: Literary Maverick*, Maryanne Confoy. John Wiley & Sons, 2005. ISBN 1 740 31119 1, RRP \$29.95

**I**N 1992 I HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE, during some sabbatical leave, to participate in a seminar entitled 'Story as Pedagogy', led by United Faculty of Theology lecturer Denham Grierson. I can remember being struck by John Shea's words: 'We are the story that God tells. Our very lives are the words that come from his mouth.' To view God as a storyteller, to read Elie Wiesel's words that 'God made man because he loves stories', to be reminded that we are all born into a community of stories and storytellers, was to see the nobility of the teaching vocation in a new light. Teachers are innate storytellers, and we learn who we are through the stories we embrace as our own. Our own story is sacred ground, Caroline Jones once said, and telling it connects us in a most profound way to our hearers.

In her biography *Morris West: Literary Maverick* Maryanne Confoy tells an interesting story 'of research and disclosure' about one of our great Australian storytellers. I am not sure that the term maverick, which often points to the quirky and eccentric qualities in a person, quite does Morris West justice. Nonconformist and unorthodox he certainly was, but 'maverick' does not really capture that passion and rich independence of mind which avid readers of his came to enjoy. Indeed, towards the end of the book, Confoy refers to the criticism by Morris's widow Joy that her biography painted him as too distant, and did not convey his warmth and generosity as a husband and close family man. While Confoy with all modesty accepts this as a valid criticism of her work, it is hardly a substantial negative mark. Morris West was a most complex character. He wrote often about the divided self, he saw himself as an outsider in most social contexts, he was a man of many contrasts and contradictions. After all, West would liken himself to 'the man without a shadow'

in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale. Confoy is skilful at unravelling this multi-layered character for us.

As someone who has enjoyed reading a good number of West's 32 novels, who believes that his prose is of such stand-alone quality that one can often return to savour it, I thoroughly enjoyed learning something about the man himself in Confoy's biography. Particularly interesting is her treatment of the historical factors shaping West's life. As the eldest child who joined the Christian Brothers' juniorate at the age of 13, he was an outsider in his own family, he was bullied at school, he resented his years in the cloister, and he replicated his own father's habits by being an absentee father for his first wife and children. It was not until he discovered Europe and its culture that he first began to feel at home. When his first marriage broke down, his inability to gain an annulment from the Church he loved meant he became an outsider in this context too. Even when he enjoyed immense success as a novelist overseas, many in the Australian literary community continued to see him as an alien and were somewhat envious of this expatriate's international acclaim.

**W**HEN ONE LOOKS at the various themes in Morris West's writing and their deft treatment by Confoy, one notes a certain prescience in the global problems West targets—issues which continue to trouble and challenge us today. The evils of terrorism, the abuse of political power, the malaise of centralism in the Church and its problems with a then ailing, albeit charismatic, Pope as leader, questions

relating to the role of women in the life of the Church and clerical celibacy, were all issues to preoccupy West and become the focus of his writing and public speeches. Though something of an outsider in the Church, it was still family for West and he saw himself as its 'loyal opposition'. Confoy summarises this very succinctly: 'West wrote his way through the questions life forced him to ask.'

As broad as the sweep of global issues treated in West's writing is, there is much of his personal footprint too. Given that he felt so much of an outsider from an early age, Confoy demonstrates that 'this became his primary mode of engaging with life, the lens through which he perceived the world, and the reason for the adversarial stance which came so easily to him, even in his close relationships'. His writings, therefore, are permeated with the experience of the alien and the outsider, the struggles of characters with divided selves. Confoy

illustrates how these struggles mirror West's own personal conflicts as he kept asking and attempting to answer three key fundamentally religious questions: who am I, why am I, where am I going?

Confoy has done us a great service in writing of a complex and driven man who constantly confronted the 'defaced mosaic', as he put it, of his life. Through his writings the quintessential storyteller helped a myriad of readers to understand their own story. Confoy's fine biography helps us to appreciate the irony that Morris West struggled hard to do the same for himself. ■

**Christopher Gleeson** SJ is the director of Jesuit Publications.



Morris West, 1965. AAP/AP/CBS

# Governments bearing moral gifts

God under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics, Marion Maddox. Allen & Unwin, 2005.

ISBN 1 741 14568 6, RRP \$29.95

**I**N HER EXCELLENT STUDY *God under Howard: the Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics* Marion Maddox describes in admirable detail the Howard Government's use of religion for political ends. Since she is less concerned to study the religious right than to analyse the use of religion by the political right, she leaves open questions about the changing relationship between religious faith, secular philosophies and churches in Australian public life today.

By her account, the Howard Government's major goal has been to promote economic change based on liberal theory. Individuals are increasingly more responsible for their own welfare in a competitive economy, and can expect less support from their own associations or from government programs. These changes create anxiety. The Howard Government has deflected that anxiety by espousing a conservative social order. It is then able to champion Australian values and to focus popular resentment on 'people not like us'—those distinctive by race, gender or plight.

In developing her thesis, Maddox describes how this political program derived from the United States and was adapted for use in Australia. Australians are suspicious of an overt appeal to religion in political speech. But they speak easily of values and social attitudes, and are interested in individual spirituality. The influence of explicitly religious groups on public issues is therefore usually masked.

Maddox describes in some detail the importance of the Lyons Forum in the Liberal Party and its strategies. It created cross-party alliances that criticised the ABC coverage of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and later overturned the Northern Territory legislation on euthanasia.

Other religious groups have also invited politicians to their gatherings, and have established informal networks among them. Large religious conventions have also allowed government ministers to endorse these groups and to praise their social values.

The Government has been less accommodating to the mainstream churches, which have generally been critical of the social effects of liberal economic policy. It maintains close connections with institutes, like the Institute of Public Affairs, that are sponsored by business groups and work to counteract church criticism of liberal capitalism. Representatives of these groups often comment in the media on public and religious issues.

The Government also tries to divide the church constituency. It questions the right of church leaders to take moral stands on social issues like refugees or the Iraq war, on the grounds that many church members would not support them. It has also offered patronage to leaders of

churches who subtly dissociate themselves from criticism of the liberal economic order. More directly, it has co-opted church groups to carry out tasks that governments had once undertaken. By putting out to competitive tender contracts to administer aged homes or unemployment services, the Government is able to favour groups that lowered its costs by drawing on voluntary labour. It is also able to mute criticism of its policies among these groups by the implicit or explicit threat to remove their funding.

**B**OTH IN THE US AND in Australia today, these political strategies seem inexorably successful. The combination of liberal economics and the symbolic endorsement of conservative individual social values has brought electoral success and has marginalised critics.

Maddox demonstrates in detail how political parties use religious and moral beliefs for their own ends. She makes her points easily and persuasively. Her book also suggests a significant cultural shift that preoccupation with the 'religious right' conceals. In public life, values concerned with home and intimate relationships formerly lay outside the concern of government and political life, while values to do with equity, economic policy, the treatment of immigrants, and the making of war were part of open political process. This has changed. Values formerly private have been politicised, while hitherto public values have been privatised. As a result, institutions may now freely push for legislative change on matters previously regarded as reserved for individual choice, whereas institutions that criticise economic liberalism, the treatment of asylum seekers or the Iraq war are attacked and marginalised. Such matters are reserved for the Government and the individual conscience. Churches and other institutions may not properly criticise them.

This significant and subtle change bears reflection. The instinctive response has been to canonise the previous settlement, and so to attack groups that seek to put personal moral issues on to the public agenda. In this response, the phrase 'religious right' is easily used as a pejorative, connoting alien roots in the US, and a preference for divisive and manipulative strategies. Critics will also often describe religion in terms of social pathology. Its growth and strength are seen as a neurotic and self-regarding response to social change, regrettable in a properly secular society.

This account is inattentive to the changes in the religious, cultural and political environment in Australia that lead people to join or take part in the services of new religious groups, like Hillsong. We need to know why people with passionate commitments to what Maddox describes as a conservative social agenda



take an influential role in established churches, and seek to influence public policy. We also need to know what makes it possible for governments to manipulate the agenda of such groups.

We need to address these questions through conversation with the people themselves, and not simply by making assumptions about what they must be like. In Mannix's phrase, we must see them as 'people like us'. This kind of inquiry lies outside the scope of her book. But she offers a model for such reflection when discussing the relationship between Howard and the Methodist Church in which he grew up. She notes the common theories that either derive Howard's political views from those of an Anglican Church to which he does not belong or, on the basis of stray comments from Methodist spokesmen, that deduce them from the supposed conservative political values of the Methodist Church. They fail to notice that the congregation to which John Howard belonged espoused quite radical views on race and immigration. The tension between his attitudes and those of his church provokes more fertile questions than does the assumed harmony.

I cannot offer a general view on why people join religious groups or adopt strong moral positions. But those to whom I have spoken say unsurprisingly that in their new beliefs they have found something precious. Their acknowledgment of God offered a broader meaning to their lives and some direction in

living it. For some, this discovery led them to perceive a lack in Australian society of shared moral values and of encouragement to live well.

Many believe, too, that the moral values, which they espouse, are important not simply for their own lives, but for a healthy and prosperous Australia. Australia would be a better society if, for example, there were greater protection of life at its beginnings and its end, less access to pornography, and more support for marriage as traditionally understood.

**I**T SEEMS A LITTLE CRUDE to describe people who have these attitudes as the religious right. Certainly, their moral attitudes are supported by religious beliefs. But in many cases they appear to be shaped by a moral reflection which precedes religious belief, and which would survive even the loss of religious belief and its authorities. The complex relationship between religious faith and moral positions can plausibly be oversimplified by the use of the term Religious, because some church traditions derive their moral positions from the Bible, and will justify them by appeal to the Bible. Their adherents, however, may differ from their leaders in deriving their moral views from a particular view of humanity that they find confirmed in churches and in other religious bodies.



Cardinal George Pell and Prime Minister John Howard in August 2004, at the announcement of the federal government's grant of \$4 million to the private Catholic University of Notre Dame to be established in Sydney. Image: AAP/Sam Mooy

Nor does the word 'right' do justice to the views of new religious groups, which often adopt attitudes associated with the left, like the defence of asylum seekers and opposition to the war in Iraq. The distinction between right and left is often based on attitudes to the maximisation of individual freedom. By this criterion churches and other religious groups may well be on the right. But it may be more helpful to define the left by its ascription to communal values such as equality of opportunity, participation, making the fruits of prosperity available to all, and structuring society in a way that supports its weakest members. By these standards, members of churches and Religious will be found both on the left and on the right.

**W**HATEVER OF THE CHARACTERISATION of people with strong moral and political views, the key question posed by the shift to make personal values a matter for political action has to do with defining what kinds of action are proper. How are people who believe that issues of personal morality such as abortion, euthanasia and marriage relationships are so important for a good and humane society that they ought to be subject to regulation and legislation, to make their case? I find it difficult to argue that it is not proper, either for them or for those opposing their views, to organise, to seek to have their views favourably represented in the media, to take direct action, and to seek to influence politicians. Whether such activities are wisely undertaken either by small groups or by churches is another matter.

Indeed the shift in the scope of politics raises as many difficult questions for churches as it provides opportunities.

First, should they welcome, totally oppose, or be selective in their response to the new settlement? I believe that they should cautiously welcome the inclusion of personal moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia, stem-cell research and pornography on the political agenda. But they should simultaneously insist that the question at issue in public debate is not directly whether particular practices are morally justifiable, but whether regulation of them is necessary in a humane society. The churches should also reject strongly the move to privatise public moral issues such as war, the treatment of asylum seekers, and the regulation of capital and labour. They should insist that groups critical of government policies should not be penalised, and oppose the tendency of governments to remove themselves from accountability on public moral issues.

Second, should the churches align themselves with governments that offer this new settlement? I believe that they should be highly suspicious of politicians' motives in this area, and of what governments will take from and give to churches. As Maddox points out, the goal of governments is to secure agreement or acquiescence in an economic order based on competitive individualism. It will wish to neutralise opposition from churches and other groups, and to reward acquiescence. Thus, it will reward church leaders who either endorse government policies or undermine opposition within churches by aligning themselves with groups critical of the churches' commitment to public morality. The reward will take the form of symbolic gestures that enshrine conservative social values or of financial or legislative support for educational or other ventures.

The reason to be wary of governments bringing moral gifts is that the symbolic gestures they offer will rarely address the root ills in Australian society, and often mask them. They often substitute ideology and prejudice for a realistic analysis of society and the development of an effective and perhaps expensive policy to address its ills. The churches' self-interest also counsels caution. A merely symbolic defence of personal values can easily rebound on those who associate themselves with government policies. In Spain, for example, the Catholic Church allowed itself to be wooed by a conservative government. When the government fell, the Church shared its unpopularity, and has been powerless to resist quite radical legislation on social and religious issues.

For churches, the deepest and most difficult challenge is to persuade Australians to recognise that the welfare of Australia demands policies and legislation on matters of personal and public morality. They need to make the case in public argument. This requires moving beyond arguments based on ideology and on slogans, to analyse dispassionately the current practices in Australian society and their effects, and to make the case that changes in policy would both benefit Australia and actually lead to real improvement.

The third question posed to the churches is: what lies at the heart of their ethic? Broadly speaking, there are two accounts of what is central in Christian life. The first emphasises the domestic sphere as the place of fidelity, with the result that domestic relationships and their emphasis on personal honesty, faithful and controlled sexuality, and respectful child raising, have the central place in their ethic. The family is the household of God.

The second account emphasises the following of Jesus in his mission to the excluded and the stranger. Kindness to strangers, and particularly to those whose dignity is most assailed, will be paramount. Family will be regarded with some suspicion, as it is in Mark's Gospel, because preoccupation with family so easily distracts from the universal and radical following of Jesus.

These two emphases are held together with some tension in Scripture. The challenge to churches is to hold them together so that both domestic and public virtues are given full weight.

Finally, the opportunity for churches to influence public policy on issues of personal morality must inevitably make them ask how they are to see other religious bodies. Starkly put, the question that they face is this: is the greatest sin facing churches idolatry or atheism? Should Christians rejoice in the number of converts to Christianity or theism in Australian society on the grounds that the cause of God is promoted? This is to give priority to the struggle against atheism. Or should they carefully evaluate both their own and others' teaching and practices for their coherence with the teaching and death and resurrection of Christ? This is to give priority to the struggle against idolatry, which begins in the believer's own heart and mind. If idolatry is a concern, then the rise of a piety that is comfortable with economic individualism must trouble any church. ■

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# The best that money can buy

*The Persuaders: Inside the Hidden Machine of Political Advertising*, Sally Young. Pluto Press, 2004. ISBN 1 864 03304 5, RRP \$34.95

**F**OR THOSE WHO WERE DISMAYED by last year's federal election campaign, during which interest rates of 15 years ago moved voters more than current issues of social justice, this is an important book. Sally Young, a political scientist and lecturer in media and communications at the University of Melbourne, has written a comprehensive analysis of political advertising, which tells a great deal about how political power is exercised in Australia. Drawing on the author's doctoral thesis, the book is lively and readable, animated by her conviction that Australian democracy has been weakened and her fellow citizens should be informed. It is refreshing to read a book which has newspaper advertisements, television scripts and advertising jingles as well as footnotes referring to a wide range of sources, including political biographies, journalism and party archives.

Some things have not changed. Menzies' 1949 slogan 'It's time for a change' preceded Whitlam's 'It's time', the ultimate political slogan lacking any disagreeable content. Ben Chifley understood the importance of 'the hip pocket nerve', the self-interest and materialism of the Australian electorate. When Bob Hawke as a novice opposition leader proposed campaigning on reconciliation, Neville Wran's advice was clear: 'If the greedy bastards wanted spiritualism, they'd join the fucking Hare Krishnas.'

The power of celebrity is not new. Winston Churchill visited Charlie Chaplin on the set of *The Gold Rush*; Sir Robert Menzies courted Don Bradman; Gough Whitlam abandoned Brylcreem and embraced a bevy of celebrities (remember Little Pattie?) who appeared in that famous television commercial which Rupert Murdoch

generously funded. This has proved to be one of Rupert's most far-sighted investments, creating a subsidised income stream for the media.

Young details how the scale and impact of political advertising have grown. In Australian federal elections more than \$30 million is now spent on paid advertising, matching the sum provided by taxpayers to the major parties. A further \$80 million comes from corporate and private donors, many of whom hide their donations within the Cormack Foundation or Labor Resources. Voters in marginal seats are targeted in what John Singleton called 'the ultimate one-day sale'. Opponents are attacked, and appeals are made to the anxieties and prejudices of the electors. Only 21 per cent of advertisements now mention the party name, and policy detail is rare. Telephone contact and direct mailing based on extensive databases are highly effective, enabling the major parties to make claims to individual voters without contradiction or debate.

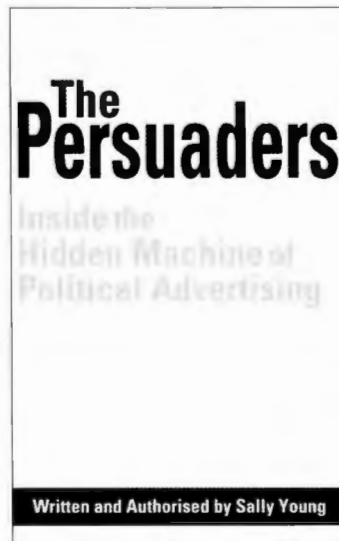
**G**OVERNMENTS HAVE far larger advertising budgets than do political parties. In 2004 the Howard Government spent \$92 million on campaigns such as Strengthening Medicare as part of \$500 million spent on advertising by all Australian governments. (This figure does not include the estimated 4000 journalists working for the federal or state

governments as part of their communication strategies.) In 2000, Joe Cocker's song *Unchain My Heart* was purchased for \$250,000 by the Commonwealth as part of \$118 million spent to promote the GST. Governments have also used extensive direct mailing at election times, the Bracks Government making the 2002 list of the top ten national direct mailers behind Coles-Myer and Reader's Digest.

This book explores the damage caused by the growth of political advertising. The major parties and incumbent governments have been favoured and minor parties handicapped; political donors have gained influence while party members and community groups have lost. As the roles of marketing and communications experts have developed,

party members have become marginalised, the influence of corporate donors increasing as party membership has declined. Large advertising expenditure has in turn given governments greater leverage with the media. Young provides instances where political leaders have used their advertising budgets to punish or reward local media.

Readers may be surprised to learn that very few countries permit paid political advertising during election campaigns. Canada, New Zealand and Germany permit political advertising with strict controls on spending and timing. Only Taiwan, the United States and Australia permit paid political advertising with very few restrictions.



In Australia's case there is a three-day blackout in the electronic media which includes polling day. Such is the lack of regulation that Pauline Hanson is likely to remain the only campaigning politician to be charged, convicted and jailed.

Australia's major political parties enjoy taxpayer funding, unlimited private donations and no spending limits, a less regulated environment than even the US.

Other countries have regulations to improve the quality and fairness of political campaigns. France does not permit presidential candidates to use the flag, the national anthem or archival footage of opponents without their consent. By contrast, larrikin Australian advertising agencies have pioneered the use of simulation and enhancement, portraying Bob Hawke with Pinocchio's nose, and a shocked John Howard reading his bank balance at the ATM. Such is the dominance of negative advertising in Australia that during the 1996 campaign Paul Keating appeared on television more for the Coalition than for the ALP.

**G**IVEN THAT AUSTRALIA has the world's worst practice in regard to political advertising, there is much that can be improved. Young makes 18 recommendations for change that merit serious public discussion. These include independent scrutiny of government advertising, the reintroduction of campaign spending limits and more free time for political parties based on their verified number of members—a salutary proposal given that half the current membership of the Victorian ALP is reputed to be bogus.

In the PR State where policies are debated less, it has become more difficult to promote social justice and challenge powerful interests. Sally Young's book is therefore very important for those interested in political and social change. At a time of rigorous targeting of disability pensions and other benefits, the freewheeling use of taxpayers' money for party and government advertising may be an issue, like parliamentarians' superannuation, whose time has come. ■

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## Brilliant buddies

**The Born-Einstein Letters 1916–1955: Friendship, Politics and Physics in Uncertain Times, Max Born. New edition by Gustav Born. Macmillan, 2005. ISBN 1 403 94496 2, RRP \$49.95**

**F**IFTY YEARS AGO, on 18 April 1955, Albert Einstein died; hence it is timely to welcome this new edition of his correspondence with Max Born. Both men were renowned physicists, both were awarded a Nobel prize, both were born in Germany of Jewish parents and forced into exile by Hitler. They shared many interests, including music, Einstein playing the violin, Born the piano, when they both lived in Berlin many years ago. Although they sometimes strongly disagreed on scientific as well as political issues, their amicable correspondence reveals a deep-rooted friendship that stretched across half a century.

The present book, edited by Born's son Professor Gustav Born, of the William Harvey Research Institute at London University, follows the previous edition of 1971, itself a translation by Born's daughter Irene Newton-John, mother of the popular singer Olivia Newton-John, of the original German edition of 1969. The latter also contained several German poems by Max Born's wife Hedwig, generally known as Hedi. The translation of these letters as well as Born's commentaries, many of them full of technical scientific detail, was no mean achievement and deserves the highest praise. The 1971 edition also contained some fine photographs of Einstein, of Max and Hedi Born, and of the assembled members of the Fifth International Solvay Congress of Physicists. This also figured on the dust jacket of the original German edition and is reproduced in miniature on the jacket of the present book. The two English editions also include the 1924 drawing of Einstein by Max Born's brother Wolfgang.

In addition to the original foreword by Bertrand Russell and the introduction

by Born's one-time colleague Werner Heisenberg, the new edition is introduced by Gustav Born and features a lengthy new preface, by Diana Buchwald and Kip S. Thorne, which emphasises the valuable testimony of the letters to the development of modern science as well as portraying the writers' views on contemporary political and philosophical concerns.

**T**HE TONE OF THE LETTERS is friendly throughout, although Einstein, long settled at Princeton University in the United States, reacted rather vehemently when the Borns decided in 1953 to return to live in Germany. After Hitler came to power in 1933, Einstein had emigrated to the US and never returned to Germany, while the Born family had moved to Britain. After some years in Cambridge, Max Born was appointed Darwin's successor at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. On his retirement Max and Hedi decided to move to the picturesque German spa resort Bad Pyrmont where they had spent some time as a young engaged couple many years earlier. Einstein abhorred the idea, even when advised of the pressing financial reasons for the move from parsimonious Scotland to repentant Germany, where Born had been reinstated at Göttingen on full salary as Professor Emeritus. For Hedi the move to Pyrmont was especially welcome, as she had joined the Society of Friends (Quakers) in 1938, whose German headquarters were located at that pleasant resort, not far from Göttingen where her brother Rudi and his family still lived.

On scientific issues the two men also had their differences, especially on the subject of quantum mechanics, but even when their different views appeared in print, as for example on the question

of determinism, their friendship was not affected 'in the slightest degree'. As Born wrote in 1953: 'My feeling towards you is that of a cheeky urchin who can get away with certain liberties without offending you.'

Both Max Born and his wife were deeply concerned for the safety and welfare of other refugees, not least fellow scientists. Their letters often read like a catalogue of well-known names, including Nobel laureates, for the period of the two world wars and the Nazi horror years in between, among them Niels Bohr, James Franck, H. A. Lorentz, Max Planck, and Erwin Schroedinger. One who gained notoriety of a different sort was Klaus Fuchs, Born's colleague in Edinburgh, a very quiet man and a devoted communist who was later to pass atomic secrets to the Soviet Union.

**B**ORN SPEAKS OF 'the voluminous correspondence' he carried on, not only with Einstein, but with many people all over the world, on the subject of help for exiled scientists. If Einstein seemed more reserved, especially after the death of his second wife Ilse, 'who was more attached to human beings than I', it was because he felt that he could not recommend mediocrities without sacrificing his own credit in the scientific world. 'It is sad,' he wrote, 'that one is forced to treat human beings like horses where it matters only that they can run and pull, without regard to their qualities as *human beings*.'

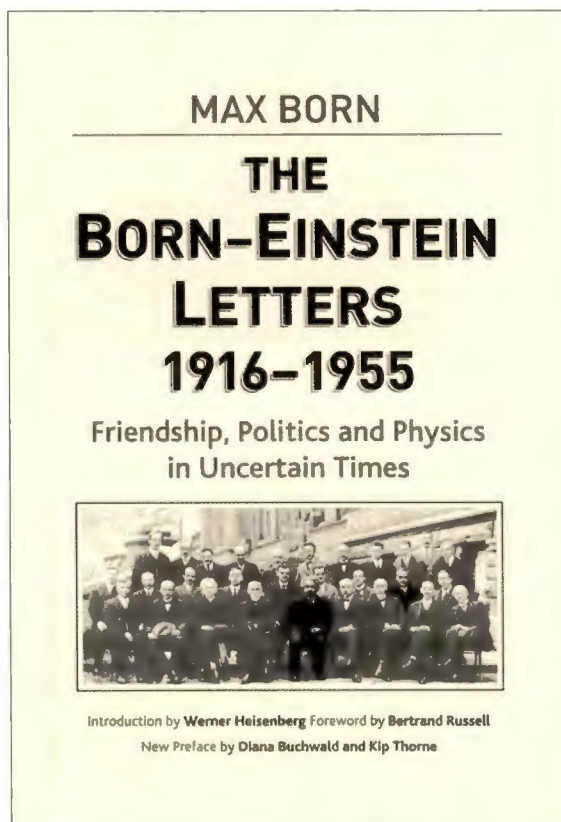
Not surprisingly, the correspondence between two highly intelligent men preserved in these pages reflects many of the problems and uncertainties of the first half of the 20th century. Born notes

camps, only to be confronted by the equal horror of nuclear fission. As Born was to write to Einstein in November 1953, 'The Americans have demonstrated in Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki that in sheer speed of extermination they surpass even the Nazis.'

Among the fascinating and erudite disquisitions on relativity, quantum mechanics, principles of optics and other such topics, there are occasional references to the Born family, their children Irene, Gritli and Gustav, especially in the letters to Einstein from Hedi Born. In July 1923 Einstein paid tribute to Hedi's 'contribution in physics, music, poetry and prose, as well as in cosy conviviality', and several years later she asked for his opinion on her play *A Child of America*, to which he responded as 'a quite successful satire on the contemporary scene ... witty and amusing throughout'.

Hedi Born was a gifted, sensitive, talented woman, at times decidedly headstrong, but thoroughly generous and lovable. She happened to have been my father's sister. ■

Professor **Ralph Elliott** was born in Berlin, educated in Germany and Scotland, served in the British Army in World War II, and has taught English language and literature, mainly medieval, in British and Australian universities. He is currently honorary librarian at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra.



the irreversible accumulation of ugly feelings of anger, revenge, and hatred in Germany after World War I, with the probability of major catastrophes resulting therefrom, as indeed happened. Fortunately both he and Einstein escaped the horrors of Nazi concentration

## Coming up — \$10,000!

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**Fifth prize:** \$300 worth of books

on stage



**H**ANNIE RAYSON'S NEW PLAY, *Two Brothers*, offers a bleak vision of a post-9/11 Australia in which political expediency, packaged and pitched as national security, has triumphed over moral decency and basic human rights.

The eponymous brothers are James 'Eggs' Benedict (Garry McDonald) and Tom Benedict (Nicholas Eadie), both members of a privileged class who were educated at an exclusive Melbourne private school.

But there the similarities end. Eggs has become Minister for Home Security, on the fast track to becoming the next Prime Minister; Tom is holding down a \$60,000-a-year job as head of an Australian aid agency. Remind you of anyone?

Into the brothers' lives comes Hazem Al Ayad (Rodney Afff), an Iraqi who is the sole survivor of an Indonesian fishing boat that sank near Ashmore Reef on Christmas Day, killing 250 men, women and children refugees, including Hazem's wife and children.

There's plenty of bad blood between Eggs and Tom, and when Tom (who takes on Hazem's case for legal asylum) slowly learns the truth about the boat's sinking, and his brother's (hence, the government's) complicity in it, that blood begins to boil.

*Two Brothers* is a fast-paced play that shifts frequently through many scenes, due in great part to the highly effective revolving set created by designer Stephen Curtis.

Hannie Rayson's satirical script is charged (and sometimes, perhaps, overcharged) with wit and verbal gags that provide comic relief from the play's dark themes.

In addition to the nationally prominent names dropped into the dialogue, Melbourne theatre-goers on opening night heard local in-jokes that will presumably be adapted for Sydney audiences when the play moves there later this month.



Garry McDonald, Caroline Brazier and Nicholas Eadie. Photo: Jeff Busby

The plot is tightly structured in the first act, which ends with a powerful atmosphere of suspense engendered by the device of a ringing mobile telephone (a prop used to humorous effect elsewhere in the play).

The second act careens towards farce, which perhaps is the playwright's intent, as the events it portrays so closely mirror those which actually surrounded the *Tampa* incident and the sinking of the SIEV X in 2001, in which 353 asylum seekers drowned.

The inevitable showdown between Eggs and Tom touches upon, but could have more fully explored, the hatred, treachery, jealousy, lies and deceit that can poison families. No one is left undamaged: Eggs's son Lachlan (Ben Lawson), a naval officer and would-be whistleblower, cannot in the end choose truth over familial loyalty; Tom's son Harry (Hamish Michael), a victim of his drug dependency, becomes the unwitting trump card in Eggs's final crushing hand over Tom.

Most pathetic of all is Eggs's wife Fiona (a difficult role played sympathetically by Diane Craig), who makes a desperate but failed attempt to break away from her husband, realising that she has never even been allowed by Eggs to grieve for their son who died of a drug overdose.

'I can't do this,' she says to Tom's feisty partner Ange Sidoropoulous (Laura Lattuada), who tells her to leave Eggs and come stay with them. 'I won't be the Prime Minister's wife.'

But in the play's most farcical scene, Eggs cajoles Fiona into staying by promising: 'You can live in Kirribilli and I can live

in Canberra. I wouldn't be the only PM to make his own arrangements in Canberra.'

'You're bad ... you're bad all the way through,' Fiona tells him. But then Eggs takes her in his arms and says: 'Let me love you all the way through.'

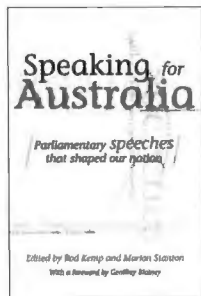
It's hard to hear a line like that uttered by someone with Garry McDonald's credentials as a comic actor without wanting to giggle. What self-respecting woman would fall for it? Especially after knowing that her husband has been shagging his 'senior adviser', the aptly named Jamie Savage (played with cold precision by Caroline Brazier).

But maybe that's a part of what Hannie Rayson is trying to say in *Two Brothers*. In a country where status and privilege and power politics in every sphere ultimately prevail over human decency, have we lost our minds? Our hearts?

This is a play about the real presence of evil in the world, and it is the deadly harm wrought by that evil that lingers, like the stench of bad eggs, long after the final curtain. Not the gags. They just make the message a little easier to take.

*Two Brothers*, presented by Melbourne Theatre Company and directed by Simon Phillips, plays in Melbourne at the Arts Centre Playhouse until 14 May, then tours to the Sydney Opera House from 19 May as part of Sydney Theatre Company's 2005 season. The production then continues to Canberra, Newcastle, Frenchs Forest and Wollongong, with Tony Llewellyn-Jones as Eggs Benedict. ■

**Robert Heffner** is the assistant editor of *Eureka Street*.



**Speaking for Australia: Parliamentary speeches that shaped our nation.** Edited by Rod Kemp and Marian Stanton. Allen & Unwin, 2004. ISBN 1 741 14430 2, RRP \$35

Most of the time Australian politics resembles the Lilliputians arguing over whether it is better to crack an egg at the big end or the little end. *Speaking for Australia*, edited by Liberal Senator Rod Kemp and Marian Stanton, is a collection that records the more significant moments.

*Speaking for Australia* covers many of Australia's more dramatic periods from Federation and the White Australia Policy to the Bali bombings and the invasion of Iraq. The choice of speeches raises questions at times. For example, Amanda Vanstone illuminates the stem-cell research debate by saying that 'the views ... to this bill depend on just what it is that comes out of the freezer'. And you have to wonder why Kemp included Simon Crean's bland and diplomatic welcome speech to George W. Bush in 2003. I am sure that these two speeches shaped no one, let alone the nation. *Speaking for Australia* can be dry, but this probably says more about recent Australian political history than anything else. That said, there are examples of speech-making eloquence, such as Gough Whitlam's post-dismissal speech: 'Well may we say "God Save the Queen", because nothing will save the Governor-General.'

By far the most sobering reading was Pauline Hanson's maiden speech. I wonder how controversial the words 'Wake up, Australia, before it is too late ...' would have been if uttered in 2005? This collection is worth having, if only as a useful reference.

—Godfrey Moase



**Direct action and democracy today,** April Carter. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. ISBN 0 745 6236 9, RRP \$56.95

I expected that this book would solely reflect Australia's experience in political life. I was wrong. April Carter explores different countries' experiences in the presence or absence of democracy.

Carter's book addresses complex political issues that may benefit academics and students of politics as a valuable research text.

She thoroughly analyses some countries' journey towards democracy (sometimes involving direct action) and reveals how those in power have responded to these actions.

The book is divided into chapters with subheadings, which allowed me to read sections that sounded interesting (and abandon them if they didn't hold my attention). I was interested in Carter's recognition that technological developments have exposed and aided those suffering under repressive regimes. For example, television coverage has raised the Western world's awareness of globalisation issues, including child labour, poverty, the abuse of natural resources and the devastating repercussions of war.

It's disappointing that the book was published before the Iraqi election in which citizens reasserted their identities as members of a democratic society through their right to vote, but overall, Carter's exploration of democracy and direct action in the world today is informative.

—Kathryn Page



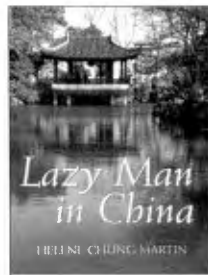
**Scraps of Heaven,** Arnold Zable. Text Publishing, 2004. ISBN 1 877 00886 9, RRP \$29.95

Arnold Zable's novel cements his reputation as one of Melbourne's great storytellers. Set in Carlton in 1958, it is made up of the inter-connecting stories of the immigrant families who call the area home and are trying to make a life for themselves in the *goldene medineh* (golden land) of Australia.

The principal characters, Romek and Zofia, are survivors of concentration camps, and Zable describes their memories of coming together and their irreparable drifting apart with skill and subtlety. Their stories, and those of others, do seem bleak. From the beer-swilling pool guard who is an 'ex-Mr Australia' to Romek, a poet with no means of expressing himself, lies the sense of unrealised potential, and the harshness of daily life stifling the dreams of those who wished to start anew. That said, the novel has many moments of humour and celebration, from a group of Yiddish actors who casually and affectionately insult one another to the stories of stylish Valerio's soccer prowess or teenagers rebelling by lying around listening to jazz.

There is a tendency for Zable to over-explain a character's state of mind. Sometimes gesture expresses a feeling with such precision that further explanation is not necessary—Romek's awkward attempts at embracing Zofia are even more poignant before they are described as a '*pas de deux* between two anguished souls'. But this is a minor complaint, and this is a thoughtful and well-rounded story of the experience of migrants, one in which even the desperate find the will to continue. As the cabaret specialist Potashinski says, 'Why wander around like farts in a barrel? The old world is gone. This is where we now belong, whether right or wrong.'

—Chloe Wilson



**Lazy Man in China,** Helene Chung Martin. Pandanus, 2005. ISBN 1 740 76128 6, RRP \$35

*Lazy Man in China* is told through a series of letters by John Martin, the husband of former ABC correspondent Helene Chung Martin. The letters document John's disdainful impressions of China in the early 1980s and his slow adaptation to his new life. Moving to China after his wife's posting as a foreign correspondent, John's letters provide witty, irreverent and humorous insights which will resonate with any person who has ever felt a long way from home. The strength of *Lazy Man in China* is the personal observations of a pre-Tiananmen Square Beijing. John writes, 'Beijing is a fascinating and most exotic place in a repressive and sinister sort of way.'

While an engaging historical read, *Lazy Man in China* is also a bittersweet love story; the letters were collated after John's death in 1993. The love story serves as a framework for the larger socio-political story. However for any serious detail about political change in an increasingly cosmopolitan Beijing, the reader will have to look beyond this paperback. *Lazy Man in China* is a good read for those wanting an insight into the massive changes happening in one of the world's most powerful countries.

—Kate Stowell



## Truth upon crushing truth

*Bad Education*, dir. Pedro Almodovar. Almodovar's narrative themes through a female perspective tend to inhabit a more optimistic, if chaotic, universe. However, he deals almost exclusively with male/male relationships in this movie. *Bad Education*'s dark world is one of cruel exchanges subject to immutable laws—money and advancement for youthful flesh. Love here is just a narcissistic projection, a delirium in which only the powerful can afford to indulge.

Ignacio, a sensitive, talented ten-year-old, is a boarder at a Catholic school in the Spain of the 1950s. Father Manolo, his literature teacher, fawns on him and then sexually abuses him. Twenty years later, Ignacio is a heroin-addicted drag queen on the skids who decides to blackmail Manolo (who certainly 'owes him'). His plans to make Manolo pay for his cosmetic surgery seem as pathetic and hopeless as his dreams of getting clean. Yet the story he writes wields the power to set the wheels of fate (and the plot) turning. It is titled *The Visit* because it has a fantasy dénouement of the adult Ignacio visiting the priest and confronting him. Gael Garcia Bernal (*Motorcycle Diaries*, *Amores Perros*) has depth and range as Juan, Ignacio's beautiful younger brother who steals his story and identity in order to scam successful young film director Enrique into making it into a movie.

Enrique, who was Ignacio's best friend (and first crush) at school, cynically allows himself to be snowed into casting Juan in the starring role as Ignacio. He soon sees through Juan's lies but is curious, and he desires Juan enough to let him move in with him. Enrique can also drive a hard bargain. On yet another level, Enrique is very much Almodovar's alter ego, lampooning his own early directorial attempts.

*The Visit* (the film-within-the-film) is a surreal high-camp pastiche with 'bells and smells' ecclesiastical stylings very reminiscent of Pierre and Gilles's homoerotic religious imagery.

Almodovar's treatment of clerical child sex abuse seems reduced to a lubricious farce at times (though certainly not at others) and makes very uncomfortable watching. It would be easy to hate *Bad Education* for this alone, but it defies a simple analysis (or even a complex one) because nothing is ever quite what it seems to be. Each character's story extinguishes the truth of someone else's. It's equally valid to interpret aspects of *The Visit* as a romanticised backstory; wilful self-deceit; the inability of experience to revisit innocence; and, of course, lies. Oddly, the lies and stories never obscure the significance of people's actions—it's when a character makes his move that you see him for what he is.

It spans the '50s, '60s and '70s with signature fashions and zeitgeist, mocking the illusions of those decades as they pass. Just brilliant. A tip: don't miss the start.

—Lucille Hughes

## Drifting along

*Young Adam*, dir. David Mackenzie. Joe (Ewan McGregor) is a drifter—sort of. He's also a writer—but not quite. Nothing really moves him, and no one really touches him. Despite this, Joe is far from a blank space; he is closer to a rain shower in a world of cold unresolved morality, in which everyone gets soaked to the bone.

Based on Alexander Trocchi's '50s Beat novel of the same name (co-adapted for the screen by Trocchi and Mackenzie), *Young Adam* faithfully follows the nihilistic vision of its author. Stepping on life with an ambiguous, unresolved tread, it refuses to wrap up storylines and characters, instead treating them with an off-hand emptiness which is in turns both true and null.

Joe lives on a barge with Les (Peter Mullen) and his wife Ella (Tilda Swinton), working the canals between Glasgow and Edinburgh. One afternoon Joe and Les pull a woman's body from the Clyde. And while this might seem a standard start for a thriller, *Young Adam* is far from a genre piece. There are court scenes and villains but not the ones British TV has taught us to recognise. The villain of this piece is emptiness—cold, hard indifference.

Before long we suspect Joe knows more about the floating corpse than he is letting on. Moving between flashbacks and the

present we gain insights into the crisis of Joe's unsettled life. Never does the film try to explain the emotional state of its main character; it just drifts along with an unnerving lack of comment. While this is indeed one of the film's strengths, it is also a strange frustration. Mackenzie has certainly embraced the Beat Generation's love affair with the emotional drifter and worked it as a storytelling device as well as a character trait for his film's main protagonist (a word that gives more hero status to Joe than is fitting).

But ultimately the film's lack of emotional ruminating lends a certain moral judgment of its own. The filmmaker follows this graceless drifter at the expense of most of the characters he bumps up against, and it's nothing short of brutal. De liberate, I'm sure, but I wonder to what end?

But even with faults and uncertainties, *Young Adam* is a film worth seeing—if for no other reason than to remember that Ewan McGregor really can act when not encumbered with a light sabre.

—Siobhan Jackson

## Life in the grey zone

*Look at Me*, dir. Agnes Jaoui. *Look at Me* is a film that emphasises the frustrating aspect of subtitles. Because it is both performance-based and dialogue-driven, you spend half the time reading when all you want to do is watch the actors. Then you come out feeling like you missed something. But this is about the harshest thing you could say about *Look at Me*, which surely means it's worth the effort.

Lolita (Marilou Berry) is the daughter of Etienne (Jean-Pierre Bacri), a successful French writer, as obnoxious as he is famous. Lolita is the student of singing teacher Sylvia (Agnes Jaoui), who goes out of her way to help Lolita, hoping a connection with Etienne will be useful to her husband Pierre (Laurent Grévill), a struggling novelist.

Lolita, overweight and lacking in confidence, is convinced that the people in her life like her only because of her father—which is overwhelmingly the case.

*Look at Me* has set the cult of image firmly in its sights. Lolita is told every day by magazines and television—and, most importantly, by her father—that she isn't pretty enough to be an actor, or a singer, or a model, or loved.



*Look at Me* also explores the self-indulgence of the literary society and the day-to-day shallowness of middle-class life, without ever lecturing its audience. The characters are artfully drawn and lovable, despite their passive-aggressive manipulations and blind prejudices (Etienne's nickname for his daughter is 'my big girl'). It is this attention to the subtle truths of human behaviour that makes you want to go away and learn French so as to experience its observations with more immediacy—without the filter of subtitles.

With an emphasis on performance, the camera is used to minimal effect. (You would, in fact, be forgiven for thinking you were watching well-written, well-acted television.) Writer-director Agnes Jaoui isn't interested in dazzling you with cinema—this is about the people. As the film pushes forward, over a period of six months, we sense that these characters do indeed exist outside the film, and that we are privy to just a few select moments from their lives. There isn't so much as a clever shot or a cut to remind us that we're watching a film. The actors do all the work.

It is sometimes difficult to be seduced by a story with a warts-and-all approach to its characters. Lolita's self-pity is unappealing, her father's self-centredness crude. But when so many films depict individuals as morally black or white, with a chasm of nothing in between, it is refreshing to see one that revels in the grey zone of ordinary people.

—Zane Lovitt

## Riveting and rollicking

*Robots*, dir. Chris Wedge. Ever thought your left arm was just a tad outmoded, or that your right ear could do with a little reshaping? Perhaps you dream of an extreme makeover? 'Why be you when you can be NEW?' Well, it's easy: just get yourself a ticket to Robot City, the great metropolis where everything old can be new again ... for a price.

Starry-eyed Rodney Copperbottom (voiced by Ewan McGregor) lives in the little hamlet of Rivet Town. His mum



Scenes from *Young Adam* (above) and *Look at Me* (left).

and dad built him from the ground up, literally, following an instruction sheet in a box of pots, pans and metal plates. They lovingly upgrade him every year with hand-me-down bits and bobs. And so he grows into a fine, upstanding young robot, full of big dreams and pop rivets.

While the Copperbottoms have a lot of love they don't have much ready cash. One year Rodney's upgrade is a hand-me-down from his cousin—a *girl* cousin (remember the old 'Don't worry, son, no one will notice you're wearing a *skirt*' routine from childhood?) And it is these hilarious, 'true-life' tidbits that really breathe life into the otherwise mechanical protagonists of *Robots*.

Rodney is an inventor. But to realise his dream of filling the world with inventive wonder he must leave his parents and go to Robot City. There lives his idol, the colossal and wonderful wizard of invention (not to mention TV stardom) Bigweld (Mel Brooks). Famous for his magnanimous catchcry 'See a need, fill a need', Bigweld is an old-fashioned industrialist, peddling promise and hope for a brave new world.

But all is not what it seems under the bright lights of the big city.

Fresh off the train from Rivet Town, Rodney heads straight for the sparkling (and supposedly open to anyone) gates of Bigweld's head office, only to find that Bigweld has been ousted by sleazeball corporate operator Ratchet (Greg Kinnear), and his maniacal scrap-metal-dealing mother, Madame Gasket (Jim Broadbent). Rodney is devastated—but all is not lost. Taken in by a motley crew of rusty old misfits, known commonly as 'outmodes', Rodney discovers his true calling and finds himself a leader of the downtrodden (or more specifically, unemployed tin cans, rust buckets, rickety toaster ovens, fat-bottomed robotic aunts ... you get the idea).

And as rust follows rain, a Samson vs Goliath battle ensues.

*Robots* creates a witty parallel world that resembles a strange animated mix of Fritz Lang and Frank Capra. And with sentiment aplenty (in its most charming get-up, I hasten to add), it takes a well-oiled look at familial love, honour, romance and good old-fashioned corporate greed.

All the voices are done with an appropriate degree of madness. Robin Williams puts in a classic 'talk through wet cement' performance as Rodney's friend Fender, and the likes of Stanley Tucci, Dianne Wiest, James Earl Jones and Drew Carey (to mention but a few) lend their voices to even out the mix.

*Robots* is good, sharp, witty fun. No nuts and bolts about it!

—Siobhan Jackson



# Lest we forget

**‘Y**OU STUPID BOY ...’

One of my favourite lines in one of my favourite shows, *Dad’s Army*. I love the theme song:

*Who do you think that you’re kidding, Mr Hitler,  
If you think old England’s done?*

Arthur Lowe as Captain Mainwaring—think of that resonant, baritone voice, delivered so often in tones of exasperation with some dithering dolt, usually Pike. Yet the sternness was reassuring somehow. After all, in the world they were fighting for, ‘stupid boys’ such as Pike were cared for instead of being sterilised or euthanised. Pompous as he was, Mainwaring embodied the best of ordinary Brits: that sense of the ridiculous, asperity that wasn’t mean—and matter-of-fact courage when required. His decrepit bumbler was the Home Guard of Walmington-on-Sea. This remnant was the last line of defence against the super-efficient Wehrmacht. If it went bad with the best of the fighting men, they would make the last stand. (They would have been Britain’s Fretlin, I suppose.)

My dad was unable to fight in the war, unlike his brother George. Dad had glasses as thick as prisms and a twisted foot. He kept trying to enlist whenever things took a turn for the worse. ‘Do you need me yet?’ he’d ask. ‘No, not yet, Mr Hughes,’ they’d reply.

Dad was working as an engineering inspector at Fairey’s Aviation in Manchester by day, and worked the night roster as an air-raid warden. The industrial north of England was a prime target for the Nazis, so he saw plenty of enemy action without gaining any uniformed glory. He was one of that unsung army who was prepared to fight them, as Churchill said in those dark days of mid-1940, ‘on the beaches, on the landing grounds, in the fields and in the streets, in the hills’.

Dad’s and Uncle George’s stories come back to me when I consider the upcoming series on SBS *As It Happened: Germany’s War*. It’s going to organise Saturday evenings at 7.30 here at Emoh Ruo for some time to come because it lasts for nine weeks through May and June. It covers the final two years of the war, when the tide finally began to turn against the Nazis. It’s one of the most compelling war documentaries ever; the product of inspired collaboration between ZDF (the German TV channel), the American History Channel, Channel 4 and Russian TV.

‘Bit of an antidote to *Private Ryan*, isn’t it?’ says my beloved.

I remember that movie: it was much less historically accurate than *Dad’s Army*. Churchill’s ‘fight them on the beaches’ speech came four years earlier, at a time when the Americans hadn’t felt moved to do anything yet; when their jury, so to speak, was still out on whether they would actually enter the war on the side of the guy who seemed to be so sound on matters of race.

‘Hah, once they had been arse-kicked into the fight, they talked like they were the only ones fighting the Nazi hordes,’ I say, thumping the arm of the chair.

‘Oh God, she’s channelling Churchill again,’ says my beloved. ‘Juliette, are you there? I want to talk to Juliette ...’

‘Give her tea,’ says our son, at this juncture.

‘I’m adding a Tim Tam,’ I hear my husband saying, through the red, white and blue mist.

Episode 1 of *As It Happened* covers D-Day, the ‘longest day’, 6 June 1944, when the Allies landed in Normandy at five beaches code-named Utah, Gold, Juno, Sword and Omaha. The documentary interviews soldiers from all sides including German. But I have an account from Uncle George (he who was rescued from Dunkirk carrying a piano accordion he’d bought in a French bar, and had to chuck it into the sea as the little boat was overloaded). He is still mystified about the cock-up that led to the carnage of the American troops on Omaha beach as they ran into a steady stream of Nazi bullets, turning the sea into viscous red soup. In the meantime, only a short distance away, British forces were landing without much trouble. He said (it seemed to be a generally held impression among British soldiers) that the further away you were from the Yanks, the safer—because, even if their generals weren’t flinging them straight into the Nazi guns, they themselves were trigger-itchy; friendly fire was an ever-present danger.

**N**OTHING CHANGES—ask the lads in Iraq. Uncle George’s son is in the Regulars and saw action in Basra. We all hope he can stay far away from the Americans. Another SBS documentary, at 8.30pm on Tuesday, 3 May—*Cutting Edge: A Soldier’s Heart*—looks at the problems that beset the ordinary US soldier caught up in hideous situations. A nervous over-reaction can lead to tragedy, because soldiers who are constantly insecure become over-vigilant. This doesn’t, unfortunately, mean that they notice everything that they should, because anxiety cloaks reality. It looks as though Iraq is a place where everyone can lose.

Subsequent episodes of *Germany’s War* show that Americans weren’t the only ones with bad judgment. Watching the 14 May episode, you’ll be fascinated and angry. The terrible blunder at Monte Cassino monastery was the fault of New Zealand’s General Sir Bernard Freyberg. He caused the deaths of the Benedictine monks and hundreds of Italian refugees, and also gave the Nazis a huge military advantage as they dug into the ruins and killed many Allies, including Aussies, from their fine new vantage point.

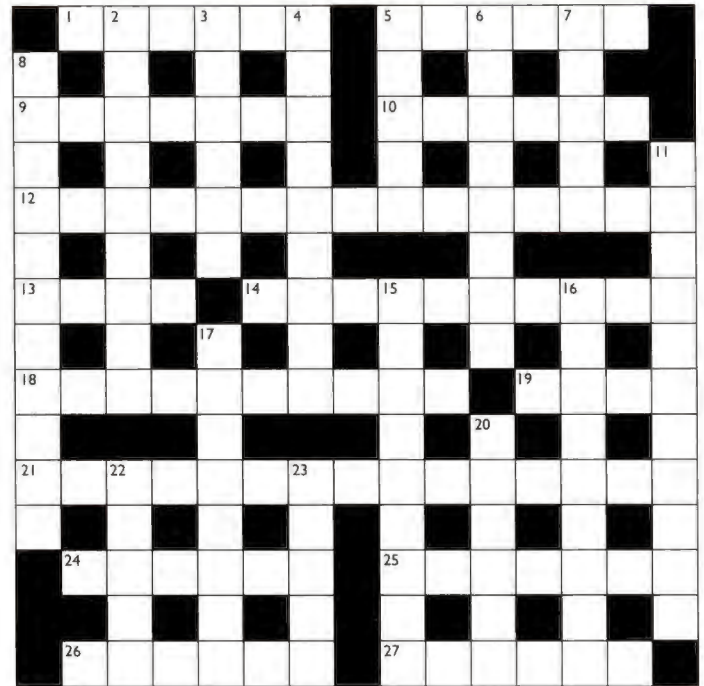
Clever men can be a lot more threatening than stupid boys. Lest we forget. ■

**Juliette Hughes** is a freelance writer.



### ACROSS

1. Distress call to join the pole dance? (6)
5. The trouble with the subject is its import. (6)
9. Heavenly being hovers over America reciting this joyfully. (7)
10. Conventional figure is above board. (6)
12. The Brontes, for example, visit the Blue Mountains for this view. (3, 5, 7)
13. Strikes occurring in Whitsuntide. (4)
14. Liable for adjustment, perhaps, Vita taped a different program. (10)
18. Left Raymond briefly in Germany for a start, possibly painting pictures. (10)
19. Oddly, gold utterly in oversupply. (4)
21. Sort of decision taken without thinking it through—not much time! (4, 2, 3, 6)
24. Wanders away from saintly beams of light? (6)
25. Frying pan poor, perhaps, but worth taking for a trial period. (2, 5)
26. Good looking? Rather! (6)
27. Legatees take initially what belongs to them. (6)



### DOWN

2. Month when so-called adviser became the one who increased production. (9)
3. Blue flowers cut at the site of the oracle. (6)
4. Eye strayed out east! Was it last night? (9)
5. One of the nine sisters, she gazes meditatively. (5)
6. It may be rash; duty, however, requires us to keep holy this time of the ascent. (8)
7. Eastern lake can be uncanny. (5)
8. Pat's pet shot unexpectedly over the finishing line. (4, 3, 4)
11. Extra big temporary shelter at headless 'Lion Inn' is noted for its showiness. (11)
15. Ten days after 6-down, write the price—breathlessly. (9)
16. The sick modify grumpiness. (3-6)
17. To be downright about decapitated animal is very high-handed. (8)
20. Give party on nature strip—don't consider boring old city! (6)
22. Speak arrant nonsense, perhaps. (5)
23. Exam at beginning of year makes one cantankerous. (5)

### Solution to Crossword no. 132, April 2005



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