

# EUREKA STREET

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“The major religious traditions have not engaged adequately with the international law of human rights. These standards offer an understanding of the “rock bottom of human existence” that needs to be reckoned with rather than ignored or undermined.”

## Hilary Charlesworth

*On religions and human rights*

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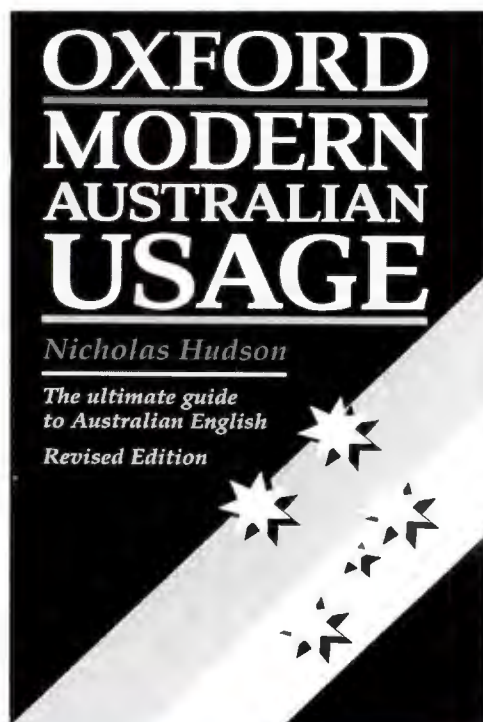
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## CONTENTS

4

COMMENT

7

CAPITAL LETTER

8

LETTERS

10

THE MONTH'S TRAFFIC

16

SECRETS AND LIES

Margaret Simons on Adelaide's rumours and what lies behind them.

19

ARCHIMEDES

20

THE WEDGE GETS THICKER

Managerial culture and political expedience are eroding hard-won democratic procedures, says Moira Rayner.

22

ROBBEN ISLAND, A TALE TO TELL

Mark Thomas visits the site of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment.

23

SUMMA THEOLOGIAE

24

NO PRINCIPLED REASON

Hilary Charlesworth on human rights and religious traditions.

32

TRAHISON DES CLERCS

Andrew Hamilton charts the growing antipathy to refugees' rights in Howard government policies.

36

BOOKS

Jim Davidson & Peter Steele on expatriatism in Ian Britain's *Once an Australian: Journeys with Barry Humphries, Clive James, Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes*; John Senty reviews *A People's Tragedy: the Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (p41); Paul Tankard measures *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber* by Nicholson Baker (p44); Frank Jackson approves *The Oxford Modern Australian Usage* while Michael McGirr reviews Trevor Hay & Fang Xiangshu's *Black Ice: A Story of Modern China* (p45).

39

POETRY

*Leaving Mantua* by Peter Porter.

46

THEATRE

Geoffrey Milne reviews the *Festival of the Dreaming*.

48

FLASH IN THE PAN

Reviews of the films *LA Confidential*, *The Last of the High Kings*, *The Full Monty*, *The Daytrippers*, *Hercules* and *Gattaca*.

50

WATCHING BRIEF

51

SPECIFIC LEVITY

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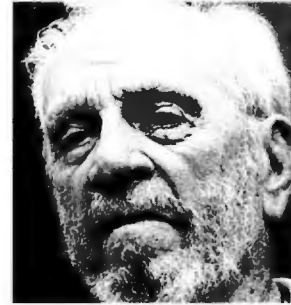
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IN MEMORIAM

JACK WATERFORD

In May 1995, *Eureka Street's* columnist, and editor of the *Canberra Times*, Jack Waterford, wrote a long piece about his friend, Dr Herbert Cole Coombs, the man all Australia knew as Nugget. We reproduce a portion of it here, upon his death, as a tribute to the man who lent dignity, excitement and stature to the idea of public service in Australia. We have not changed the tense: the present seemed appropriate to Nugget Coombs' remarkable legacy. —M.F.



**N**UGGET COOMBS HAS BEEN the greatest living Australian for so long that he has almost vanished into the scenery, his nagging and very modern messages almost taken for granted.

If he had died before this writer-grandfather was born, his position in the history books would already have been secure. He is the last of a generation of public servants of enormous intellectual breadth who had seemed, even then, to have dabbled in everything. He had been a school teacher in rural Western Australia, horrifying school inspectors in the mid-1930s by teaching *The Waste Land* to his students. He had studied at the London School of Economics, where he was caught up in the ferment and excitement created by the publication, in 1936, of Keynes' *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*—'for me the most seminal intellectual event of our time'.

For Coombs, Keynes' achievement clearly lay not in the work's explanations of economic activity—indeed later he was to see their limitations, and expand on them—but in its recognition that social, political and other 'non-economic' objectives could be inserted into the processes of allocating resources and setting priorities. Human communities, Coombs came to understand, could consciously shape the context in which the lives of their members were led.

... At retirement 30 years ago ... he was to play a major role in Commonwealth funding for the arts, and the further expansion of universities. And in 1967 he became involved in Aboriginal affairs, first as a member of the three-man council to advise Holt on taking up the mandate given by the referendum, then to fight a holy war against the assimilationist policies and practices then in vogue.

... His faith in the human spirit, his optimism make some people think him a mere romantic. But at the core of a man Mick Dodson, Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner, called the 'whitefellas' most senior elder' is someone who is ever practical, talking about real people doing real things down at the ground in real communities. We need a few more public servants like him.

—Jack Waterford, May 1995.

# Bougainville waits

A TRUCE HAS BEEN DECLARED on Bougainville as I write, but a final settlement seems a long way off.

The infamous Leo Nuia, now Brigadier General and CO of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF)—he, who with a wry smile, owned up on TV in early 1991 to the ‘St Valentine’s Massacre’ of the previous year—has declared an end to restrictions of movement and access. The terrorist, Sylvester Vane, is tolerated in Sohano hospital after a serious road accident, although only last December he was alleged to be responsible for the deaths of three soldiers at Siara near Buka Strait. No pay-back? Well, not for the moment anyway.

The New Zealand government deserves congratulations for sponsoring the two conferences at the austere military camp at Burnham near Christchurch. The Burnham II Declaration was signed by delegations from the PNG National Government (including the four Bougainville MPs), the Bougainville Transitional Government (BTG, set up by former Prime Minister Chan and the late Theodore Miriung in early 1995) and the two rebel organisations via the Bougainville Interim Government (BIG, set up by the Unilateral Declaration of Independence on 17 May 1990) and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA, 1989).

Signatories included Nuia and three of his officers, two senior police, 21 ‘Resistance’ (i.e. anti-BRA), and 36 BRA commanders led by ‘General’ Sam Kauona and his Chief of Staff, Ishmael Toroama, who also knows what it is like to be seriously wounded.

One problem, however, is that the BIG political supremo, Francis Ona, self-elected ‘father of the nation of Bougainville (or ‘Meekamui’, ‘sacred land’, as he liked to call it) was not at Burnham and has not agreed to the truce. This is in line with his absence from former colloquies and his failure to endorse agreements signed by his own delegates. In fact, some of his supporters were reported to have attacked the Catholic Girls High School during the recent conference but they may have been mavericks.

Ona’s attitude is not clear, nor is the degree to which he may be captive to cultic intransigence. There is a die-hard group in his mountainous hinterland who were opposed to releasing the five soldiers captured last year and the briefly-abducted provincial MP, John Momis, as an irenic gesture before Burnham II. They may have Ona in thrall.

Moreover, he is constantly reassured via satellite phone by Australian supporters who gave it to him that there is no need for compromise: attrition is bringing victory, the PNGDF is in disarray and the UN

will eventually recognise the rebel claim for an act of self-determination.

However, Joseph Kabui, former premier and leader of the BIG/BRA delegation to Burnham I, is in favour of the truce. His supporters are better armed than Ona’s and a confrontation will not be a complete surprise as the more pragmatic rebels respond to village war-weariness. Officials on both sides now have to monitor the truce and plan for a leader’s meeting which Prime Minister Skate seems prepared to attend, and which is scheduled for some time before 31 January.

Naturally, special emphasis is being given to reconciliation and rehabilitation. One of the perennial grievances in Bougainville has been its alleged neglect by central government. The present climate is not propitious for remedying that.

The current famine in the Highlands of PNG is the greatest catastrophe in that region in its brief recorded history. Loss of life may well run into five figures; general debilitation will be long-term. Staple tree-crops are being ruined; water shortages have reduced productivity in the mineral sector just as prices have slumped. Even Bougainville with its usual high rainfall is suffering under El Niño. While, from a conservation point of view, a lapse in logging is not unwelcome, it reduces government revenue. All these flow into increased unemployment, worsening law and order problems and the discomfiture of government.

Australian aid will also be stretched. Already there has been disquiet that assistance to Bougainville will be subtracted from the overall PNG package. It would be unhelpful if there were to be a conflict of priorities—the blighted Highlands, or Bougainville with its self-inflicted wounds.

FORTUNATELY THERE ARE INDICATIONS that the United Nations Development Program will be available for Bougainville but this does not promote Port Moresby’s image as a benign overlord.

But let us assume that the peace process *per se* develops a momentum that not even Ona can frustrate without being dealt with by his compatriots. Whatever is decided at the January leaders’ meeting, disarmament can hardly be achieved without an expensive peace-keeping force.

Some rebels and their Australian supporters fantasise about a UN force. The UN has no such ambition: it has other priorities and, not being receptive to secession movements, regards

Bougainville as PNG's affair, albeit one in which the world body purports to be solicitous of human rights.

Little can be expected from New Zealand which did not shoulder the transport costs for Burnham and would have inadequate logistics for even a small contingent on Bougainville. As Kissinger famously said, 'New Zealand is a dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica.'

How supportive is Canberra prepared to be? Not all policy makers see Bougainville as particularly important to Australia.

Present indications suggest that a leaders' conference will be readily deadlocked. Rebel spokesmen assert an inalienable right to self-determination—a dubious claim, even if it were possible to frame and stage a referendum under non-intimidatory conditions. It cannot be claimed that Port Moresby was repressive prior to the rebellion. Bougainville had a comfortable degree of autonomy and was the most prosperous province in PNG. The rebellion resulted from specific local

grievances in the mining area, and these would have been at least alleviated if not rectified, by Prime Minister Namaliu's compensatory package of May 1989. Mining degradation aside, it is the rebels who have destroyed Bougainville.

Port Moresby will not relinquish Bougainville or readily concede a free association status such as the Cook Islands (not, in any case a happy example) has with New Zealand, even though there has been loose talk, by no less than Sir Michael Somare, in PNG, and some New Zealand officials would see a salutary lesson for Australia and a gain for their national influence in achieving it. There is no sign, however, that Port Moresby has seriously considered giving Bougainville a special status that clearly falls short of virtual independence, although that would, in the foreseeable term, appear to be the only way to go. ■

**James Griffin** is a writer and critic and Professor Emeritus of the University of Papua New Guinea.

#### OBITUARY

PHIL CROTTY

**O**N MONDAY 27 OCTOBER, news was received by phone from Hazaribag, Bihar, India that Father A.T. Thomas sj had been beheaded in a village 30 kms southwest of Hazaribag.

As far as we can work it out, the story is this. Thomas had just returned to Hazaribag from Manila where he had gone to do studies that would help in his work for the Harijans (untouchables) of the villages close to Hazaribag. Work among these people had been pioneered by Fr Peter Doherty about 25 years ago. He was followed by Fr Tony Herbert, and then by a number of young Indian Jesuits.

Prominent among these was Thomas, affectionately known as A.T., who had been in theology during the heady days of decree 4 (The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice, 1974) and had joined in the work for the 'dalits' (the oppressed) that had been initiated by Peter and Tony. He was particularly interested in helping the children of untouchables to achieve basic literacy. These children were not able to attend the local schools during the day because their parents needed their labour, so Thomas and his companions started night schools, and gradually developed a network of such schools throughout the environs of Hazaribag. When he and his teachers sat with the village people at night they heard horrendous stories of injustice. Gradually they became involved in their struggle.

Eighteen months ago A.T. was sent to Manila to do further study in sociology. In September he returned to India and the villages around Hazaribag to complete work on his thesis. On the morning of Friday, October 24 he was with a Jesuit companion,



A.T. Thomas sj, 1951–1997

George Thomas, in a school they had built in Rajhar village. George returned to Hazaribag and A.T. decided to go to Sirka village, about 3 kms away. From this point on the news is largely hearsay, but it seems that he arrived in Sirka. A rumour came back to Hazaribag that he had been kidnapped by a group of strangers. The news of the kidnapping reached Hazaribag that night, but the Jesuits acted cautiously, because they knew that a precipitous move would result in further trouble for the villagers and A.T. himself.

On Saturday and Sunday all efforts were made to find out where he was and whether there would be a demand for ransom—often the practice in this type of kidnapping. By Sunday evening the strong rumour was that A.T. had been beaten and killed. On Monday, October 27 his decapitated and battered body was seen in a river bed not far from Sirka.

The police were informed. As I write, the body is being brought to Hazaribag for post mortem and burial. His head has not been recovered.

A.T. was 46 years old. He entered the Society of Jesus at the age of 17 and was ordained in 1981. He took his final vows in 1991. Bright in studies, he became an enthusiastic student of liberation theology and admired those people—Jesuits among them—who had given their lives for the poor in Latin America and elsewhere in the world.

He will be remembered for his courage, his humour, his love of friends and his total commitment to the oppressed. ■

**Phil Crotty sj** is a member of the Hazaribag Jesuit Province. He has lived and worked in India for 45 years.



JACK WATERFORD

# Changing of the guard

**W**ILL CHERYL KERNOT be good for the Labor Party? On the face of it, the answer has to be yes. Not only is she a catchcard who has earned enormous public goodwill, but she has a capacity to strike for the emotions that no other current politician in the Labor party—or for that matter in the Liberal Party—has. Kim Beazley and some others of his frontbench are perfectly competent speakers, but not one of them has been able to articulate the hymn of discontent about the style of the Howard Government that Kernot was able to present in her dramatic resignation from the Democrats. A devastating critique and an appeal both to the Labor Party heart and to its mind.

Or was it? For all the style, and not a little substance, it was populist stuff. From a different end of the spectrum to that of the other most remarkable woman in Australian politics, Pauline Hanson, but appealing to many of the same fundamental discontents out in the community. Not, of course, the discontent about Aborigines or migrants, but about the politics of economic and employment insecurity, the feeling that life is getting out of control, that government is no longer effectively helping people or creating the circumstances where they do not need help; the feeling of social, political and economic drift, that was aptly underlined a few weeks ago by the wide gyrations on the stock exchange, and accentuated by the feeling that the Howard Government cannot articulate a vision for the future direction of the country.

It's the sort of unease that John Howard used with such effectiveness to woo battler votes from Labor. Howard has, by now, had time to demonstrate that, while he can mine such insecurity for votes, it has been just his sort of approach that has created such disillusion. But what is no longer so clear is whether those who are disillusioned merely want more caring and sharing and more intervention—the prescription for the reinvented Labor Party that Kernot advocates.

Because Kernot's new Labor is in many respects old Labor, stripped of some of the less attractive trade union base. Cheryl Kernot is a more effective public performer than many of her new colleagues, but the failure of Labor's leadership to sell a message of discontent with the current government is not merely a matter of want of slogans or sincere looks. It is because Labor has by no means abandoned the market, is by no means determined yet to see large scale intervention as the solution to all of the economic ills, or necessarily back into the use of the taxation or welfare system to deliver services to the middle class. A large part of the party yearns for this, and not a little of its membership, but many are far from sure that it is good policy or good politics. In many of the areas in which Howard is vulnerable—cuts to hospitals, nursing homes, education and so on—Howard can claim, with justice, that he is merely doing at a faster pace what Labor had been doing before.

If Labor wants to do it any differently, then they also want higher taxes to fund the doing, a point Howard will be able to make at election, even with his own baggage of tax changes. The sort of health, welfare, labour market and education industry programs Kernot favours, even as a mere restoration, cannot be funded by any redirection of existing resources within

government, a point which Treasuries and Finance Departments will make, in a nicely apolitical way of course, via the new Charter of Government Honesty program at election time. The international deficit daleks care less about levels of government spending than about whether the revenue rises to meet it.

There is a perfectly respectable case for higher taxes—Australian taxes are low by international standards—but is Labor prepared to put that case? Politically, to do so would be almost impossible if all that Labor were talking about was a restoration of rights once thought to exist. Whatever the electorate wants, it is unlikely to be persuaded that it made a disastrous mistake and needs a Keating-style government back again. And people may resent losing their own entitlements—say to child care, higher education or nursing homes. But the popular image, rightly or wrongly, of much social welfare spending is that it has gone in the past to the undeserving, or that it does little to change outcomes.

**T**HIS IS WHY HOWARD can get away with mean-spirited cuts to Aboriginal affairs or to labour market programs, and why flim-flam schemes such as work-for-the-dole charades are so popular in the electorate. And this is why the warm, caring and sharing feel of Blair Labour in Britain or Clinton in the United States is so tightly focused, and often actually occurs as public relations during cutbacks.

Which is not to say that intervention programs, even ones that cost money, cannot be sold. But, in a vision-vacuum they may be more easily sold as grand national programs to renew the education sector or the quality of health care, to develop some region or some industry sector, while other parts of government expenditure are kept under a tight rein. This is not to say that Labor should not be targeting some key discrepancies and promising specific changes. It is striking, for example, that a government which has made such claims to be family-centred is vulnerable over having families pay more for child care, tertiary education and nursing homes—from cradle to grave, as it were.

The problem, however, is also one of saying no—a problem with which, Kernot, in her old life as a Democrat, was relatively unfamiliar. The Democrats could empathise with almost everybody.

There is every evidence that Kernot has the mental toughness to change now that she has decided that politics is about seeking and exercising actual power. And change she must. Certainly she has a capacity to project an optimistic image of an Australia of the twenty-first century, a ideal of relationship between government and citizen, of standards for politicians, some civility and a wider inclusiveness than the present government can manage.

Just how well she can match that with what Labor will be prepared or forced to do about economic management—about actually delivering goods and services to the community, or about manipulating the economic levers—we will have to see.

Will the bastards be honest enough for her? ■

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

## Dead cert

*From Emeritus Professor J. J. C. Smart AC*  
The Prime Minister has been reported as saying, at the time of the South Pacific Forum, that there was quite a bit of debate among experts about the greenhouse effect, and that it was 'not all one way'. (The *Australian Financial Review*, September 19, p11). This seems to me to suggest an inability on his part to understand the concept of *expected utility*. When making a decision one should multiply the *probabilities* of the possible consequences of an action by their (positive or negative) utilities. Thus (roughly speaking) a 20 per cent probability of five million deaths is equivalent to a certainty of one million deaths. Now the consequences of a greenhouse effect would be so horrendous that we should take action against it even though its probability was relatively low. A five per cent chance of a super-disaster can still be equivalent to a super-disaster. We are not naturally good at thinking about worldwide catastrophes because we have only recently acquired the technology to cause them. For this reason I suggest that very elementary probability and decision theory should be taught in all primary schools. Then eventually we might have more politicians who require less than near-100 per cent certainty before they have the will to take action. Like Mr Howard I am a very patriotic Australian, but we must also think globally. Moreover if the world goes, we go too.

**J.J.C. Smart**  
Canberra, ACT

## No thank you

*From Peter Beilharz.*  
Inasmuch as Tim Bonyhady's essay (*Eureka Street*, October) refers to my book on Bernard Smith, *Imaging the Antipodes*, please permit me one observation, and a coda. Bonyhady discusses alleged absences, and not its presences. I do not view this kind of writing as an invitation to argument. I remain unclear as to exactly what Bonyhady envisages as a 'critical culture', but I do not imagine this kind of politics as given to its promotion.

**Peter Beilharz**  
Bundoora, VIC

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## Steady on

*From Fr Christopher Gleeson SJ*  
*Headmaster, St Ignatius College, Riverview.*

As an avid reader of *Eureka Street* for some time now, I have always been under the impression that it was meant to be a magazine of politically independent and non-partisan comment. If I am correct in assuming that this had been one of its strengths, why did the October edition carry an insert propaganda letter for one mainstream political party? Should not the November edition, to be fair, carry a similar 'join-up' missive for another mainstream political party? By all means let us promote excellent neutral causes like 'Community Aid Abroad', but surely we can do without tacky inserts along party-political lines?

**Christopher Gleeson SJ**  
Lane Cove, NSW

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## Lost baggage

*From J. Byrt*

John Lee's correction (*Eureka Street*, October, 1997) of the quotation with which I concluded my letter in your previous issue had me ready to 'kiss the rod'. I had not been able to trace the source and was quoting what had reposed in my mind for decades. If his rendition is correct I should not have used my version.

My only consolation is that my apparent error would appear to illustrate the main theme of my letter. I remembered, interpreted and used the quotation as I wished to. Once more, I produced my intellectual baggage.

One thing puzzled me. I am fairly familiar with Auden's poetry. I have long been an admirer of his work. Going to my copy of a selection of his poems (*Penguin Poets*) I found the one about Yeats. However, it did not mention the lines quoted by Mr Lee. I have not been able to locate another collection of Auden's poems and the one in question does not appear to have been anthologised.

Stephen Spender wrote (*The Thirties and After*): '... Auden ... edited out of his work what might be termed the Thirties Connection'. Perhaps he edited out the passage quoted by Mr Lee?

**W.J. Byrt**  
Brighton, VIC

## Last rights

*From David Pincus*

Helga Kuhse is correct when she asserts in *Eureka Street*, (letters, September 1997) that many Australians die in suffering and pain. As a doctor in general practice for 38 years, I know

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that death is unnecessarily painful and distressing too often in this time when great advances in knowledge and drugs are often, tragically, not used.

Is the answer to legalise the killing of patients by their doctors when the doctor decides this is the best way of relieving suffering? It seems that 926 of the profession think that changing the law would not help—to quote from Kuhse et al's own survey.

I have sat on an official committee, looking at the reasons that doctors put patients on pethidine injection long term. I was ashamed of my profession when I found that the commonest indication for a young adult's being prescribed pethidine for longer than six weeks was for headaches. This shows terrible ignorance of modern and responsible management of these unfortunate patients. I am sure these doctors would have advocated a change of the law so that they were not forced to reveal their drug prescriptions to the authorities.

Most doctors, with knowledge of modern medical diagnosis and treatment, would accept the present law on this matter of drug prescription as reasonable. Most of the patients who die in pain in Australia suffer because they are not prescribed enough analgesic drugs and/or are not given the support and ancillary care they need. To see a patient dying with dignity and with the benefit of modern relief of symptoms is a great contrast to the poor unfortunates who are so often left to suffer unnecessarily.

Kuhse and her associates continue to deny any difference between a doctor's actively killing a patient and the use of drugs to relieve suffering in doses which may hasten the patient's death. Any doctor caring for patients recognises the distinction. Kuhse's

surveys (and statements) are in line with this denial and thus will never get a true picture of the views of the doctor who faces these issues in day-to-day practice.

Let us not make laws based on the opinion of a minority of the practitioners in the field, but based on modern and caring medical opinion.

**David F. Pincus**  
Stafford, QLD.

## Dicing with dates

*From Tom Hyland*

Whatever else Peter Pierce might have got up to at university in 1968, he did not go to the Wrest Point Casino, despite his memories of doing so ('Making Their Own Fun', *Eureka Street*, September).

The casino didn't open until 1973.

**Tom Hyland**  
Northcote, VIC

## Truth and daring

*From Anne Wilson et al*

We write as a group of concerned parents and friends about Archbishop Pell's book *Faith and Morals* which is being promoted for use in [Victorian] secondary schools. We wish to highlight some of the shortcomings found in Chapter 9 which is entitled 'Why Can't Catholic Women Be Priests?'

The Archbishop's argument turns on the odd assumption that the Church cannot change anything that was the practice in Jesus' time. This is indeed an incredible claim, given the development that has occurred within the Church in the last 2000 years! If it is argued that women cannot be priests because Jesus did not 'ordain' them, then surely the same logic applies to gentile priests who constitute most of the clergy today. Further examples abound! He totally ignores the fact that the role of women in Jesus' time was culturally different from that of today's women and that Jewish women could not assume any sort of public role. Surely we can consider the possibility that Jesus would act differently in today's world if He were to commission his disciples. Then there is the statement that the Pope's pronouncement on this issue is infallible, an extraordinary claim when theologians all over the world have pointed out that this teaching

does not conform to the criteria necessary for it to be a part of the infallible magisterium.

Space does not permit a listing of all of the shortcomings of this chapter, which is misleading, irritating and uncharitable in many of the views expressed. Suffice to say that in all other areas of education we expect our children to be able to pursue the truth from unbiased, well-documented sources. For religious education to be otherwise is to deny what our Church stands for. '(Theology) must strive to 'abide' in the truth while at the same time taking into account the new problems which confront the human spirit' (Cardinal Ratzinger, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1990).

To stifle debate on this issue appears fearful and lacking in trust that the Holy Spirit will enlighten and guide the Church.

**M. Cropley, C. Cropley,  
F. Dodds, D. Dodds, A. Donoghue,  
P. Donoghue, G. Gore, W. Gore,  
P. McAvaney, B. McAvaney,  
M. Nabbs, A. Wilson, E. Wilson.**  
Ashwood, VIC.

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# THE MONTH'S TRAFFIC



## Writers' rites

**I**N ITS SEARCH FOR NEW TOPICS to discuss, the Melbourne Writers' Festival can sometimes be quick off the mark. Its panel 'Dumbing Down' was probably the first forum in Melbourne to address the issue. First to speak was the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*, Ferdinand Mount, who seemed to take a rather benign view of what was happening. True, compulsory grammar tests at the age of fourteen were being abandoned in the UK because teachers no longer had the knowledge to administer them; true too that a pub (bearing a royal name) in a television series was recognised by more people than the name Queen Victoria. But Mount cheered himself up with the thought that in the eighteenth century three-quarters of all ploughboys and dairy maids could read, that broadsheet sales in Britain were not dropping as fast as tabloid, and that the literary weeklies were actually increasing their circulation. Dumbing down, where it did occur, was 'a cock-eyed homage to democracy'. At least the Blair government was doing something about it.

Andrew Clark, while pointing to the

recent expansion of book review pages in the leading Australian papers, regretted the insidious impact of marketing. But it was Hilary McPhee who was concerned most about the impact of business. People talk as though 'we inhabit an economy, not a society'; we live in a time when capitalism seems to be more powerful than governments. The universities, she said, instead of resisting this, have been keen to turn themselves into 'second-rate corporations'. Meanwhile the impact of technology has led to what could be termed a 'dumbing up', and an increasingly instrumentalist view of knowledge.

She could have gone even further. With regard to the Miles Lewis case, the University of Melbourne managers (as they like to be styled now) made it plain that they no longer consider public comment to be an obligation or the role of expertly-trained academics. Increasingly the university seems to feel that as a corporation it should hoard its knowledge, releasing it preferably in the form of paid consultancies. At the same time, other corporations no longer feel the need to support the arts as they once did. The National Australia Bank now prefers to promote a swimmer, with the result that posters of her body, plastered with a breakdown of her day (Wake. Eat. Train. &c., all the way through to Sleep) appeared in its branches as a benchmark for us all. Clever, really: apparently populist,

but in fact a Stakhanovite metonym for working harder.

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As he came on stage, a big, burly figure with his trouser cuffs flapping, Gough Whitlam could almost have passed for a cruise ship's entertainment officer. The amiability became even more pronounced as he sat down and the applause continued. 'Well Gough', Paul Kelly said when the clapping ceased, 'out there they still like you.' A pause, then the considered response: 'Us!' No dumbing down about Gough.

Gough Whitlam was given an interview spot at the Festival because his *Abiding Interests* has only recently been published. The title sounds ominous: it could be a simple top-dressing of ancient obsessions. But no, when 1975 came up, Gough was quite detached about it. He answered a series of questions, was merciless about Sir John Kerr and his personal foibles, but the spirit was one of lofty detachment. For a moment I thought Paul Kelly might find the chink in his armour when he pointed out that Fraser and Hawke had spent eight years in the Lodge, and Keating five; didn't Gough feel a little cheated to have had only three? The pause was now conspicuous. Then came the answer: 'With all due respect to those gentlemen, they needed eight years, or five—to achieve what I did in three'.

How well he handles himself now. The ego is there all right, but Gough constantly sends it up—with almost a touch of bifurcation, like Barry Humphries and Dame Edna. At the same time—while asserting that he hopes to leave the country better than he found it, and offering insights into current controversies—he has also developed a striking historical perspective. Eighty-one now, Gough has clearly been thinking of his early days in parliament: a number of times he referred back to the mid-fifties, to Menzies, to Evatt and to Owen Dixon. And, interestingly enough, his list of the achievements of his government has become shortened; instead he's aware of how much it brought a new professionalism to Canberra. High Court judges don't now turn up drunk, he said.

Gough's hostility to John Howard is measured. As he said, illuminatingly, it takes more than a mug to be prime minister. 'But a minister can be a mug', he said



Around the corner from both the Rembrandt and Andres Serrano exhibitions: a quiet moment at the National Gallery of Victoria, during the Melbourne Festival. Photograph by Bill Thomas.

cheerily. This is what we have missed: the intelligence, and the frankness, as well as the wit. Also the obsessions—I suspect the eyes of a good deal of the audience glazed over when he got going on the constitutional intricacies involved in choosing a president. Nevertheless Gough has the manner of a great teacher, and for four or five years the country was prepared to listen. He offered us a way forward, and was there in the wings, waiting, if only enough people could see their way to electing him. Today, with another Billy McMahon in the Lodge, there is a much greater sense of crisis and very little hope. Cut down in his prime and islanded by those twenty powerless years, Gough cannot help us now.

After the session, I kept looking up to where he was signing copies of his book. The queue was long, and he must have been at it, affably, for half an hour. Later I picked up a copy of *Abiding Interests*, just to see how much he was still concerned about the Dismissal. The first essay boldly begins: 'My chief interest in the events of October–November 1975 now lies in their relevance to Australia's advance towards the Republic.' What a comfort he has so triumphantly moved on.

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The Festival is too big to go to everything, or even everything you might want to. There are two, sometimes three, parallel sessions; and then the exhaustion factor sets in. So this time I decided to limit myself to ten sessions (\$85), and largely chose discussion panels. As usual, these were a mixed bag. One was positively (scarcely the word) the worst I have attended. The chairman indulged himself for more than twenty minutes, the first (distinguished) speaker spoke austerely as if issuing a remonstrance to the audience, an Aboriginal speaker made a totally uninflected political statement, and the last two speakers scratched their heads wondering how they could best use the five minutes left to them; at the end the audience trooped out angry that there had been no time left for questions. Other panels were impaired by the absence of key people—locals, not international stars, who had somehow found better things to do.

Two sessions on theatre, one a panel discussion and the other a double interview with David Williamson and Louis Nowra, somewhat overlapped; but since they were also often entertaining, nobody much minded. Williamson—increasingly a more confident speaker, and more flexible in his attitudes—was interesting in the analogy

he drew between the way Roman theatre died out, after Terence, in the face of the rising popularity of gladiatorial contests and feeding Christians to the lions, and the onslaught theatre experiences today from the dream factory in Hollywood. Theatre, he says, is interactive, character in action, whereas to work at all, film has to privilege one character over all the others, following his or her fortunes, so that in the end it essentially becomes narrative. And, as Nowra pointed out, these days theatre is much more in the firing line. The playwright now has to contend with more letters complaining about bad language than would have been the case ten years ago, or even with a court action initiated by Bosnians unhappy about his depiction of a pro-Serbian character in *Miss Bosnia*. But in the end subject matter will always offend more than radical practices do; it may be that we are heading into a new era of increased censorship.

Not quite censorship, but exclusion of a whole generation is the theme of Mark Davis's book, *Gangland*, and the Festival committee made sure that there was a panel to discuss it. The book is useful in the way that it draws attention to a huge shift in the concerns and preoccupations (even taste) of a new generation, and to the fact that this is not getting a sufficient airing in the media. But its demonising of baby-boomers, very broadly designated, is often quite reductive. Besides, as one prominent member of that group put it, 'We went out and started up our own ventures'. One isn't aware now of new publishing houses being founded by people around the age of thirty, as happened in the seventies. It's possibly a great deal harder to do, particularly in a climate of money-driven dumbing down. But there is also, as Kathy Bail pointed out, an entirely different attitude to publication and technology, a much greater sophistication in these matters. Younger writers are more often aware of how a magazine is produced, and how cultural agendas are constructed. Perhaps then they are just holding their fire. Certainly Frank Moorhouse's explanation that—compared with the upsets and demonstrations of the seventies—this was a more 'digestive' period, one not characterised by dramatic moves and shifts, could scarcely have been wider of the mark. We live in a time of great turbulence, and daily experience the truth of the ancient Chinese curse. That a lineal monoculture should come to be attenuated in such circumstances is scarcely surprising. That it will come to be transformed, probably beyond recognition, is also likely.

The preponderance of grey heads in Writers' Festival audiences is itself perhaps an indicator of these things.

—Jim Davidson

## PNG writ

THE SHORT FORECAST for Port Moresby was one that I had never encountered before: 31°C, smoke haze. All across Papua New Guinea bushfires were burning. A severe drought had struck the land and it was worsened by frosts at night. This was the most damaging natural disaster to afflict the country since independence. Travelling from Cairns north to our nearest, scantily-known neighbour, we descended through light cloud above a reef, marked out by an even, white line of surf. The countryside around Port Moresby was so brown, bare and dusty that it recalled drought-blighted Australia in the summer of 1982–3.

The airport also started incongruous thoughts of elsewhere—of Africa. Men in woollen knitted caps pressed against the perimeter fence. Families in their hundreds squatted on the road beyond the terminal building which—inside—was crowded, dirty, without air-conditioning. Guards checked who secured incoming baggage. I made it to the tiny, hot oasis of the Air Niugini lounge, ventilated by two fans, to wait for the flight over the mountains to Lae.

There were birds of paradise flowers in the lounge, so that I thought of all the resonant words and phrases that evoked New Guinea in my childhood. While many were coloured by the Australian experience of the Second World War, others belonged to a previous era of exploitation and exploration. I recalled the bird of paradise, 'prophetic bird, in rippling spectrums of fire', as James McAuley called it, coast watchers and patrol officers, fuzzy wuzzy angels and the Kokoda Trail, Buna and Salamaua, the Fly River and the Sepik River, the Highlands, Damien Parer, Burns Philp and Errol Flynn. This is a history in which Australians have long been implicated, by turns honourably and despicably. The names, of course, mostly speak of Australian rather than native perceptions of and interests in New Guinea.

As the plane took off for Lae, betel nut was forbidden in the same breath as lap top computers. Beneath us, the topmost ridges of the 2,500 metres-high mountains looked

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like islands as they broke through the cloud and smoke cover. We landed at Nadzab, 45km out of town, an airstrip built by allied forces to facilitate the assault against the Japanese at Lae. What followed was a bus ride in the dark. Figures edged alongside a road which was crossed by deep furrows like dry creek beds. Occasionally a general store was illuminated. Signs pointed to the omnipresent activities of soul-savers—Four-square Gospel Hall, Swiss Mission, Lae Baptist College. Two fires burned on a nearby mountain, their yellow flames like the slits of cats' eyes. Approaching the city, residential accommodation, its walls topped with coils of razor wire, adverted to the dangers of modern New Guinea for the few thousand expatriates who live and work here.

My business was at Unitech, the Papua New Guinea University of Technology. Its compound houses 4,000 people. Most staff and students live on site. Great rain trees rise above you. The ground is splashed red with betel-nut-stained saliva. The street names on the way in—Huon Road for example—remind one how nearly New Guinea came to having the experience of French, rather than British and German colonialism. The university houses an excellent Rainforest Habitat, replete with somnolent crocodiles, butterflies and, above all, birds. Here are birds of paradise, russet and flame-coloured parrots and the regal toucan, with its black body, white tail, brown ruff and serene indifference to the size of its beak.

I had come to New Guinea at a time of troubles. Overtopping them all was the drought, but the memory of the Sandline near-coup was fresh. The *Post-Courier* published the revised terms of reference for the inquiry on one of the mornings of my stay. Flight West services to and from North Queensland had just been suspended as payback for its owner, Sir Dennis Buchanan, having precipitately shut down his Talair Company several years before. In the Highlands, the Plumes and Arrows Hotel at Mount Hagen had been looted and burned. The National Broadcasting Commission office at Five Mile in Port Moresby was up for sale to recover damages that had not been paid to a former employee.

These items of news are part of a picture too large for the traveller to grasp, and of a national story whose outcome is uncertain. How could there be a coup when there is no road from north to south of the country from Lae (whose military barracks was not involved) to Port Moresby? How could one

not be optimistic about an expanding, government-funded tertiary sector?

Benefiting from local hospitality, I was driven around Lae town and up into the Markham Valley, one setting of the best Australian book of the war, Peter Ryan's *Fear Drive My Feet*. We went first to the old airport. No other in the Second World War was more heavily bombed. Its strip turns straight out into the Huon Gulf and the Solomon Sea, where kids were surfing.

Logically enough, we went next to the Lae War Cemetery, which is bounded on two sides by the Botanical Gardens. Here are the graves of 2,808 serving men and women, from the Indian army, as well as Australian gunners, aircraftsmen, nurses, merchant seamen. In this tropic landscape, the gardens are eerily immaculate, insisting on a peacefulness that is belied by all to which the graves witness.

It was time for betel nut, my host having kindly taken an aside of mine seriously. No simple operation this: one does not just shell and chew the flesh of the nut (best quality, from the Sepik). It needs to be chased—by a mustard stick that has been dipped in a jar of lime. Sellers by the roadside offer the whole kit. The effects—a red mouth, a bitter taste and some clarification of the head—satisfied my curiosity.

Nigel Krauth's *New Guinea Images in Australian Literature* (1982) reflects partial apprehensions, epiphanies, missed opportunities. Marcus Clarke, who never visited New Guinea, wrote a sardonic anti-romance about a baffled group of adventurers. Louis Becke, who did (and nearly died of malaria), portrayed the skull scavenger Dr Ludwig Schwalbe. Others to write of and work in the country included Jack McLaren, Ion Idriess and Beatrice Grimshaw, fifteen of whose 'Romantic Papua' novels were published by the New South Wales Bookstall Company. Errol Flynn, who lived in New Guinea at times between 1927 and 1932, before escaping debtors and a manslaughter charge, used it as the setting for his novel *Showdown* (1946). McAuley, who was converted to Catholicism here, celebrated a 'Bird-shaped island, with secretive bird-voices, / Land of apocalypse, where the earth dances'. But no literary work of substance about New Guinea has appeared since Randolph Stow's *Visitants* in 1979.

The 'bird-shaped island' is a troubling, little-understood neighbour, a place of heroics and of corruption. Australians without direct economic interests have often regarded New Guinea either with

unconstructive affection or with revulsion—as when the news broke of the murder in his fortified apartment in Port Moresby of an Australian geologist. Our political disengagement from New Guinea was precipitate. An imaginative re-engagement—by writers as well as government—is due.

—Peter Pierce

## Small devils

**K**AREN GUERRILLAS call it the 'Vietnam mine'. It is the Chevrolet of landmines. Screwing a detonator into its base and twisting the top from 'Safe' to 'Active' arms the mine. Reversing the process deactivates



it. Cased in dark green plastic, the mine is surprisingly light and compact.

After twenty or thirty years in the lime-rich soil of Vietnam the mines have bleached to a dusty olive. Laid by American G.I.s, they are dug up by Vietnamese farmers and sold to black market arms dealers to be shipped to Burma. Thirty years after their manufacture and use, these American M-14 mines are not only still dangerous but can be transplanted into a current war.

There is a man at the KNLA's 7th Brigade HQ whose job it is to make landmines. The Karen National Liberation Army is short of cash and even Vietnam mines are expensive. Like the Khmer Rouge and other insurgent groups facing the same dilemma, they have begun manufacturing their own. The man who designs and makes mines is not unintelligent and he listens to the BBC Burmese Language Service and the Voice of

America. Saw Paw Gay will know that Jody Williams and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines have won the Nobel Peace Prize, and probably he will be happy. Other men who manufacture landmines do it for the money, the big houses and the fast cars. Saw Paw Gay does it for Aung San Suu Kyi, democracy, and the Karen Revolution. The Revolution needs devices that will rip the legs off Burmese Army soldiers, and landmines are his contribution.

Saw Paw Gay showed me his latest creation. It was a block of wood with a slot and two holes drilled in it. Into the holes went an electrical detonator, a M battery and TNT explosive. The mine is light and powerful but there were other reasons its creator is proud of it. The mine could be tested before it was armed to ensure that it would not detonate prematurely. There are a lot of Karen guerrillas who stay in hospitals, the stumps of their arms and eye

sockets long healed, but with nowhere to go. It may seem hard to pity people who injure themselves planting landmines, but a twenty-something-year-old man with no hands and no eyes and no future but who can still hold a cigarette between his fore arms is something to make you cry. And Saw Paw Gay knows as well as Jody Williams what landmines do to farmers years after they are laid in the ground. His mines would be laid in the dry season when most of the fighting occurs. When the monsoon rains come and it was time to plant

rice, he told me proudly, the mines would be so much rotten wood and a rusted battery. But in the 'operations area' deep inside Burma I saw Saw Paw Gay's mines being distributed together with plastic bags to keep them dry.

Far from Saw Paw Gay and his lonely struggle for the future of Burma, Jody Williams is using the publicity generated by winning the Nobel Peace Prize to attack President Bill Clinton's refusal to join the ban on landmines. While Clinton may not care for mines, he also does not want another fight with the U.S. Army. The U.S. Army is a bad enemy and has never forgiven him for making it accept gays.

The U.S. is a relatively easy target for the campaign to ban landmines. In the U.S. the combination of public opinion, lobbying and the media suggests that a complete ban on landmines is simply a matter of time.

But if the U.S. bans landmines it may be little more than a moral victory. The U.S. no longer exports landmines, and its own use of them is very limited. The consequence of a victory in the U.S. may only be complacency.

Australia's decision to cease using land mines caused the Australian Defence Force some disturbance but in reality the principal result was to destroy the anti-landmine campaign in Australia. The Australian anti-landmine movement had focused its efforts on lobbying the Australian government to ban landmines. The Liberal government's decision took it by surprise, and the movement quietly died. There are other valuable tasks it could have performed – lobbying the Australian government to increase support for de-mining in Cambodia, for example, or rehabilitation for amputees there. Instead, it has simply folded.

Burma is just one of many countries that have been bypassed by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. The country that held one Nobel Peace Prize winner under house arrest for six years is not going to pay attention to another one. The Burmese military government has already stated that it will not join the ban on mines, and only a genuine peace will stop the Karen and other insurgent groups manufacturing their own.

The Burmese Army buys its landmines from China, which is not likely to stop manufacturing or selling them. Chinese arms have a reputation for being low in price and even lower in quality. As several countries have found out, buying anything sophisticated—a tank, a jet fighter—from China is eventually disastrous. Landmines though, are simple devices that need only to do one thing once. And as too many Cambodians can tell you, Chinese mines function well enough. Mines are weapons of quantity and China sells them cheaply.

The Chinese political landscape does not include lobbyists, popular opinion, elections or adverse media reports. Like Burma, China has had its Nobel Peace Prize winner. But China was not impressed by the Dalai Lama, and it is unlikely to be impressed by Jody Williams. While Bill Clinton is besieged by landmine campaigners, the Chinese arms giant Norinco will quietly keep on turning out mines. Persuading China to give up this source of revenue will not be easy.

The Left is the natural constituency of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, and the US is the target of choice for the Left. China is not a preferred

target, and there is a real danger that once the US has acceded to the ban on mines many supporters of the campaign will lose interest. The United Nations believes that each year 10 million mines are added to the 100 million already in the ground. Any celebrations in the near future would be very premature.

The involvement of Princess Diana was the best thing that could have happened to the campaign; it transformed landmines from another Left-wing cause into the mainstream issue. Many in the Left derided Princess Diana's support, ignoring her ability to put Angolan amputees into the six o'clock news of every TV channel,

Traditionally, the Burmese Army and pro-democracy guerrillas have used landmines to supplement bunkers, barbed wire and bamboo barriers as defences for their strong hold camps. Everybody knows where the camps are, and civilians generally avoid them. But there are increasing reports of the use of landmines by the Burmese Army to prevent refugees fleeing to Thailand, or to depopulate areas believed to be supporting Karen guerrillas. Compared to Afghanistan's or Cambodia's mine problem, Burma's is minor. The majority of amputees in Burma are still combatants, and mines are mostly found around well-known points of conflict. But the International Campaign to Ban Landmines will have to work hard if Burma and many other countries are not to become like Cambodia. Winning the Nobel Peace Prize and forcing Australia and the US to ban the use and export of landmines is only a beginning.

Saw Paw Gay cannot save Burma from a future human and ecological disaster on his own.

—Martin West

## One who got away

**E**ARLY THIS YEAR, Ko Min Thein spent four months and ten days in a twelve-foot square Bangkok prison cell. He shared the cell with nine others. There were no beds—only a concrete floor, a bucket and a fluorescent light that remained on 24 hours a day. His gaze is firm but disquieting. 'I never saw the sky all that time', he says in faltering English.

Min Thein now lives in suburban Melbourne as a political refugee but was once a soldier in the Burmese army. His

father had been a soldier, his brother was a lieutenant and so Min Thein joined up after leaving high school. But 'When I saw what was happening to my people, I couldn't be a part of it. I had to try and help them', he says.

He deserted in the early part of 1988. On March 16 of that year Min Thein stood on the causeway at Inya Lake near Rangoon university. A large group of students had gathered for a demonstration. The army attacked, beating some to death and herding others into the lake to drown.

Min Thein shakes his head. 'I watched them die' he says, 'Some were my friends'. Sometimes, when he sleeps, he can still see the place they call 'The White Bridge'.

He had started a history course while in the army and, while living underground, continued his studies at Rangoon university. Everything was so confused that the university didn't seem to be interested in his past. He became a leader in the students union and, after the events at Inya Lake, helped organise demonstrations and hunger strikes.

Then on September 8 the country erupted. Students were joined by people of all walks of life fighting against the oppression. After the initial uprising had been brutally put down, Min Thein hid.

During the next three weeks he stayed one step ahead of the soldiers. When finally they were closing in on him, he and one of his friends left Rangoon on foot and headed for the liberated Karen area near the Thai border.

There the students who had fled Rangoon formed the ABSDF (All Burma Students Democratic Front) and fought SLORC as guerrilla fighters with the help of the KNU [Karen National Union].

Min Thieu's His unit had the task of going behind the SLORC lines. 'Sometimes we kill 20 or 30 soldiers and come back', says Min Thein, before adding matter of factly, 'but they always kill some of us'.

The thick jungles of Burma are no place for an extended stay. In 1992 Min Thein's unit was there for 7 months.

'We had not many men left, so we had to stay—there was no-one else to fight', he explains. During that time they lived only on rice and some MSG which they mixed with water. No cover at night, no change of clothes, sleeping whenever and wherever they could. He tells of waiting days for ammunition supplies ordered on an ancient walkie-talkie radio. And of hand-to-hand fighting. Surviving meant killing first.

One evening, while withdrawing after a

raid on a SLORC supply convoy, a 60mm mortar exploded near Min Thein, wounding his leg. He dragged himself for nearly two kilometres to where it was safe for villagers to help him. They placed him on a old blanket slung over a bamboo pole and set off with some other wounded men who could walk, through the thick jungle. Two men carried Min Thein for four days over some of the worst terrain in Burma. 'Very bad time', he says.

'SLORC soldiers knew that we were being moved and they raided villages looking for us. They burned houses and killed all the men. Then take everyone else away. My carriers were very brave'.

As Min Thein recovered he began to learn English with the help of Rinni, an Australian teacher working as an aide on the Thai border. As part of her lessons, Rinni would talk to Min Thein about Melbourne.

'I'd tell him about the trees in autumn', she says, 'About the banks of the Yarra and the sound of the trams. He would just keep asking me if it was all true'.

As the villages and towns around the border fell, Min Thein realised that staying would be of little use. He and Rinni decided to seek refugee status for him in Australia.

'We had a contact who helped with a false passport, but we had to travel late at night as it would not stand up to any daytime scrutiny', says Rinni.

Leaving Min Thein in Bangkok with some of her friends, Rinni returned to Australia to organise his status and to become his sponsor. When his application was processed the Australian government accepted him. However, refugee status must be also granted by the United Nations. Min Thein's case was refused and he continued living in hiding.

In Bangkok the Thai police often raided houses where they knew Burmese were hiding so they could appear to be on the side of SLORC and send them back.

Min Thein was caught and thrown in jail to await deportation. His first cell was around 40 feet square, filthy, and housed 150 others. Each prisoner's space was marked out by the cell leader and they took it in turns to lie down and sleep. It was two months before he was transferred to his small cell. After intense lobbying by Rinni and the Australian Embassy in Bangkok, Min Thein was finally released.

It was about 2 am when they came for him. Eight guards took him to the airport and put him on a plane for Australia. He says he didn't believe it was happening

until his flight landed at Tullamarine.

Only now is he becoming used to seeing uniformed men on the street and not flinching or wanting to hide. He still cannot flex his leg.

Rinni lectures occasionally on the Burmese situation and Min Thein goes with her to answer questions. He says he finds it hard to explain how he once lived. 'What can I say—I try but they can never really understand.'

But he wants the world to know about the ways of the Burmese Government. He wants to tell about 'portering'—where SLORC take all the men from a village to carry supplies for them, then kill the old, infirm and the young and burn the huts. To tell how they are building an extension to the infamous Burma Railway with forced labour.

Ko Min Thein is a gentle man who would like to contact his mother but fears she is being watched. His brother is still in the Burmese army but he is not sure he wants to see him again. He believes he is one of the lucky ones but he knows how different it all might have been. At the moment he is also uncertain about the future, 'I just live for now,' he says.

—Steve Stevens

*This month's contributors:* **Jim Davidson** is a writer and historian; **Peter Pierce** is Professor of Australian Literature at James Cook University; **Martin West** is a freelance writer and photographer and **Steve Stevens** is a freelance writer from Swan Hill, Victoria.

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# Secrets and lies

*Margaret Simons examines the post-electoral state of play in South Australia*

**A** FEW MONTHS AGO I was talking to an Adelaide journalist about the difficulties of the job in one of Australia's smallest capitals. 'In any other state if you hear something from three independent sources, you are inclined to believe it,' he said. 'In Adelaide all you can be sure of is that they were all drinking at the Exeter Hotel, or have been talking to someone drinking in the Exeter Hotel, sometime in the last week.'

Adelaide is Gossip City. With just over a million people, it manages to be big enough so that not everybody can know the truth, but small enough for a rumour started in the morning to take on the status of fact by evening. Very little happens in Adelaide. Or very little that anyone finds out about. The city's real secrets are well kept. As investigative journalist Chris Masters remarked after doing a lengthy investigation into the city's drug and brothel industries, 'In Adelaide you get the feeling that nobody really wants to know'.

So historically, gossip has filled the gaps, forming the basis for a great deal of both the journalism and the public and political life of the city-state.

Take the recurrent rumours about the disappearance of the Beaumont children, or the extraordinary way in which the rumours about the Family, a group of high-ranking members of the Adelaide establishment supposedly responsible for a string of sex crimes, became accepted fact. Everyone knew someone who knew who the Family members were meant to be.

A friend of mine recently experimented by starting a false rumour about a certain politician's prospects. He whispered in two people's ears on Monday. On Wednesday morning he heard the rumour back from an apparently unconnected source, who claimed to know someone who had first-hand proof.

Ask Chris Sumner, formerly Attorney-General in the Bannon Labor Government, about Adelaide gossip. He is one of its most deeply scarred victims. In the early 1990s, the rumours about Sumner—that he was in the pay of drug dealers and brothel owners, and that he was himself well-known to Adelaide prostitutes as a client with bizarre sexual habits—became so well established that the National Crime Authority investigated. Kicked along by the Liberal Party and the media, the rumours were widely believed. In that weird Adelaide way, everyone

supposedly knew someone who had direct knowledge of their truth.

The very thorough NCA investigation's eventual report would have been comic had it not been so serious. After months of work, the NCA found no evidence at all against Sumner, and considerable evidence that he could not have done the favours that he was supposed to have done for Adelaide crime figures. The NCA found another man with the name 'Sumner' who had visited brothels, and yet another brothel client who looked a little like the Attorney-General. From these slender beginnings, the rumours had taken flight, been mentioned in Parliament and ended up on the front pages of the city's newspapers. Sumner's political career survived, but he was permanently affected, suffering a nervous breakdown, and some years later introducing into Parliament draft privacy legislation that, had it been passed, would have placed severe restrictions on the media.

The Sumner farce, meanwhile, distracted attention from the South Australian Police Force,





which was at the time in damage control mode after the head of the drug squad, Barry Moyses, had been found guilty of corruption. Cynics might think that the diversion was not entirely accidental.

But that's Adelaide—surely one of the most comfortable places to live in Australia, and yet a place with that weird, country-town sense of disconnection. Ever since my childhood, it seems that the big stories in Adelaide are the things that never happen—the earthquake and tidal wave, predicted by a psychic, which was to wash away the beach suburbs. In any other city, I doubt if the psychic would have been noticed. In Adelaide his predictions led to a slump in real estate prices on the coast, and a rise in the hills. There was panic. The day after the disaster was meant to have occurred, the front-page banner headline on *The Advertiser* represented a journalistic first. It read: 'Nothing Happened'. Quite.

Then there was the satellite city of Monarto, which dominated the headlines during the Dunstan Government, and yet failed ever to emerge from the Mallee Plain. More recently there had been the Multi-Function-Polis, a cyber-city to be built on the marshes to Adelaide's north, now little more than a real estate development and an optimistically pitched site on the World Wide Web.

At the time of writing, South Australia had just come through an election campaign. When the election was announced, most had expected the Liberal Government led by John Olsen to be easily returned, perhaps with the loss of a few seats. South Australians were generally believed to be still furious

at Labor over the State Bank fiasco, in which the state's main home-lending institution had, in a prime example of '80s-madness, become a high risk merchant bank, before virtually collapsing under a weight of poor investments and bad loans. The Liberal Party came to power on the back of the disaster four years ago, with a crushing 27-seat majority.

But to the pundits' surprise, the Liberals have only just retained power, with a greatly reduced margin. As one commentator said: 'It is as though the State Bank thing had never happened.'

The truth is that politics in Adelaide for the last few decades has been about playing with mirrors and talking big. Olsen's predecessor as Premier, Dean Brown, used to say that his main function was to act as a salesperson for South Australia, to talk it up. The truth is, of course, that there isn't much to talk about. Economic growth is virtually at a standstill—at just one per cent compared to 3.6 per cent nationally. It is the worst performer of any mainland state.

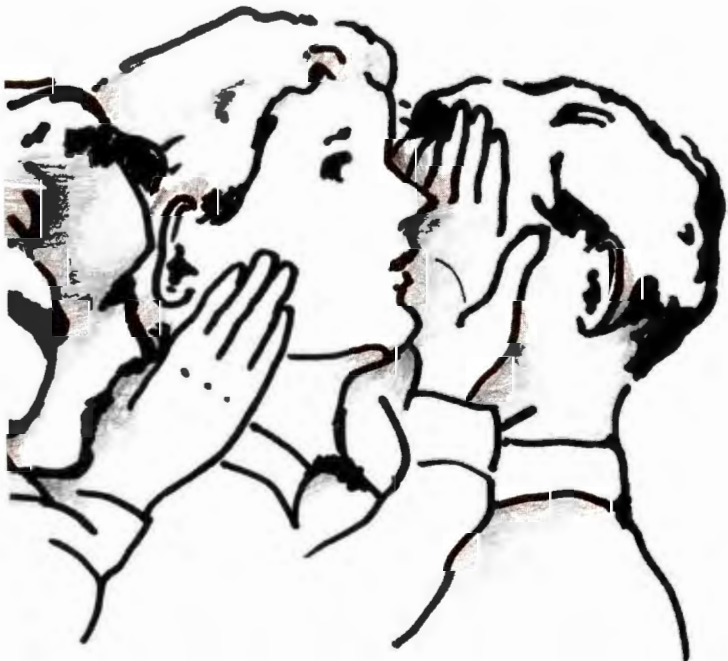
The whole state has a population less than half that of Melbourne, and nearly all of that is in Adelaide. As well, the population is ageing even faster than that of the rest of Australia. Of the dozen or so friends who accompanied me through the last years of school and university, only two still live in Adelaide, and they both work for the state public service. With unemployment above the national average at 9.8 per cent, and youth unemployment at 37 per cent, it isn't surprising that young people tend to leave.

In the last days of the election campaign, figures were released showing that jobs growth in South Australia was at a standstill. Only just over half a per cent of jobs were being created per year, and all of those were part-time.

**I**N THIS CONTEXT, ELECTION PROMISES had more than the usual air of unreality. John Howard announced a Federal Government commitment of \$100 million towards the realisation of that persistent pipe dream, an Adelaide to Darwin rail link. South Australia and the Northern Territory are supposedly to contribute another \$200 million, and private industry will pick up the rest. John Olsen claimed during the campaign that seven private consortia had already expressed interest in investing, but hardly anyone really believes it will go ahead. Even sources from within Government were expressing doubts well before polling day.

As leading scientist, Paul Davies, once an Adelaide resident, commented recently 'The real damage of the MFP fiasco is to Australia's reputation abroad ... Whether it is the on-again off-again Darwin rail link, the much-discussed but never-achieved revival of the Woomera space base, or the latest big science project, the story is one of hype, followed by vacillation, lack of nerve and indefinite postponement.'

So why is it that when both political parties can do little more than talk big that voters turned so decisively against the government? Perhaps it is



because after the State Bank fiasco, South Australians have learned to look behind mirrors. Perhaps the disillusionment with the hype outweighs the anger with Labor. In South Australia, hype isn't working any more, and so far hype is all the Liberal Party has offered.

Even the good economic news of the last few years is largely a matter of how you see it. The Liberals were faced with an enormous task in the wake of the State Bank fiasco, facing huge public sector debt and a \$300 million operating deficit.

In the last budget, the Liberal Government succeeded in achieving a \$1 million operating surplus, but only after having sold the State's big ticket utilities and removing 12,400 public servants from the payroll. As well, the surplus was achieved only by deferring payments towards the state's unfunded superannuation liability. The budget's main spending plank—an increase in capital works—was largely achieved by drawing on unspent funds carried over from previous years. Public sector debt was down from \$8.4 billion in 1994 to \$7.5 billion, but after an asset sales program that saw huge losses on the sale of the State Bank's more dubious investments. Although the state debt ratio is expected to fall, it is still undesirably high for such a small state, at close to 20 per cent. South Australia will be living with the results of the State Bank fiasco for a long while to come.

Only three months after bringing down his budget, Treasurer Stephen Baker announced that he would resign after the election. *The Australian* quoted Treasury sources as saying Baker had gone because the Government was headed for a significant budget deficit in the forthcoming year, thanks to Olsen's abandoning of the tight economic policies previously being followed by Dean Brown, the Premier he deposed in a filthy party-room coup.

Private polling by both major parties in the lead-up to the election showed that Adelaidians feel their state is being left behind by the rest of Australia. The politics of envy—envy of other states—have become important.

The present government has shown itself to be willing to do almost anything, including entering into dubious deals with taxpayers' money, in order to have a crane on the skyline in election year.

The most recent example is an \$85 million foreshore marina development in Glenelg, being pushed ahead with government funding in spite of environmental concerns. Under Olsen's predecessor, Dean Brown, South Australia became the first government in the world to contract out all its data processing to a private company. The contract, with American company, Electronic Data Systems, was a central part of what the Government calls 'IT2000'—a strategy which is meant to see Adelaide become a hub of information technology. Some have less flatteringly dubbed it as the 'Back Office State' initiative. The suggestion is that Adelaide will

effectively become the hi-tech equivalent of the nation's typing pool, with companies being encouraged to take advantage of cheap office space and a pool of qualified unemployed.

Brown's deal with EDS involved the Government partially underwriting the cost of a brand new building on North Terrace, with significant exposure for the taxpayer.

But earlier this year, a State parliamentary inquiry cast doubt on the whole program, with preliminary reports from 24 State Departments operating under the EDS program showing that there had already been a blowout on computing costs of \$12 million, instead of the \$10 million savings promised by EDS.

As well, the departments complained of service delays and unwieldy bureaucracy in dealing with EDS. Brown, now Information Minister, claims the blowout figures have been taken out of context, but other senior Ministers openly express dismay with the EDS deal. One was quoted as saying that it had the potential to be 'a little State Bank debacle'.

If Brown's initiatives in high technology do come off, then South Australia will have reason to thank him in the future. In the meantime, however, his salesmanship looks like high risk for little tangible return.

**B**ROWN, HOWEVER, WAS A PREMIER of substance. Interstate, he is recognised as an authority of influence on national environmental policy. Before the last Federal election, he was a prime mover, through the Murray Darling Basin Commission, in getting both major parties to focus on the terminal condition of the nation's foodbowl. Labor and Liberal parties ended up with very similar environmental policies, both focusing on the hitherto low-glamour areas of soil degradation and salinity in the basin.

As a politician, Brown was unspectacular, but generally well regarded by the public. Olsen, on the other hand, has proven to be a big loser for the Liberal Party with polls showing his satisfaction rating declining fast.

The coup in which Olsen deposed Brown was surely one of the least edifying exercises in Liberal Party history. The aftermath has almost certainly cost the Government dear in this election, and the whole story still hasn't been told.

So bitter is the faction fighting, that over the last eighteen months, sensitive Cabinet documents have often arrived in the hands of the Opposition within hours of being tabled. Labor Opposition leader Mike Rann has claimed to a federal parliamentary committee that Olsen, then Minister for Infrastructure, leaked sensitive documents, including confidential information about the EDS deal, to him in order to destabilise Brown in the lead-up to the coup.

According to Rann, on the night Olsen succeeded in deposing Brown, Rann congratulated him with the words 'don't forget who put you there'.



Olsen has denied Rann's claims, and called him a liar. Rann has responded with a writ for defamation, presently before the South Australian Supreme Court.

The ALP has also claimed in State and Federal Parliament that Olsen's ally, former Primary Industries Minister Dale Baker, was offering Liberal MPs inducements of \$20,000 to support Olsen against Brown in the coup. Labor has called for a judicial inquiry into the allegations, and the South Australian Police Commissioner has been asked to investigate. At the time of writing, the Commissioner had not responded to the request, but *The Advertiser*, Adelaide's only daily newspaper, had responded with characteristic lack of investigatory zeal, railing against the 'raking over of old allegations'.

Whatever his role in the struggle that brought Olsen to power last July, Olsen was forced to dump Baker after a report by a QC found that he had sought to buy land for his private company while knowing that his Department was also interested. At least, that is part of what the report said. Olsen, however, has released only one of the report's ten chapters. Even more extraordinarily, he has not even released the whole report to his own Cabinet, apparently because he can't trust his Ministers not to leak.

Furthermore, the offices of the author of the report, Tim Anderson QC, were raided by Crown Solicitor officers, and all copies of the report were removed, together with transcripts of evidence.

Even Anderson himself apparently no longer has a copy.

**R**ANN, PREDICTABLY, HAS SAID that the report would be released on 'day one' of a Labor Government. In spite of the weekend's surprise swing against the Liberals, that release is likely to be some time away.

Meanwhile, the content of the rest of the report, and its implications for the Olsen faction and the Liberal Government as a whole, is one of the better kept secrets in gossip city.

Perhaps it is not surprising that South Australia's rage against the Labor Party, while maintained, has apparently been tempered by the implications of more recent history. ■

**Margaret Simons** is a regular contributor to *Eureka Street*.

## Taking coals to Kyoto

**O**VER THE PAST FEW DECADES, much of the science community's self-righteous aloofness has been punctured, thank goodness. Scientists have proved to be just as human as anybody else. Among their numbers are just as many who are greedy, blinkered, and corrupt, and just as many who are altruistic. And scientists have become heavily involved in politics as never before, whether debating the merits of nuclear power, the ethics of reproductive technologies or saving the whale.

But while scientists are not apolitical, the scientific method is. As a process it does not take sides in a political debate. But it can prove useful in assessing political arguments or the value of a particular policy. Casting an eye over the Government's statements and actions on greenhouse in the run up to the Kyoto Conference, I'd have to say they don't make a lot of scientific sense.

The overarching laws of science can set limits on human activity, barriers which can be most inconvenient to politicians. Perhaps the classic example is 'The Limits to Growth' debate, set in train by the studies carried out under the aegis of the Club of Rome in the early '70s. This research graphically illustrated what the mathematician Thomas Malthus had proposed 170 years earlier—that the growth of any species must inevitably be limited by lack of resources. But that simple, obvious message—that human populations and economies cannot keep growing indefinitely—still has not penetrated political and economic consciousness to any profound degree.

Given that we can already see the limits to our fossil fuel supplies, there are two clear courses of action: in the short-term we should use the fossil fuels we have as efficiently as possible; and in the longer-term, switch to other energy sources.

But what has this to do with greenhouse?

Simply this. As an International Energy Agency report on Australia pointed out earlier this year, the level of our carbon dioxide emissions is a measure of how efficient we are at using fossil fuels. And, according to the agency, we do not perform well in this area.

To lower carbon dioxide emissions, we must either use what we have more efficiently, or switch to other sources of energy. So by decreasing carbon dioxide emissions, we are simultaneously preserving fossil fuels and reducing the greenhouse threat. But wait, there's more. Committing ourselves to lower carbon dioxide emissions would have almost exactly the same effect as decreasing tariff protection. It would force us either to operate our industries more efficiently, or close or modify them if they cannot compete.

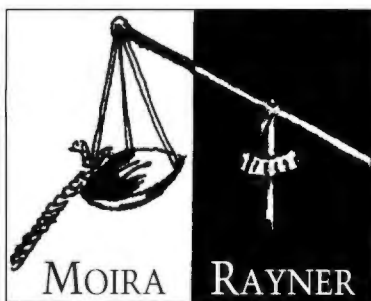
But that does not seem to be clear to the Federal Government. What makes sense in the economic sphere somehow does not make sense as energy policy. Whereas abolishing tariffs is justified by the Government because it makes industry more efficient and thus preserves and creates jobs in the long-term, somehow doing all the same things by meeting greenhouse targets is not justified.

Unfortunately, the consequences of this inconsistency are serious. Having struggled to force our industries to become more efficient and competitive by reducing protection—now that the rest of world looks like driving towards energy efficiency by opting for greenhouse targets—the Government is proposing to let Australian industry off the hook and allow it become uncompetitive again.

There's another quirk of the scientific method: in order to be classed as scientific, a proposition has to be able to be tested by experiment and therefore, be capable of being falsified or disproved. No matter how much evidence there is to support a particular explanation, it takes only one negative example to consign it to the scrapheap.

So far in the greenhouse debate, we've heard a great deal from Mr Howard and Mr Downer about the disastrous consequences for the nation if we go along with the reductions in carbon dioxide emissions proposed by most of the rest of the developed world (consequences of a similar ilk to those they expected us to endure to get the 'economic fundamentals' right). But we've heard little or nothing about the consequences if, as is likely after Kyoto, Australia finds itself one of the ones in step, but with other countries out of step yet nonetheless making their industries more energy efficient. ■

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



## The wedge gets thicker

**O** H BRAVE NEW WORLD, for so it seemed in the 1970s, when I became a lawyer. As a student in the 1960s, I thought 'administrative law'—the ways citizens could challenge their government—was an academic delight, a Common Law puzzle. Our British, and (faithfully following their precedent) other ex-colonial courts, including our own State Supreme Courts and the Australian High Court, were moving rapidly away from the traditional view that 'the Crown' ought to be immune from civil action (a useful doctrine meant to support efficient administration) and towards the need for accountability.

This wasn't easy: the citizen had to approach the highest courts and pick out a circuitous route among the ancient prerogative writs and remedies, hoping to predict how their technical rules might be interpreted to give them standing to complain, rein in excesses of statutory authority, breaches of natural justice, investigate allegations of malice, bad faith, improper purposes, and refusal to exercise discretions in the public interest.

It became obvious that 'leaving it to the courts' was grossly unsatisfactory in the new, complex world of big government. In the next 20 years new ways to control or make the executive accountable blossomed. There was an orgy of righteousness, and creation of new statutory rights, and bodies designed to redress the imbalance of power between the State and its citizens.

The Commonwealth led the way with statutory rights to demand written reasons for administrative decisions and 'due process' in decision-making, and a new concept of 'freedom of information', first introduced by the Commonwealth in 1982. This was highly controversial. Loss of frankness in public servants' advice to ministers and an inability of government to function when its actions were open to public scrutiny were predicted, but did not follow.

The States followed the lead—Victoria in 1983, the ACT and NSW in 1989, SA in 1992, Tasmania, Queensland and Western Australia in the 1990s. Oppositions loved it and, of course, this became quickly inconvenient to governments, all of whom seek regularly to exempt themselves from such intrusions. None has had the courage to repeal the right entirely—or not yet.

As well, governments set up special statutory administrative review procedures and tribunals to review decisions with a minimum of formality and delay. I was, for instance, an early Chairman of the Social Security Appeals Tribunal. Others followed, and

Administrative Appeals Tribunals have been established around the country to deal with the many perceived injustices of government bodies.

During the 1970s and 1980s governments also started to spawn specialised statutory agencies: Law Reform Commissions, to give independent, authoritative advice, in consultation with the people, on desirable changes to the law in key areas; and offices explicitly designed to protect citizens' rights and watch over government propriety in administration—the provinces of the Ombudsman, the Auditor-General and the Human Rights Commission.

They were all based on what was *then* acknowledged: that formal, constitutional means of making executive government accountable were essential for good government, and they were not working. Public servants who are technically 'accountable' to their Ministers, and the Ministers to Parliament, are not in fact when the parliamentary conventions are not respected.

Until the parliamentary rorts scandal in the Commonwealth this year, the principle requiring a Minister's resignation if the Minister—or his Department—makes a major blunder or a scandal or if Parliament is deliberately misled, has been infrequently observed. Similarly, a citizen's right to request his or her representative to lay grievances before Parliament is almost defunct. The discipline of the party system ensures that a 'government' MP would hardly seek to bring scandal upon his or her own political party. Cabinet and the party room unofficially control Parliaments' business. For instance, in early October the Victorian Speaker, through his interpretation of Standing Orders, simply prevented a debate over Premier Kennett's share-dealings, claims of conflict of interest and misleading Parliament.

**T**HESE NEW ADMINISTRATIVE MECHANISMS have developed a 'democratic' flavour. The people know about them, and have come to expect them. But they are not 'constitutional'. They are funded by government to watch over government, their powers come from statutes which the government-dominated Parliament can repeal or amend, and their money comes from the very government they hold up to public scrutiny. Naturally, government seeks to limit them.

How will they fare, these democratic laws, processes and agencies, as government slips into managerial mode? When government values 16-

'efficiency' above accountability, and with the growing practice of entering into entrepreneurial partnerships with business under confidential commercial arrangements, coupled with the far greater discretionary power wielded by public servants, accountability is a fragile concept.

We need to look at what has already happened to the Commonwealth's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. This is the future.

The Commission has, of course, offended governments. Watchdogs do, if they bark at their masters. As a human rights monitor, its duty is precisely that. The Commission offended Prime Minister Hawke when it criticised his government's treatment of homeless children in 1989. It offended Prime Minister Keating when then Human Rights Commissioner, Brian Burdekin, documented our failure to respect the rights of people with mental illnesses in 1993. It offended the Australian Defence Forces with decisions critical of their approach to gays, women, and personnel with HIV-AIDS; and immigration authorities when the present Human Rights Commissioner, Chris Sidoti, directly challenged their treatment of would-be refugees—and children—detained in our camps, in 1996. The Commission certainly offended John Howard this year, by finding that it was genocidal to remove Aboriginal children from their homes and culture. It offends every public servant who wishes to please his master, and every minister who believes that government should 'get on' with the business of governing.

This year HREOC has been dealt a series of body blows. It will be restructured, so that its power to hear unresolved complaints goes to the Federal Court. It will not have the power to run the Inquiries that have made such a difference to our awareness of human rights. Nor will it have the money. It has already announced that it cannot act to protect and report on the rights of children. The Commission's budget has been slashed—43 per cent over three years means most of its staff have to go, now. All corporate memory has been lost.

When the term of Commission President, Sir Ronald Wilson, expired the Government did not bother to tell him that it had no intention of extending that term until the day it actually expired. There is no president now. The Commissioners whose terms are about to expire—Elizabeth Hastings (Disability), Mick Dodson (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice), Zita Antonious (Race) will be allowed to leave and not be replaced.

The changes are designed to tame the beast.

It is important to remember why Australia set up such bodies in the first place. The 'traditional'

protections—the Common Law and its courts and judges, the responsiveness of legislative representatives to the concerns of their electors—did not work, and were clearly *seen* not to work during the 1960s and 1970s. The predecessors to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission—Al Grassby, Commissioner for Community Relations (administering the Racial Discrimination Act 1975) and the Human Rights Commission—had determinative powers. When the new Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was set up in 1986 it lost some of its 'teeth' but retained the power to inform the public about human rights, instigate its own Inquiries into discrimination, and receive and determine complaints of discrimination against individuals, industry and governments.

As a result of the High Court's decision in *Brandy* in 1995 the Commission's determinations became unenforceable. The Commonwealth left them to languish in that state. The result was that respondents chose not to comply with HREOC determinations, and government departments made a practice, over the last two years, of challenging even those unenforceable findings in the Federal Court. Now, the Howard government has done another rename: a 'Human Rights and Responsibilities Commission' with even fewer powers and resources.

These trends should worry us. There is a new style of government—in every State, Territory *and* the Commonwealth—that emphasises

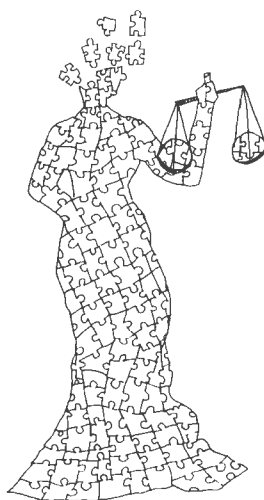
'small government', efficiency achieved through ordinary managerial culture and explicit assertions that accountability is adequately achieved through the Corporations Law.

This is utterly at odds with the quasi-judicial bureaucratic culture of the administrative institutions we have spawned in the last 20 years. This culture tests decision-making according to conformity with established rules and Common Law ideas of procedural fairness: it scrutinises acts and omissions with concern about fairness and openness. It is a 'legal' culture, it is true, but it performed its purpose well.

Managerialism, on the other hand, is about the achievement of pre-set objectives, political and administrative goals—efficiency, economy and performance management.

The 20 years of administrative review which are coming to an end were based on the values of openness, participation, fairness, and honesty. There is growing evidence that the new breed of contracted senior public servants does not see a risk in abandoning principled sensitivity to the public interest to a faith in the ultimate good of the invisible hand of the market place. ■

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## Robben Island—a tale to tell

**C**LICHÉS BECOME SUCH for a simple reason: they tell us a simple truth. So it is with the adage that stone walls do not a prison make.

Nelson Mandela knows the truth of that maxim better than anyone, better even than any of the other masters of prison literature, Sharansky or Speer, Solzhenitsyn or Begin. Twenty-seven years in prison, including 18 years on Robben Island, are enough to give not just run-of-the-mill credibility but rare moral authority to your experience.

On his way to purgatory as prisoner 466/64 on Robben Island, Mandela initially glimpsed the place through a ferry porthole: 'green and beautiful, it looked at first more like a resort than a prison'. On the day, his expectations may have been understandably low. Resorts are usually not situated over 20 kilometres out into a bleak ocean, separated by a heavy swell and icy winds from the nearest town. Resorts are generally not constructed on a site where, for 386 years, the authorities have confined, punished, hidden and isolated all the misfits of society. Resorts customarily try to live up to expectations rather than to live down their history.

Now that history has been house-trained. Visitors approach Robben Island just as Mandela and his fellow prisoners did, by a 90-minute ride out past the filthy foam of Cape Town harbour into the ocean breakers. They depart from the same jetty those prisoners used, travel in the same jail ferries, and arrive at the same grim bluestone harbour. The only differences are obviously the fundamental ones; passengers are not chained up or bashed up, and all of them have something Mandela could never have hoped for, a return ticket.

Robben Island is genuinely greenish and more-or-less beautiful. Perennially strong gales have stunted the trees, except for a stray gum tree oblivious to the prevailing winds. Tubby seals and penguins are prospering, tourists' feet are kept on the tracks and away from the bird eggs, and various types of buck languidly graze on the sparse vegetation in the paddocks. The prickly pear beloved by Baloo Bear poses the only hazard for the visitor. In a bizarre

irony, Robben Island has become the safest spot in all South Africa. The incongruity between this gentle, placid landscape and the prison is as stark as in the lush, rolling hills around Port Arthur. In both cases, we constructed a Hell in a segment of Heaven.

The managers of Robben Island are now seeking to learn lessons from Rottneest Island, roughly the same size, with a similar range of animal and bird life, tucked away at approximately the same distance from its home town. Those will be benign lessons, designed to enhance the quality of nature's



Mandela's corridor

Heaven, nothing to do with man's Hell.

The South Africans are already working out how to learn something durable from Robben Island. They have turned this national memorial into the most minimalist museum in the entire world. On Robben Island, there are no statues, no photographs, no books, no souvenirs, no graffiti, no placards, no dioramas, no sound-and-light shows, no theme parks, no taped commentary, no showbags.

Minimalism connotes dignity. The prison ferry ties up in front of a sign from the bad old days, one reiterating the warders' motto, *Ons Dien Met Trots*. That is not in the same league as *Arbeit Macht Frei*; the warders were meant to be inspired by the Afrikaans' aphorism about duty, rather than the prisoners being intimidated.

After walking under the sign and up a crushed gravel path, you arrive straight away at the main prison. Minimalism still rules. Along a bare corridor, all the outer cell doors stand open, including one distinguished merely by a bit of paper stuck on the door with sticky tape, noting in the most minimalist way imaginable,

'N. Mandela'. That cell is conspicuously, ludicrously small. A single bed, a belated concession, has replaced the two sisal and felt mats on which Mandela used to sleep. A tin bowl waits for yet another serving of mealie pap porridge. A bucket for slops sits in the corner. The single light bulb still burns day and night. Everything is miniature as well as minimalist, all of it tiny, spare and neat.

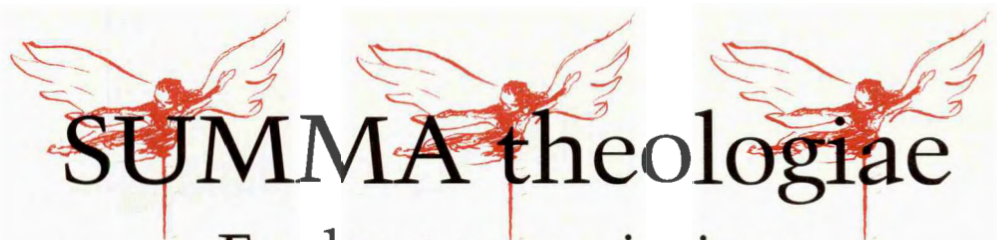
Around the end of the corridor is a barren dining room, connected to showers and toilets, the showers providing only freezing cold salt water from the sea, the toilets with half-sized doors like the ones we put in kindergartens. Outside is a courtyard where the prisoners began by chipping rocks and ended, as the régime relaxed the rules, by playing tennis. A brisk walk takes you out to the lime quarry, still glittering white in the weak winter sun, still a threat to the eyes and lungs of anyone forced to work there.

On the road into the quarry stands a pile of stones, as tiny, spare and neat as all the furnishings in Mandela's cell. That pile of rocks—

home-made, rough and awkward though it is constitutes the sole memorial on all the island. The first stone was placed there by Mandela himself on a homecoming visit as

State President, the others by his fellow-sufferers.

**S**OME OF THOSE SUFFERERS, the prisoners-turned-guides, now have the chance to propound their own authorised version of history. Even their explanations are minimalist. One of them had been sentenced in 1987 to 25 years' imprisonment, for possession of banned materials. (He declined to clarify whether those materials were pamphlets or guns.) This still-young man claimed that he did not feel at all odd in returning to the island. As he put it, in an utterly un-didactic, un-polemical way, 'we have got a history to tell'. 'All kids must know what happened.' Another, much older guide, insisted on the ecumenical character of suffering. He would not discuss Mandela as an individual fellow prisoner, but would only talk collectively about 'all the leaders of all our groups'. The old man's monologue dealt with all the petty artifices of prison



# SUMMA theologiae

## W Faulty transmissions

life (how to pass a message submerged in porridge, how to hide a newspaper down your pants), his laments were chronicled in a minor key. His hair had gone irretrievably grey after six months washing in sea water, while his skin had blistered ('rash is another name for it').

Nowhere is any instrument of torture to be found. Robben Island contains no vicarious horror for the tourist to match being locked in the dark cell at Port Arthur. The courtyard and the cells are starkly bare rather than horrific. You are obliged to deposit all your hand-guns before boarding the ferry. One guide—a novice rather than an old lag—went so far as to soften the prison terms of art; instead of referring to 'warders', she talked innocently about 'wardens'.

**K**ELPING MINIMALISM UNTAINTED has the backing of some forceful lobbyists. After all, people do not often emerge from prison after 27 years away to become President of their countries. Ex-prisoners elsewhere possess no prerogative rights over their old jails; inmates of Alcatraz could not really object to the film, *The Rock*; nor could Hess have taken issue with the *Spandau Diaries*. Lessons about dignity are learned hard. Hence the same brand of minimalism is to be applied to the transformation of the notorious Old Fort in Johannesburg, now to become a home for the Constitutional Court and a museum of racial tolerance.

In years to come, some public-spirited figure may try to plonk a statue of Nelson Mandela down on Robben Island, perhaps next to monuments for fellow-inmates of earlier generations, like Makanna (a commander in the fourth Xhosa war), Autshumao (the first of the Khoi Khoi rebels), or even the lepers. That would be a bit like, say, building a convent next to Auschwitz. The intention may be honourable, the remembrance sincere, but the execution flawed to the point of tawdriness. In our world, it is hard to find any authentic memorial to the human spirit, and well worth keeping one which South Africans—and all of us—inherited by the most fortunate happenstance. We can cherish not just the spirit but the full-blooded cliché, taking heart from the proof that stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.

*(Ferries leave Cape Town harbour, near the Victoria and Albert hotel, for Robben Island three times daily. Cost for a return fare is R80, about \$25.)* ■

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**W**HILE ALL THE FOUNDATIONAL THINKING CONTINUES TO ENGAGE US, practical theology still has to be done. The days do not wait. One pressing and practical question is, 'How are we to teach the faith to our children?' Some say we should go back to the catechism and rigorously teach the content of the faith: 'what it is we believe'. Others say that faith is 'caught' and not 'taught', and that it is more important to communicate 'who it is we believe in'. Thomas Groome has given more thought to these questions than most. In his view religious educators want to promote a 'lived' faith, and that therefore the best way to do this is by both disclosure and discovery, or what he calls 'shared Christian praxis'.

The Diocese of Parramatta has used Groome's approach for eight years in a project called 'Sharing Our Story', and you can read a very thorough review of this experiment in the Australian Catholic University's journal on education, *Word in Life* 45 (3) 1997. While the Parramatta project shows need for further refinement, it is also evident that Groome's approach gives religious education a successful focus and a coherent theoretical framework.

One of the other challenges in transmitting the faith in Australia has to do with the shift in the administration of our schools from the religious sisters and brothers to the laity. Paul Sharkey, in the Christian Brothers' sponsored journal *Catholic School Studies* 70 (October 1997), writes on 'Handing over the baton, from religious to lay administration'. Sharkey's reflections, we are told, are based on his involvement 'in the transition of the principalship of a long-established Melbourne Catholic College'. He asks the hard question about finding a new context for old truths. He comes to the ominous conclusion that, 'without courage, trust, reflection, creativity of spirit, "charism continuance" projects will be received as imposed discourses of religious mumbo jumbo that make little sense to their hearers and even less impact'.

Homosexuality is another disputed question in the Church today. Two serious and respected journals, *The Hastings Center Report* (July-August 1997) and *The Journal of Religious Ethics* (Spring 1997) currently offer articles on the consequences of genetic research into sexual orientation. It was once thought that if homosexuality could be shown to be attributable to genetic structure then surely homosexuality could not be condemned as immoral. Scientific study thus far indicates that there is 'significant environmental and moderate genetic influence' on a person's sexual orientation. The further moral question, however, has to do with whether or not such research ought even to be undertaken. If homosexuality can be attributed to one's genes, what is to stop the homophobic from saying that such a genetic structure is a disease, with the consequence that a foetus showing such genetic structure might in the end be terminated? It seems to me that this is a very strange question, however, and that genetic research can help us accept and understand each other for the wonderfully various ways in which we are made.

I must report that *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* has been found to contain a number of errors. Cardinal Ratzinger, on 9 September 1997, released ten pages of corrections which must be made to the 1992 text. To consult all these changes to the *Catechism*, see *Briefings* (18 September 1997). Some are very minor. Two worth noting, however, are the addition rather than correction made to §88, resulting in an extension to the authority claimed by the Magisterium of the Church to include not only 'truths contained in divine Revelation' but also, in addition 'truths having a necessary connection with these'. One cannot help but wonder what kind of truth and what kind of necessity are entailed here.

Second, at §2266 and §2267 in the *Catechism* there has been a slight reworking of the Church's attitude towards capital punishment. The film *Dead Man Walking* was based partly on the life and work of a feisty American nun who, apart from working with men condemned to death, petitioned Cardinal Ratzinger to take the clause allowing capital punishment out of the new catechism. It is reported that the Cardinal agreed to this. And, indeed, capital punishment has been removed from §2266. It re-appears, however, in a newly written §2267. ■

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# No principled reason

*In the final Centenary Lecture at St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne in October, **Hilary Charlesworth** addressed the Challenge of Human Rights Law for Religious Traditions*

I REMEMBER COMING TO ST PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL AS A CHILD, for major ceremonial occasions. I was always moved by its great size and grandeur. It seemed a generous, welcoming space, able to enfold all who entered it.

My parents, Max and Stephanie Charlesworth, shared a faith that was a defining feature of my childhood. I remember being mortified when our local parish priest once criticised my father in his sermon for his opposition to the Vietnam War and I assumed that this would mean that Mum and Dad would henceforth abandon the Church. But, although my parents might have been critical of positions that were taken by the Church from time to time on social and political issues, they had steadfast faith in Christianity's transcendent truths. They may now think that their seven children have taken the critical tradition too far and have lost sight of the value of institutional religion, but I think that they have given to all of us a keen sense of the spiritual in everyday life, a sense—to use the words of George Bernanos in his *Diary of a Country Priest*—that 'Grace is everywhere'.

It is entirely in character with that insight then, that we can consider the challenge posed for religious traditions by human rights law. The way that this challenge is met will be critical for the development of religion, offering as it does a valuable, transformative framework for the evolution and re-invention of religious traditions into the next century.



The development of a system of human rights law dates from after World War II and the founding of the United Nations in 1945. However, the idea that individuals had some form of basic rights is much older: traces of rights talk can be found in ancient Greek and Roman thought. When Sophocles' Antigone defies Creon's command not to bury her slain brother and invokes the higher laws of the gods that require his burial, she is using a rights-based argument. Kim Dae Jung, writing recently in *The Australian*, noted that in China, the government of the Chin dynasty, founded 2,200 years ago, operated with a belief in the fair treatment of all, regardless of caste. And in the third century BC, inscriptions of the great Indian emperor, Ashoka, emphasise tolerance and liberty as central values of a good society. Later, the tradition of natural law, as developed in Europe by St Thomas Aquinas and others, had human rights elements, particularly the idea that there was a higher law above that of governmental authority. And in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the writings of John Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau, translated into action by the French and American revolutions, promoted the idea that humans were born with certain inalienable rights and that violation of these rights by government justified the government's overthrow.

**A**LTHOUGH THERE WERE VIGOROUS ATTACKS ON the notion that individuals had rights simply by virtue of being human (Jeremy Bentham wrote in 1843 that talk of rights was 'nonsense upon stilts'), social movements such as the anti-slavery movement and the women's suffrage movement kept the idea of basic rights alive.

All this time, however, international law remained largely detached from concerns of individual or group rights. With some minor exceptions, the province of international law was considered to be the relationships between nations, and not the relationship between a nation and its population. It took the atrocities of the Holocaust to prompt the international community to acknowledge formally its concern with nation states' treatment of all individuals within their jurisdiction.

The Charter of the United Nations contains the first explicit recognition in international law that an individual is entitled to the observance of fundamental rights and freedoms. Among the purposes of the United Nations set out in Article 1 of the Charter is that of coöperation 'in promoting respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all'. Article 55 commits the United Nations to promote 'universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion' and Article 56 provides that all members 'pledge themselves to take joint and several action in cooperation with the Organisation for the achievement of the purposes set forth in Article 55'.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted unanimously by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, gave content to the undefined notion of fundamental human rights in the Charter. Although the Universal Declaration was not originally intended to be a formally binding instrument, it has always had the status of 'an authoritative interpretation of the Charter of the highest order'.<sup>1</sup> Together with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (ICOPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, (ICESCR), which were adopted in 1966, the Universal Declaration forms the so-called 'International Bill of Rights'. Quite apart from the specific treaty obligations contained in the Covenants, observance of many of the principles set out in the Universal Declaration and the Covenants is now generally considered to be required by customary international law binding on all nations.

While the Universal Declaration and the Covenants deal with human rights generally, other instruments dealing with specific areas of human rights have been adopted internationally. These include the Genocide Convention (1948), the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952), the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (1957), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990). The International Labour Organisation, UNESCO and other specialised agencies of the UN have drafted and now administer a wide range of human rights instruments. There are also significant regional human rights treaties, such as the European Convention on Human Rights, the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights and the American Convention on Human Rights.

*The major religious traditions have not engaged adequately with the international law of human rights. These standards offer an understanding of the 'rock-bottom of human existence' that needs to be reckoned with rather than ignored or undermined.*

The international law of human rights then, is a sophisticated and well-developed system. It offers a considerable range of human rights guarantees. While these rights are often couched in general language, it is clear that their assertion is not unlimited. For example, article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that limitations on rights are permissible 'solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare of a democratic society.'

Human rights, says the Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung, protect the 'rock bottom of human existence'.<sup>2</sup> The aims of human rights law have been described by Professor Louis Henkin as 'unique and revolutionary' in international law—essentially ideological, idealistic, humanitarian ... [whose] true and deep purpose is to improve the lot of individual men and women everywhere'.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, concern with human rights remains controversial in international law because it conflicts with traditional notions of state sovereignty that accord states great freedom in their domestic, or national, activities. As we see all the time in Australia's reluctance to criticise the human rights abuses of its major trading partners, economic and political considerations often take precedence over human rights on the international agenda. The very basis of human rights law is controversial because it imposes restraints on governments in the name of individual or minority autonomy. In this sense, human rights law is counter-majoritarian in that it provides protection for individuals, groups and minorities so that, in certain defined contexts, their interests are not

**W**HILE IDEAS ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS may have been once connected with religious traditions, the international law of human rights has been largely detached from religious world views. Indeed the *travaux préparatoires* to the Universal Declaration reveal that there was a proposal by Brazil and the Netherlands to include a reference to a deity in the preamble and article 1, to the effect that 'human beings are created in the image of God ... and are endowed by nature with reason and conscience'. This proposal was rejected because of objections that this should offend those nations without a natural law tradition and also non-believers.

It is not that international human rights law completely ignores religion as an aspect of peoples' lives; it recognises a right to freedom of religion, and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. In 1981, after twenty years of debate, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief, and this may one day form the basis of a treaty on religious intolerance.

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has appointed a Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance. But the engagement of human rights law and religion has been mostly procedural, concerned with freedom of religion as an aspect of freedom of speech and thought. Even this limited engagement has been controversial, because some religious traditions do not accept the idea of freedom to choose a religion. Indeed, Saudi Arabia abstained from the vote adopting the Universal Declaration on Human Rights precisely because the Declaration endorsed freedom of religion and belief.

It is often argued from non-Western perspectives that the international law of human rights is effectively a Western construct. It is ostensibly universal, critics say, but in fact it reflects the values of Western liberal culture—individualism over communitarianism, political and civil rights over economic and social rights. This type of attack has been particularly pronounced in our region, with Dr Mahathir of Malaysia recently suggesting that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should be redrafted to take 'Asian values' into account. He has attacked

individuals in some developed countries [who] consider it their right to tell us how to rule our country ... These people latch on to various causes such as human rights and the environment in order to reimpose colonial rule on us.

The debate has sometimes been characterised as one between a 'universalist' philosophy that imposes unvarying human rights standards on all cultures and a 'cultural relativist' position that argues that human rights should be shaped by the particular historical context of each nation. However, as Professor Yash Ghai has pointed out, rejection of human rights principles typically comes from governments seeking to justify repressive practices, and that minorities and local non-government organisations typically see international human rights standards

*At the international level religious traditions are used in a complex way to preserve the power of men. The appeal to the sanctity of religion is considerably reduced if it is the case that it is being used to bolster the existing distribution of power and privilege.*

as extremely important benchmarks. Indeed Dr Mahathir's Deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, has said,

If we in Asia wish to speak credibly of Asian values, we too must be prepared to champion those ideals which are universal and belong to humanity as a whole. It is altogether shameful, if ingenious, to cite Asian values as an excuse for autocratic practices and denial of basic rights and civil liberties ... It is true that Asians place greater emphasis on order and societal stability. But it is certainly wrong to regard society as a kind of false god upon whose altar the individual must constantly be sacrificed.

From an international lawyer's perspective, it is striking that despite the strong attack on human rights law as a vehicle for Western ideology, each of the 185 member states of the United Nations has become a party to at least one international human rights treaty.

If human rights law has not engaged explicitly with religious traditions, what have religious traditions made of human rights? In one sense, human rights and religion are intimately, if ambivalently, related in that religions provide a transcendent perspective by revealing a dimension of human life over and above the social and political order. Religions set a limit to the power of the collectivity and the state, since in a religious context the state cannot pretend to be the unitary source of all authority. The tensions between religion and the states run through European history: think of Socrates and the Athenian state, the debates in the Middle Ages between the Church and the temporal rulers about the things that are Cæsar's and the things that are not Cæsar's, the role of individual conscience in radical Protestantism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and so on. From this perspective, one might think that religious traditions would be the natural champions of human rights. But none of the great religions of the Book—Christianity, Islam and Judaism—has endorsed human rights ideas unequivocally. Their texts speak of obligations and duties rather than rights. And their histories contain many examples of their discrimination, intolerance and oppression—crusades, jihads, Inquisitions and ostracisms of many sorts. The Roman Catholic Church did not condemn slavery until the late nineteenth century, and it took almost 2000 years to acknowledge at the Second Vatican Council that there was a right to freedom of religious belief and practice. Straight after World War II, Christian and Jewish groups actively participated in the development of international human rights norms, but this interest seemed to wane over time.

In the case of the Catholic Church, this lack of engagement on the international level did not mean lack of interest in human rights issues. In the wake of Vatican II, the Church endorsed many human rights notions: in Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* (1963) we find a statement that every person is created by God with 'dignity, intelligence and free will ... and has rights flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature.' And in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) the Second Vatican Council said 'The protection of personal rights is a necessary condition for the active participation of citizens ... in the life and government of the state.' The ideal of equality and human dignity is part of the Judæo-Christian culture.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THIS RELIGIOUS TRADITION are the idea of the sanctity of the individual human body which supports a right to freedom from torture and a right to bodily integrity; and the sacredness of the individual human spirit, which requires freedom of expression. The Catholic Church has also been very active in the grassroots of human rights struggles in many parts of the world. Both leadership from Rome and the work of local churches have supported and guided human rights movements in Central and Latin America, the Philippines, South Korea and Central Europe. Archbishop Belo's Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 is a reminder of the significance of the Catholic Church in the fight for human rights in East Timor. Despite this, the Holy See has accepted only two international human rights treaties—the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The relationship of Islam to human rights is more complex. *Shari'a*, or Islamic religious law, was developed in the second and third centuries of Islam. The *Shari'a* is not a formally enacted code, but a vast body of jurisprudence in which jurists express their views on the meaning of the Qur'an and the Sunna, which are the holy scriptures of Islam. The *Shari'a* then, is a body of religious and moral directives and principles. It affects the thinking and behaviour of Muslims the world over and it is the foundation of the institutions and customs of most Muslim societies. Although many Islamic states have partially adopted European legal systems, particularly for commercial law, the *Shari'a* remains dominant in the areas of family law and inheritance.

Because of the deep significance of the *Shari'a* in Islamic society, most Muslims would believe that it should take precedence over any other legal system. The basis of international human rights law, the idea that a person has rights by virtue of being human, is quite foreign to Islamic

jurisprudence. Indeed, many *Shari'a* precepts are based on distinctions between humans—Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women. For example, the *Shari'a* makes repudiation of Islam or, as we know from the Salman Rushdie case, the expression of views contrary to Islam, punishable by death. And like the Roman Catholic Church until the last century, the *Shari'a* also tolerates slavery.

Recently, the Islamic world has made an attempt to come to grips with international human rights law. Thus in 1990, the Organisation of Islamic States adopted the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam. This acknowledges limited human rights, but states that all rights must be regarded as subject to Islamic law. In 1994, the League of Arab States adopted the Arab Charter on Human Rights, over the objection of seven of its members. The Charter is not yet in force. It refers in its preamble to the Charter of the UN and the International Bill of Rights, but does not endorse those instruments' acceptance of a right to be free from slavery and the right to change one's religion. Many international human rights guarantees are weakened considerably in the Arab Charter.

But while the Catholic Church and Islam can claim an engagement with international human rights issues in some contexts, they have played what can be regarded as a negative and problematic role in other human rights contexts, particularly in that of women's rights. This has fostered a striking and incongruous alliance between the two religious traditions. A coalition of the Islamic countries, the Holy See (which is a permanent observer state at the United Nations) and some Catholic countries, has been most prominent in the 1990s at United Nations conferences, particularly the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development (UNCPD) held in Cairo, the 1995 World Summit on Social Development held in Copenhagen and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing. At the UNCPD, the Catholic and Islamic religious traditions strenuously opposed placing women's health, reproduction and sexuality within a human rights framework. Because UN conferences work on a consensus principle, the Catholic-Islam coalition was able to delay agreement on a text until very late. The coalition resisted definition of the notion of reproductive health to include sexual health, 'the purpose of which is the enhancement of life and personal relations, and not merely counselling and care related to reproduction and sexually transmitted disease'. This text was finally accepted, with strong reservations made by Catholic and Islamic states.

**B**UT THE HOLY SEE AND ISLAMIC STATES managed to undermine this apparent advance at the next international summit, the Copenhagen Summit on Social Development. Unusually, and at the insistence of the Holy See and Islamic states, the Copenhagen Platform for Action refers to reservations made to the UNCPD documents, which gives them renewed status. And a statement in a draft of the official Beijing conference document that reaffirmed earlier commitments made about women, especially at (UNCPD) was vigorously contested by the Holy See. The Holy See was also active in ensuring that parts of the official documents containing references to reproductive health, fertility control and sex education, all endorsed at the UNCPD, remained in square brackets during the negotiations for both Copenhagen and Beijing, indicating lack of consensus on their adoption. In the end, however, the UNCPD wording was preserved.

A particular concern of Islamic states has been the issue of the universality of human rights. After much debate and controversy, the Vienna Second World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 affirmed that human rights were universal, indivisible, inter-dependent and inter-related and that:

While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of states, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

At the 1994 UNCPD, Islamic states were successful in watering down the Vienna language by inserting a rather contradictory clause stating that implementation of the document should both be in conformity with universally recognised human rights but also should be consistent with full respect for the various religions and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of nations. Islamic states also revived this debate in the context of women's rights at Beijing. And until the very last moments of the official Conference, there was a proposal on the table to insert a footnote to the effect that different cultural and religious traditions were relevant in implementing the human rights of women. The footnote did not make its way into the final document—apparently as a trade-off for the exclusion of any reference to women's right to freedom of sexual orientation.

There are signs of the success of Islamic lobbying at Beijing in the official documents: the Beijing Platform for Action acknowledges women's right to inherit property, but because of resistance by some sub-Saharan and Islamic states, not the right to inherit in equal shares to men's. The signs

of the failure of the religious lobbies are evident in the reservations made to the Platform: the Holy See and some Catholic and Islamic states rejected the idea of a woman's right to control her sexuality and they also rejected the call to review punitive laws for women who had had illegal abortions.

Not that the role of the Holy See and Islamic countries was wholly negative at Beijing. Indeed, Professor Mary Ann Glendon, the leader of the Holy See's delegation, supported many aspects of the Beijing Platform for Action—for example, recognising the economic value of women's work in the home. But the Catholic and Islamic delegations mainly promoted limited notions of the rights of women that involved no rethinking of religious traditions.

**T**HE TENSION BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS showed again in the reservations made by Islamic states to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. (The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam states that women are equal to men in dignity, but not in rights.) Unlike the Holy See, many Islamic states have become party to the Women's Convention, but have lodged formal statements of reservation to the treaty. Typical of these reservations is that of Egypt, which states that matters concerning marriage and family relations must be subject to Islamic *Shari'a* law.

Some states have made even more sweeping reservations: the Maldives' reservation commits it to comply with the Convention's provisions 'except those which the Government may consider contradictory to the principles of the Islamic Sharia upon which the laws and the traditions of the Maldives is founded.' Moreover, the reservation goes on to say 'the Republic of Maldives does not see itself bound by any provisions of the Convention which obliges it to change its Constitutions and laws in any manner!' This type of reservation is invalid at international law because it undermines the object and purpose of the treaty, but there are no satisfactory mechanisms in international law to challenge reservations adequately. A number of states—notably Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Portugal and Sweden—have objected to the reservations, but these objections have been rejected by the Islamic states as a form of religious intolerance.<sup>4</sup> Thus Islamic states are still considered parties to the Women's Convention although they have rejected the equality provisions that are at its heart. Many other countries have made reservations to the Women's Convention, but the Islamic reservations, along with the Israeli, Indian and UK reservations, that protect the laws of religious communities, are the only ones based on religious grounds.

So, in the context of women's rights, major religious traditions have regarded human rights as a sort of Trojan Horse, with a belly full of subversive values. But why do women's rights pose so many problems for religions? Their traditions sustain both spiritual and temporal hierarchies. And they have contributed to and reinforced the historic relegation of women to the sphere of home, hearth and family and women's traditional exclusion from the public sphere of the economy, political life and power. The idea of separate spheres based on gender is accompanied by a common image of womanhood presented in the texts of all major religions: it is integrally connected to motherhood, submission, sacrifice and duty—being a woman entails obedience, not only to God, but to fathers, husbands and other male family members. Indeed there are many passages in the

Bible, the Qur'an and the sacred texts of Hinduism and Buddhism that explicitly present women as the property of men.<sup>5</sup>

**I**N OTHER WORDS, THE MAJOR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS operate with asymmetric accounts of manhood and womanhood. This is rationalised, not as inequality, but as a type of 'separate but equal' doctrine. Women may have similar moral and spiritual worth to men, but their life-work is fundamentally different. This is why the Catholic Church has found the issue of women's ordination so difficult: priesthood is simply not within the province of womanhood. Similarly in orthodox Judaism, women are disqualified from being rabbis and performing most public functions. In Islam, a verse of the Qur'an declares that men have *qawama* [guardianship and authority] over women because of the advantage men have over women and because men spend their property in supporting women.<sup>6</sup> The *Shari'a* interpretation of this verse is that men as a group are guardians of and superior to women as a group and the men of a particular family are the guardians of and superior to the women of that family. Women also have much fewer rights than men in family and inheritance law. Attempts by scholars to re-interpret religious texts to eradicate the asymmetry have had little apparent impact on actual religious practices.

The problem with a 'separate but equal' approach, as we have learned from the experience of segregation in the United States and that of apartheid in South Africa, is that the promise of equality is illusory if groups are running different races, or assigned to different spheres. There is nothing equal about denying women the status of being a priest, or rabbi or mullah.

Given the fundamental inequality between women and men on which the major religious traditions operate, it is small wonder the international law of human rights which regards sex and gender as irrelevant to rights poses a huge challenge to those traditions. This challenge has not been taken up in any meaningful way: unfortunately, the approach seems to be to resist engagement and dialogue and to work hard to undermine many women's rights at the international level.

This avoidance of the challenge of human rights law is also evident here in Australia, where many religious institutions lobbied successfully to gain exemption from the state and federal laws prohibiting sex discrimination. For example, the Sex Discrimination Act specifically excludes from its provisions sex discrimination in the ordination or appointment of priests and ministers or members of a religious order (sec 37 [a]).

We can imagine the huge outcry if the Churches had lobbied to be exempted from the race discrimination laws—this would have been regarded as utterly unacceptable by their members and by the community generally. Why is the religious exemption from sex discrimination laws not similarly problematic? I suggest that there is no principled reason at all and that it is urgent that Australian religious institutions rethink their antipathy to these national human rights laws.

Despite the tensions in the relationship, human rights is a worthwhile framework for the development of religious traditions. And, equally, religious traditions have something to offer human rights law, which is by no means a perfect system. There is the criticism that human rights have been developed in a mainly Western context. Further, human rights law does not provide many easy solutions: it is, for example, deliberately vague on the controversial issue of abortion. But it does offer a vocabulary and structure in which claims by marginalised groups can be formulated. It allows dialogue on difficult issues of human existence. It allows 'continually changing, negotiated understandings of that which it is most essential to protect in order to defend and to enhance our common humanity'.

How then can human rights law provide a framework for religious traditions? First, this will require a willingness to acknowledge practices that have violated human rights. The Catholic Church has been prepared on many occasions to confront its complicity in human rights abuses. In early October we heard the French bishops recognise and apologise for the Catholic Church's silence in the face of the persecution and annihilation of Jews in France in the Second World War. And in Australia some Church leaders have acknowledged the human rights violations of the stolen generation of indigenous children. In Australia there is also an opportunity for recognising the issue of women's rights in the Catholic Bishops' Inquiry into the Role of Women in the Church.

**S**ECOND, RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS MUST BE PREPARED to interpret their sacred texts and traditions in ways that are consistent with the protection of human rights—'developing a human rights hermeneutic'. This has already proved possible: at the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church adopted a Declaration on Human Freedom which vindicated the right of people to choose their own conscientious religious beliefs although the right had been denied for centuries by the Church. In Islam, the Sudanese jurist, Abdullahi An-Na'im, has described a process of re-interpretation of the sources of Islamic tradition in a way that preserves legitimacy and is also consistent with human rights norms. He argues that we need to understand that religious traditions reflect an historically conditioned interpretation of scripture, influenced by social, economic and political circumstances. For example, when considering the strictures on the role of women in the *Shari'a*, we need to note that equality between women and men at the time of the development of the *Shari'a* in the Middle East would have been inconceivable. The principle of *qawama*, (the guardianship and authority of men over women) is based on assumptions that have little relevance today: that men are stronger than women and that men support women financially. The principle, An-Na'im argues, should not therefore retain its legitimacy. A similar analysis could apply to the scriptures of Christianity that are used to justify the exclusion of women from the priesthood.<sup>2</sup> I think that a human rights approach indicates that it is important to pay attention to the political uses of claims of religious culture. We need to ask whose culture is being invoked, what the status of the interpreter is, in whose name the argument is advanced, and who the primary beneficiaries are.<sup>3</sup> An-Na'im observed that Islamic governments, when pressured to observe Islam, 'have tended to enunciate policies that have a differential impact upon the weaker elements of society [particularly women and minorities]'. So too, Ann Mayer has noted the tendency in Islamic states to use Islam as an interchangeable rationale with 'the rule of law', 'public order and morality' and 'state policy' to suppress any activism by women. A good example of this is a recent statement

*If human rights is a valuable framework for the development of religious traditions, what can human rights law learn from religion? An important contribution that religious traditions can make to human rights is their emphasis on duties as a concomitant of rights: individuals have duties to themselves, to others and to society at large.*

of the Muslim Governor of Kandahar, a province of Afghanistan, rejecting attempts by the Grameen bank of Bangladesh to lend money to rural women to start their own businesses.

We should also closely analyse the invocation of religion by the Holy See in its international lobbying against certain women's rights. Whose interests are served by arguments based on religion, and who comes out on top? At the international level religious traditions are used in a complex way to preserve the power of men. Mayer points out that the appeal to the sanctity of religion is considerably reduced if it is being used to bolster the existing distribution of power and privilege.

**I**F HUMAN RIGHTS IS A VALUABLE FRAMEWORK for the development of religious traditions, what can human rights law learn from religion? An important contribution that religious traditions can make to human rights is their emphasis on duties as a concomitant of rights: individuals have duties to themselves, to others and to society at large. John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* noted that individuals must respect and promote the rights of others, including resisting regimes which violate the rights of others: '... a renewed ethos of duty has the potential to increase social cohesion, moderate racial and ethnic antagonism, and better protect the most vulnerable members of society. ... A regime of duties would lead to social cohesion rather than fragmentation and to solidarity rather than selfishness.'

Another advantage of a religious perspective on human rights is that it would promote concern with a full range of rights—civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural. This is a valuable counterweight to the narrow views of some Western governments, particularly the United States, which insist that civil rights are more important than economic and social rights.

Finally, a religious perspective emphasises the transcendent nature of human rights. In 1994, the Czech President, Vaclav Havel, said:

Politicians at international forums may reiterate a thousand times that the basis of the new world order must be universal respect for human rights ... [B]ut it will mean nothing as long as this imperative does not derive from the respect of the miracle of being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature, the miracle of our own existence. Only someone who submits in the authority of the universal order and of creation, who values the right to be a part of it, and a participant in it, can genuinely value himself and his neighbours, and thus honor their rights as well.

In his recent book, *Religious Inventions*, Max Charlesworth points out the inventive nature of religions: human creativity and imagination have played an indispensable role in the development of religion. Revelation, he says, is inevitably 'mediated by human reception and understanding'. My argument (not just based on filial piety, indeed he may reject it completely) is that human rights law has inventive, transformative potential—it is one vehicle for reinventing religious traditions. My hope is that in the next century the wonderful, generous space of St Patrick's will be home to a Catholic Church that is committed to the human rights of all its members. ■

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THE NATION: 2  
ANDREW HAMILTON

## *Trahisson des clerics:* the Howard Government and refugees

**T**HE WORLD HAS BECOME a colder place for refugees during the last decade. Governments now see them as a problem to be removed from sight and expect international agencies to serve their interests. And Australia has led the world in devising a harsh regime for asylum seekers.

Under the present government, Australian policy has displayed the underlying antagonism and fear of unwanted immigrants that has characterised most of

our history. In an earlier Australia which welcomed newcomers of British stock, this attitude showed in the White Australia policy and discriminatory treatment of non-British immigrants. Australian reception of refugees was therefore grudging until the demand for labour to support post-war industrial development made it necessary to seek immigrants from beyond the English-speaking world.

The welcome given to refugees rose to its apogee in the reception of the Indochinese

refugees selected from the camps. But the welcome dipped as the end of full employment in Australia coincided with the first arrivals of on-shore asylum seekers. The latter awoke atavistic fears of alien hordes waiting to fill Australia's empty spaces. Their arrival, too, was unplanned, could not be budgeted for, and was only accidentally compatible with Australia's needs.

Successive ministers were torn between Australia's obligations under the United



Nations Convention to protect refugees and their desire to discourage on-shore applicants for asylum. On the one hand, many asylum seekers were detained, while the support and ability to work enjoyed by those already in the community became successively limited. On the other hand, government attempts to limit its obligations under the Convention were thwarted by decisions by tribunals and courts.

The policy of the Howard Government towards refugees has been consistent. It accepts a small quota of off-shore refugees, but has set out systematically to discourage on-shore asylum seekers and as far as possible to deny their claims for protection. In this respect it has tried to strip Australia's commitments under the UN Convention of practical effect.

**I**N THEMSELVES, THESE GOALS do not differ from those of the previous government. But their implementation takes on a particular colour from the Howard Government's ideological stance and policy orientations. Whereas the Labor Government had to deal with a constituency concerned with human rights issues, the present government includes supporters who are opposed to all instruments and conventions that limit the free play of government power.

The Howard Government has been concerned above all to demonstrate economic competence, defined in terms of short-range goals. The real business of government is seen as economic management, based on cutting public spending, particularly in areas where no political disadvantage will follow. And as economic change increases anxiety about employment, immigrants and refugees can easily be made scapegoats.

At the same time, agencies which help marginal groups often have to compete against other agencies for funding, and so are reluctant to criticise government mistreatment of their clients.

Immigration policy, within which the reception of asylum seekers is set, has been dominated by the desire to secure almost total control of entry to Australia. Within this perspective, shown also in the awarding of visas, on-shore asylum seekers are not regarded as the objects of sympathy but as unscheduled and irregular would-be immigrants.

The government has also sought to restrict immigration, in the populist belief that immigrants cost jobs. Within the diminished number of immigration places, skills have been given a higher place than

family reunion. Money has been saved by refusing benefits to immigrants (with the exception of those who are admitted on humanitarian grounds) until they have been in Australia for two years.

The number of those admitted into Australia on humanitarian grounds has also shrunk to the point where only 4000 places are reserved for humanitarian entry. Furthermore, this quota now includes off-shore refugees, their immediate relatives, and on-shore asylum seekers.

One of the incidental effects of this aggregation of categories has been competition between different groups. It would require great magnanimity on the part of Bosnian refugees, for example, to welcome a grant of residence to the East Timorese asylum seekers, if they believed that this would delay or prevent the acceptance of their own wives or young children.

The government's goal of discouraging on-shore asylum seekers has been largely achieved, and by the use of three methods: rhetoric that depicts the claims of on-shore asylum seekers as fraudulent; pressure on those adjudicating refugee claims, and the progressive withdrawal of support and review from asylum seekers.

Government rhetoric also affects the culture of decision-making: from the beginning, the Minister has criticised the many avenues of appeal open to asylum seekers, and has sought a system which will be 'more efficient'. He has also sought to apply the demand for increased productivity throughout the public service to the adjudication of claims. This emphasis rewards quick decision-making. At the same time, he has criticised what he sees as wrong decisions made by the Refugee Review Tribunal. All the 'wrong decisions' have been ones that granted refugee status.

In a government department whose numbers have been severely cut, and among the members of the Tribunal whose re-appointment depends on the minister, indications of government attitudes are understandably treated seriously. It would be surprising if this negative attitude to the claims of on-shore asylum seekers did not become conventional wisdom.

Under the present government, the Minister has also taken a more active role in the processes of adjudication. Cases can be heard on the papers without the applicant being interviewed. In cases before the Refugee Review Tribunal, the hearing can be by teleconference without the actual presence of the applicant's lawyer.

At the same time, the government has introduced into Parliament a privative clause which will exempt most cases from judicial review. The Minister, however, has regularly appealed against decisions with which the government disagrees. He has also insisted on his right to direct the Tribunal as to the government's position in certain cases.

The number of asylum seekers supported by the government has been further limited by restrictions on the right to work. Only those who apply for the right to work within forty-five days after their arrival in Australia will be eligible to receive work permits. Those without work permits are also deprived of a health card. Thus, asylum

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seekers without substantial private resources will be forced to beg from charities and their own ethnic communities in order to maintain themselves. Finally, in order to discourage appeal against primary decisions, the government has introduced a penalty of \$1,000 to which unsuccessful applicants are liable.

Detention also plays a part in deterring asylum seekers. With few exceptions, asylum seekers liable to detention are imprisoned until they are either granted residence or removed from Australia. In August this year, some asylum seekers had been held for more than four years. Some, who had appealed to the Minister, had waited in detention for over a year without receiving a reply.

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If the government's policy has been to introduce without political cost a more harsh and discouraging regime for on-shore asylum seekers, it has substantially succeeded. There has been little public criticism of the changes introduced. Whether these measures will substantially limit the number of asylum seekers who come to Australia and the amount of time which they spend in Australia will depend in part on whether most asylum seekers are driven primarily by need or by perceived opportunity.

Nevertheless, there have been minor irritants in the implementation of policy. The results of two court cases have caused annoyance. A judgment in the Federal Court has made it more difficult for the government to resolve to its satisfaction the position of the 1,500 asylum seekers from East Timor.

The solution to the dilemma was, first, to decline to have their applications heard, and then to rely on an opinion that the majority of these asylum seekers had also Portuguese citizenship, and therefore were entitled to seek protection in Portugal. When some tribunal members rejected applications for refugee status on these grounds, the case was taken to the Federal Court.

In its response, the Federal Court decided that in fact they had Portuguese citizenship. But it ruled also that the Tribunal had to decide whether the asylum seekers could win effective protection in Portugal. In its instantiation of what effective protection might mean, it included several conditions which can not be verified in Portugal without significant change in Portuguese regulations and attitudes.

After the court case, two decisions were heard by the Refugee Review Tribunal. The members had previously been asked by both the Minister and the director of the Tribunal to delay their hearings until the Minister could give some direction in the case, but both refused and judged that the applicants were refugees.

The Government, which has responded by appealing against the decision, has made its policy clear. Good relations with Indonesia are so important that it will use all possible pressure to ensure that the East Timorese are not awarded refugee status in Australia. The asylum seekers will be encouraged by delay and uncertainty about present support and future prospects to seek asylum in Portugal.

Thus, the Government will be happy to adopt a policy of attrition. It is unlikely to

act directly to remove the East Timorese. Portugal, whose representatives have no respect for Australian policy towards East Timor, will not accept the involuntary removal of the asylum seekers. The latter, moreover, have strong support in the Australian community, and several thousand Australians have joined a sanctuary network to prevent their removal.

In the second court case, the European Commission on Human Rights found that Australian detention of asylum seekers to be arbitrary because it was not subject to effective review. The Commission gave the government 90 days in which to reply. The Government's response has been to claim that the decision bore only on a past case and not on current Australian policy.

It has argued that Australia detains asylum seekers only until their bona fides is established. Bona fides is defined as the awarding of refugee status. By this definition, the government could defend the detention, for the term of their natural life, of babies seeking asylum, should it choose not to process their cases. The argument is cynical, but it will buy time.

Australia's policy towards asylum seekers cannot be evaluated in isolation from the view of Australia adopted by the government. This can be characterised as a narrow view of Australian identity and a short-term view of Australian prosperity. Within this view, the metaphor that shapes the understanding both of identity and prosperity is one of small business. Middle Australia is conceived as composed of self-reliant and decent individuals who will prosper as long as their initiative is encouraged and they are not prevented by external interference. From this perspective, marginal groups in Australia are also marginally Australian. The spending of public money on these groups is seen as interfering with real Australian prosperity, which is defined in short-range economic rationalist terms.

**T**HOSE DISQUIETED by the treatment of asylum seekers are generally convinced that this short-term view of Australia is not conducive to the flourishing of Australians. It infringes on human dignity, a short-hand term for the conditions that favour long-term prosperity. The flourishing of a society has to do with a culture in which human resources are cultivated and human beings are given a respect beyond the economic contribution which they make.

From this long-term perspective, the treatment of asylum seekers is open to



criticism at three points: first, to detain indefinitely people who have committed no fault is an affront to human dignity. That such detention is unreasonable is shown by the ease with which governments have adopted and discarded arguments to support it. The need for deterrence was followed by the need to vindicate the integrity of immigration policy, and more recently by the need to establish the bona fides of asylum seekers. None of these arguments support routine detention.

Second, it is inhumane to deprive refugees of support. Australia is the only country in the Western world which deprives asylum seekers both of support for living and of the right to work. When access to medical care is also removed, asylum seekers are condemned to live in inhuman conditions.

Thirdly, the progressive withdrawal from asylum seekers of access to review of unfavourable decisions threatens to make them mere objects of unaccountable administrators. The rule of law is central to the defence of human dignity, and any move to replace it for asylum seekers by untrammelled and unreviewable executive power is harmful. Like the withdrawal of support and the practice of routine detention, it enshrines a view of Australia

in which asylum seekers do not belong because their humanity does not matter.

There is little likelihood, however, that the condition of asylum seekers will improve soon. The One Australia movement has been of great advantage to the government in allowing it to claim credit for breadth of vision while introducing restrictive policies. The support for the movement, too, has discouraged the Opposition from opposing resolutely the most damaging measures which, in any case, represent only a more draconian form of its own policies.

Few Australians, too, have any sympathetic contact with asylum seekers and little knowledge of their situation beyond that provided ultimately by slanted ministerial statements. A recent Uniya (Jesuit Social Justice Centre) survey, for example, showed a massive over-estimation of the number of boat-people arriving in Australia.

It is even more discouraging that the representatives of international agencies, like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, no longer appear to represent the human dignity of refugees but the interests of the governments dealing with them. In Australia this *trahison des clercs* has been notable.

In the longer term the damaging effects of a narrow and short-term view of Australia will become evident and will lead to change. This may happen relatively quickly, because the short-term and narrow vision of the Government is not grounded in rigorous historical scholarship or cultural reflection.

The destructive effects of a narrowly focused economic ideology have already subverted the claims to authority of its proponents, and have promoted a broader industry policy.

The effects of the destruction of education and of health care and of the narrowing of Australian identity will take longer to express itself, but will affect Australian prosperity.

A truer and broader vision of Australia, then, will become fashionable again, and within this vision the injustices done to asylum seekers will become more patent. ■

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Photographs, by **Bill Thomas**, taken at the Lunar Festival in Melbourne's Victoria Street, Richmond, and at a Melbourne outer suburban textile factory.

# Jokers from the pack

Once an Australian. Journeys with Barry Humphries, Clive James, Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes,  
Ian Britain, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997.

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AS TIME MOVES ON, Australian-British relations in the Menzies era are likely to seem as implausible as Austria-Hungary. Yet the dualism was real. *Oz* magazine, threatened by censorship in Australia, upped and went to London. Some of the students resuscitating the Liberal Club at Melbourne University toyed with the idea of affiliating themselves with the more progressive English Liberal party, then undergoing a resurgence. Intellectuals listened to the BBC news, relayed on the ABC twice a day, and read English weeklies. Even the English *Women's Weekly* was a familiar enough sight, and the paroxysm of loyalty that swept the country during the Royal Visit of 1954 showed that it was perfectly happy to cast itself as a larger, lumpier version of the Isle of Wight. At Farm Cove a sumptuously sited inscription—now looking more and more like the monument of a past *imperium*—proclaims the spot where the first reigning (British) sovereign first set foot on Australian soil. She had arrived by the *Gothic*, specially outfitted as the royal yacht; in its everyday function the ship had carried off thousands of Australians to Britain.

Australians had always returned—or gone—to England. Ian Britain reminds us that probably as many as half of the First Fleeters found their way back to the mother country, while by 1870 the Australian community was sufficiently large to support a newspaper. Such people, though, would probably have thought of themselves as ex-colonials rather than as expatriates. The Americans in Paris earlier this century seem to have been the people who popularised the latter term, since they had embarked on an indefinite absence from home and had a clear sense of the nation they expatriated themselves from. For many Australians, though, going to England was an affirmation, even if just on a trip 'home'. As late as 1962 any Australian presenting the document styled 'British passport', though it bore the Australian arms, secured unrestricted admission to England. A functional reciprocity existed in that the boats that had brought them also took back to Australia thousands of ten-pound immigrants.

When the imperial structures were still

clearly demarcated, the temporary Australian migration—even as it increased in volume through the 1950s—bore some resemblance to the internal migration that can occur from the countryside to the city. Those who intended to stay longer than a year, seemingly dictated by four weeks' boat travel each way, would seek assimilation. Here they followed an earlier generation. For people like the historian W.K. Hancock, who edited the official British war history after World War I, or Louise Hanson-Dyer, who recorded a rare English masque with two of the three soloists barely detectable Australians, the national origin was simply a coloration, not so much an accent as an inflection.

Something seems to have changed around 1960. Numbers had built up to the point where Earls Court in London became Kangaroo Valley, a clearing house for those who wanted a temporary base and a temporary job before venturing into Europe, or the smaller group who then moved elsewhere and tried to go native. (Even Clive James had a go at this: around 1970 he appeared in *The Listener*, demure among the daffodils at King's College, Cambridge, above the caption: 'The Englishing of Clive James'.) Australians had become so recognisable as a group that they were ripe for satire, and in 1964 *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* began appearing as a comic strip in *Private Eye*.

As the Liberal hegemony stretched on and on, conservatism in Australia seemed increasingly endemic. There was an impatience for change: a Martin Sharp cartoon had the ageing Menzies and Calwell (the Labor leader) confronting each other from wheelchairs. Meanwhile the suburb, often promoted now, was attacked for being a kind of security blanket, smothering in its conformity, comfort and monocultural certainties. To many people, including Ian Britain's big four, Australia was a place where nothing happened. 'I decided that Australia and I were both deprived', said Germaine Greer. 'It was boring.' But by the late sixties it was worse than that. The public 'apathy' that intellectuals complained of enabled the Liberal government to slide into deeper involvement in Vietnam, and

into repression at home. Those already abroad found English people making unflattering equations: the *New Statesman* proposed that the best solution to the Rhodesian crisis would be to resettle the whites in Australia.

It was in this context that Britain became even more attractive. Just as the Beatles and the Stones emerged, it became possible to jump ship at Bombay and proceed the rest of the way by the overland route, sampling drugs, mysticism and assorted exoticisms on the way. Post-Carnaby Street London, which gave us the word 'trendy', was eager for novelty and in favour of breaking down social boundaries. 'English society was ready to be shaken up', wrote Clive James. 'Authentic barbarians were welcome in the drawing room.' And Australian expatriates, often oblivious to English class distinctions, were only too glad to muscle in. Sometimes, though, there could be a shock, as in the 1971 *Oz* trial when the editors were sentenced to jail. In a sequel unrecorded by Britain, James and other signatories to a letter to *The Times* stated how very upset they were, since this sort of legal philistinism was exactly the kind of thing that had led them to leave Australia. Poor old Australia—damned when it did, damned when it didn't. Brown-nosing, I'm afraid; but this reproduction of Pommy snobberies may have helped to secure a later acquittal.

THE STORY OF AUSTRALIAN expatriates in England—for Hughes too had an English period—is a huge topic, and Ian Britain has sensibly used perhaps the four most famous of them to focus the issues. Continuing to have fresh thoughts about the subject even as the book was launched, he remarked on the fact that no other expatriate group in England has made a comparable impact. He's right: whereas English South Africans just had to reverse that designation, while most Canadians crossed the border rather than leaving their continent, Australians had the right degree of both residual imperial involvement and a New World detachment. (Expatriate New Zealanders generally assimilated, or joined the Australians.) And as Britain demonstrates, his four principals—

and a notable fifth, Peter Conrad—were 'word children', precocious wordsmiths heavily over-compensating for the primal disjunction between their natal place and the source of the high culture that had come to mean so much to them. The dazzling verbal display they tend to share Clive James has already identified, calling it 'kangarococo'. And it seems to go with the polymathic perverse. Scholarship may covertly power these four like steroids, as Britain says, but if so it is balanced by elements of ratbagery.

What else do the four subjects share? Britain points to their aptitude for self-publicity, for performance. A sense of theatre is ingrained in all of them: apart from Humphries, James and Greer were active in revues, while one of Hughes's talents was doing cartoons—revue in indian ink. Yet apart from Greer, none of them has been conspicuously political, and even her politics have been an amplification of the personal. Humphries, though conservative in temperament, has always deliberately defied categorisation. Hughes, until Vietnam, had no pronounced political views, while James on occasion will weigh into right or left as the occasion suits him. Sometimes he has been surprisingly conservative; at Cambridge he not only banned revue skits about Prince Charles, then a student there, but also material he thought gratuitously dirty. Now he is a monarchist, even in the Australian context. As the other three have aged, they too have felt the need to be steadied by a streak of conservatism, to be reassured by the old. Hughes rails against the culture of complaint; Humphries returns wistfully to Camberwell; and Greer, in seeking communal households and now the collegiate life is, Britain suggests, in part staging a return to a convent upbringing.

Britain also shows how none of these people had easy, conventional relations with their parents. Humphries loathed his mother, who would 'wonder where Barry came from', while an increasingly distant father helped him to nurture fantasies of having been adopted. James's soldier father was tragically killed in an accident just as he was coming home at the end of the Second World War; he has written that 'someone not being there' was 'probably the central experience of my life'. Then there was mother, who presented a different problem: 'being a mother's boy is a condition that can be fully cured only by saying good-

bye to mother.' Britain's implicit argument is that these difficult family circumstances helped propel these people forward, loosing them upon the world. There is also Greer, with her evasive father and a difficult mother, and the feeling that she was an unwanted child; and Hughes, who lost his father when he was twelve, and who—armed with a Jesuit education—has been trying to restore a balance in his view of the world ever since.

*Once an Australian* is particularly good on Humphries, who clearly was fun to write about. Britain points to the peculiar sense of displacement that is evident in him, as is



clear from Humphries' autobiography. A little sister arrived, and Humphries' initial intimacy with his mother became a lost Eden. Perhaps more could have been made of the way he has resisted change ever since. In the very accuracy with which he chronicled suburban banalities in the fifties, Humphries was collecting them, and relishing the enterprise not only because it licensed vengeance, but because it was perversely imaginative. A generation or more later, it is as though he takes out this collection to pore lovingly over it; Sandy Stone, instead of being a despised little man of the suburbs, has become an icon for a lost way of life. What Humphries once sneered at, felt estranged from, has become part of his self-definition, rather like black and white South Africans in the apartheid era who would be ineluctably drawn to each

other at London parties. But the regressive streak in Humphries runs broader: there have always been outdated elements in his work, such as the recurring references to wartime food parcels, Peter Dawson, or Rudolf Hess. And relatively recently he was still capable of making remarks to the effect that Australia has no intellectuals, while all its best artists have gone overseas.

Britain has been assiduous in tracing the autobiographical elements embedded in Humphries' work: he points out, for example, that the fascination with the grotesque may have stemmed from Barry's having had a spastic cousin. Similarly, to Humphries' evasiveness—'I flit in and vanish'—the author adds an altogether new dimension, by revealing that Edna was created within a few weeks of Humphries' first marriage. Escape, indeed distance of any kind, is highly important to him. Britain tellingly shows that even 1,000 kilometres away would suffice, as Sydney—with its distinctive mixture of similarity and difference—was enough to enable Edna to take flight, to crystallise Sandy Stone, and to engender Sir Les Patterson. In fact Britain is better on Sydney as Humphries' crucible than he is on Moonee Ponds. The point about that—given the fact that Humphries has conceded that Edna initially was essentially a Camberwell character—lay in the name. Instinctively he chose one that was grotesque and slightly comic, since almost uniquely it combined one of the first uses of an

Aboriginal name with one of the last borrowings of the English 'Ponds'.

If Humphries has been cultivated, multi-layered, and evasive, squirting out phantasmic personae like a squid, Clive James has been all up-front, essentially making a cult of his own personality. Britain describes him as 'an obsessive voyageur-voyeur', and notes the way his literary tastes have always been omnivorous. Despite all the sought-for public exposure, Britain writes of a yearning for self-effacement in James. Certainly he has tried out roles, and at times been a chameleon; but then Britain, in a telling aside, remarks that 'The bourgeois-bohemian make-up requires a continuing anchor in the securities of the world it seeks to undermine and escape'. In England, James is well aware, he can be mollycoddled, perhaps be both sage and

child. Interestingly enough Robert Hughes once described himself in similar terms: 'I'm a fat old enfant'. There is something liberating, but also infantilising, about expatriatism. I could not have been the only returnee to find the years catch me up with a wallop the moment the ship had docked at Station Pier.

Britain's account of Germaine Greer centres on her equivocality. He notes that she always seems to expect consistency from others, but shifts her own positions constantly. Since she has always drawn on and dramatised her private life much more than most writers, this is not surprising. But it invites the accusation that Greer is self-contradictory, even hypocritical. Britain is more sympathetic, pointing out that her life has not only been a sequence of performances, but also a series of escapes. 'When I sense hostility or waning interest', she declared, 'I'm off.' At the same time, while he skilfully traces the elements in Greer's career—and notes the fruitful tension between the scholar and the activist—one does not feel that this section is entirely successful. Greer is known to be an intimidating subject.

If a cultivation of the equivocal is Greer's hallmark, then Robert Hughes's personal style is convincingly characterised by Britain as a quest for balance. For while Hughes is hailed as the leading art critic of his generation, unrivalled in his 'crudition, wit, fluency and panache', the author also speaks of the 'peculiar, almost compulsive, poise' evident in his writings. Was this partly a recompense for the early primal loss of his father? A disciplinary technique to counter-balance and focus his explorations of the wider world? Or partly the result of his Jesuit education—evident again perhaps in the concerns expressed in *The Culture of Complaint*? Hughes himself had been involved in an earlier radicalism, the London counter-culture, but after a short period opted out. Becoming art critic of *Time* seemed to offer both independence and influence at the centre of the artworld, but a generation later, in a period more notable for its decentredness, Britain gives us a glimpse of Hughes as now being quite disillusioned. 'The Nostalgia of the Critic', he calls this section, and berates him for his heavy-handed attacks on postmodernism. The case made for American art having more vitality than Hughes allows is not strong.

*Once an Australian* concludes with a discussion of the factors which led to the expatriate becoming 'a dying, if not extinct, species'. First was the end of the Liberal

hegemony. Just as Howard turned round and fanged ATSIC soon after coming to power, so within days of moving into the Lodge, Margaret Whitlam entertained Germaine Greer there. It made immediate billboard material for the tabloids, proclaiming this was a changed Australia. People began to drift back. Then, when the Whitlam era was abruptly ended, something else occurred. In 1972 a number of people had loosely talked of 'emigrating' if Labor failed to win; in 1974, a few still did so, but in 1975 practically nobody did. Australia had ceased to be a place where 'nothing happened'.

**L**ESS DRAMATIC were other significant, long-term changes. The country had become less culturally dependent on Britain; the arts in Australia, even before the great expansion in funding, had become much more prominent. There was a greater diversification of the population, which in turn encouraged a more general pluralism.



There was a hint that the postcolonial world was becoming more decentred; changing modes of travel followed the rapid replacement of the passenger liner by the jumbo jet. Nearer destinations than Britain could be visited cheaply, and for a short time; Britain also could be visited for just a few weeks, which was as well since from 1973 in particular immigration controls there became much tighter.

Expatriatism still occurs, but Australians no longer go overseas to find themselves so much as to advance themselves. Until the 1960s, the only way to see a range of opera, participate in filmmaking, or compensate for the lack of an indigenous drama was to go and sample what was offering elsewhere—and all roads, or seemingly all boats, led to England. Now expatriatism is likely to be an extension of a successful career begun locally, as with the filmmakers who have moved to Hollywood, or writers such as Peter Carey in New York. Others, like David Malouf, expatriate themselves from time to time, then return. (In this they parallel the more inclusive nature of recent Australian literature.) The old expatriatism was quite

different, ending suddenly and usually totally. Return was often the last card held by a desperate man or woman, and was sometimes played as if biting the cyanide capsule.

It would, though, be a rash person who said that expatriatism is over. Population movements, being usually a direct outcome of where people see their best opportunities, invariably contain surprises: for quite some time now there have been more Italians *leaving* Australia each year than coming here. Similarly, Ian Britain shows that the number of Australian-born leaving the country has also risen, having climbed in the late 1980s to 16,000 without dropping significantly since. As our relative economic importance declines, and Australia becomes more marginalised in an increasingly globalised world, the enterprising young are likely to follow the path abroad already taken by Australian inventions such as Xerox and the black box. Excluded from North Atlantic groupings while our relationship with Asia progresses only in fits and starts, Australia's long-term prospects are not bright. Expatriatism of the self-advancement kind will increase, and come to be more greatly resented than in the past. The familiar typographical howler, 'expatriot', will then mean exactly what it says.

Despite minor disputation with Britain's judgments, I can recommend this book heartily. If there are errors of fact, then I have not been able to detect them (except perhaps for 'Cintra', in Portugal: but that's probably a Humphriesian whimsy, pinched from antique English or directly from the Lusitanian). Nor are there proofing errors. Instead, there is an admirable index, and a remarkably lucid exposition. Sometimes the allusions are a little forced, such as when Dame Edna is discussed in relation to the traditional masque, but more often one is struck by the trenchant observations and the elegant turn of phrase. (Summing up Hughes' appearance as 'part cherubic, part gladiatorial' takes some heating.) Britain's decision not to interview his subjects means that at times there is an unavoidable sense of shadow boxing about the enterprise. But since he has scrutinised their writings, performances and interviews so carefully, he has probably thereby been able to move more easily—and certainly more independently—from their ideas to their personal histories. It is this insightful combination which gives the book its value. ■

**Jim Davidson** has twice been an expatriate, the second time in London from 1970 to 1974.

## Leaving Mantua

*I woke up early as I invariably do  
when I have an early train to catch—  
a dream-master has no need of clocks.*

*The night before I'd argued in my language  
with two Italian ladies who might have been  
happier in theirs: had I been rude or thoughtless?*

*One was wrong, undoubtedly, to think Shakespeare's  
works were written by the Earl of Oxford  
but they both resided in Mantua and I*

*Was in exile from myself or so I told myself,  
looking at the stallions on the wall  
of the Palazzo Te: 'here is for me no bidding.'*

*And wasn't I as grossly opinionated  
about Italian painting as she on Shakespeare?  
My head hurt after a thick wine they'd been happy*

*To leave to me, and I'd toyed with beetroot-coloured  
strips of meat, once more maintaining  
our Northern barbarism—drink ahead of food.*

*Struggling past the desk (I'd had the sense to settle  
the bill the night before) I pushed my case to the street  
sheeted from eave to cobbles in soup-thick mist.*

*Where in this Dantesque gloom might the station be?  
I knew I'd find it and that in the meantime  
I'd enjoy the sense of apprehension.*

*Some text-book facts were circling in my mind—  
the lakes formed by the Mincio which made Mantua  
the unhealthiest city in all Italy,*

*The mid-day gravitas which even bold Mantegna  
found obsessively marmoreal, the grim  
abutting jokes that Giulio proved sexy.*

*Yet the Gonzaga, as their Estense neighbours,  
lived in the sun and left it up to Shakespeare  
to conjure terror for us from their name.*

*I'd seen King Charles's pictures bought from  
Mantua's sack, or what we have of them  
after Cromwell sold them off—I'd followed*

*A troop of noisy children just to view  
the Pisanello frescoes in the Reggia;  
I'd been in Mantua only once before.*

*And that had been a time I was unhappily in love  
and yet felt hopeful: hope meant now just  
images and archives and a muffled street.*

*At last in the swirling vapour of a Bogart movie  
I bought my ticket, registering I had  
to change at Fornovo and ate a warm brioche.*

*I was leaving Mantua. I was curiously content.  
I thought of James Wright, who in a sense  
I'd wronged, and of his rescue of a bee*

*Imprisoned in a pear beside the gasworks  
outside Mantua, and his Virgilian tag,  
'the best days are the first to flee.'*

*As the train pulled out we entered total mist.  
We choked along an isthmus, so I thought,  
wholly immersed in whiteness like a veil.*

*'Smooth-sliding Mincius, crowned with vocal weeds,'  
harsh-sliding train carrying one man  
beyond all Lycidases to his Luna Park.*

*Last to leave! May this be my inscription!  
Light and no vision, such was better than  
a dream, more reassuring than oblivion.*

*Ahead the Appennines and knowledge that  
the sun would penetrate the mist,  
the soul, that passenger, stand at last*

*With few regrets on Platform One, changing trains,  
willing to see Mantua again, hoping to make  
the last days best, fleeing fast or slow.*

Peter Porter

EXPATRIATES: 2

PETER STEELE

## Drolls

ONCE UPON A TIME, in America, the patient auditor of a couple of loquacious Australians offered the guess that, in their home country, all introverts are exposed at birth to die. I pointed out to him, helpfully, that in fact we two were introverts. He was not convinced.

Anyone whose acquaintance with things

Australian was confined to a reading of Ian Britain's excellent new book would also take some convincing. There is a famous anecdote about Coleridge's talking when he came in sight, persisting right across a landscape, and keeping going when he disappeared; these days, over the hill come Barry Humphries, Clive James, Germaine

Greer and Robert Hughes, bidding fair to catch up with Coleridge. 'Word Children', Britain calls his first chapter, and nobody who has either heard or read any of his troupe could deny the warrant.

Words however may be deathly things, the antithesis of cornucopia—so many shards in time's midden, so much scree to

impede the mounting to any intellectual heights. They are of course alleged to be such by many an academic shedder of crocodile tears, mourning all the way to the bank: but Humphries, James, Greer and Hughes have at least this in common, that they flourish in the uplands of eloquence. The shortest verse in the best-known English translation of the Bible is, 'Jesus wept,' for this foursome, copiousness and esprit go together.

Britain, in his chapter on Humphries, adduces Ben Johnson's 1609 piece of theatre, *The Masque of Queens*. It is a characteristically original and thoughtful notion, of a piece with the book's whole temper, which is both calm and acute, and which often keeps learning sprightly. In the end, we can make nothing of the totally unprecedented—it is as if, like angels in medieval theology, each exhausts both its own species and our understanding; and *Once An Australian* is so illuminating chiefly because of Britain's dexterity with analogy and contrast. To supplement his no to the Masque, let me make one to the Droll.

That gigantic vade-mecum for the bewildered, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, reminds us that a 'droll' could be something of the order of a farce or a puppet-show, or could be a figure who played it through—as in Steele's reference, in the *Tatler*, in 1709, to 'Mr Scoggin, the famous Droll of the last Century'. The show and the show-er can fuse irreversibly, so that what the audience likes or dislikes is a whole gestural self, a fleshed style. This can seem magical—eyes, hands, the strutted stuff, and above all the mouth, an alchemist's after all. And insofar as the effect is brought off, the performer is drawn more and more into ambition, prone to outpace and outfling what has been done already, and to make hay of distinctions between one theatrical or intellectual or imaginative genre and another: the better the droll, the bigger the anarchy.

Britain does not put it like that, but it is one of the virtues of his sober book that it makes the room, and provides the evidence, for new construals of his highly-wrought individuals. He, the historian, wants very properly to house them in social matrices, Australian, English or American: but he never forgets the potential force of some such realisation as Humphries'—that a 'sense of belonging to a foreign place had been a fantasy of his from his bassinets, or so

he liked to recall'. To have a sense of belonging to a foreign place is, to put it mildly, paradoxical: and the fact that a good deal of the European and the European-derived imagination has been fertilised by something of the kind for three thousand years or so does not abolish the paradox. 'Anywhere, but somewhere else,' Robert Lowell wrote, borrowing from Baudelaire, who might have had it from Dante, Augustine, Virgil, or other late-comers.

Chesterton spoke of 'a mob of hermits': each of Britain's figures is, as it were, a hermit before the mob, out there on the desert of singularity, limelight beating

*To have a sense of belonging to a foreign place is, to put it mildly, paradoxical: and the fact that a good deal of the European and the European-derived imagination has been fertilised by something of the kind for three thousand years or so does not abolish the paradox. 'Anywhere, but somewhere else,' Robert Lowell wrote ...*

down, the mind and the heart often in masquerade. Deserts, notoriously, provide temptations, and it would be ridiculous to suppose that these individuals have not been ravaged, and I suppose ravaged, in their time. And yet what concentrated intelligence can be displayed, even casually, when they are about their cherished business. I could not count my disagreements with any of them, I guess, not that any of them should care: but fire, once discovered, is here to stay, and each can be fiercely insightful.

They have their seasons, of course, and I doubt whether this is Greer's: but no time reading James on, for example, poetry has ever been a waste, for my money; and who would not be the better for straying across Hughes' description of a book as 'less written than poked into shape with a white stick'? It is not so bad a life, in the desert.

Hughes' lethal stroke is in part that of a

farceur. A scholar of Swift has pointed out that when Swift saw an opening for a joke to be made, he made one, without too much regard for the decorum of the narrative or of the argument: and for what it is worth, if there is a case to be made against this, I do not know what it is. Hughes, though, usually rides exposition on a fairly tight reign, which is probably a good policy when one's principal audience is American; James, much practised in American folk-ways, is nonetheless a wilder card. Britain quotes one of his descriptions of Barbara Cartland's eyes, 'twin miracles of mascara', which are compared to 'the corpses of two small crows that had crashed into a chalk cliff'. The rampancy of imagination is given more reach still by the energies of alliteration. Here, as at many other points, 'the benefit of reading Shakespeare morning, noon and night' is plain to see, though best seen by one of the playwright's boomers and strutters.

About many good books, and many bad ones, one does not ask why they were written: worthy or unworthy, their rationale is obvious enough. Britain's book, whose subtitle is 'Journeys with Barry Humphries, Clive James, Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes', is more interesting, and less resolved, than many such.

In Caesar's *Commentarii*, a beleaguered opponent shouts out that he is 'a free man in a free state', and as I remember it the next sentence is, 'They surrounded him and killed him'. Britain's book reads like that of a free man in a free state of mind—a rover, a journeyer—and most of the darts which could be expected to come its way would probably come from less free individuals than he. It has something contemplative about it, not the most esteemed of virtues nowadays. Animus, raffishness, psychic lesions—all of these have their place in the chronicle: and yet, for me, the most striking moment in the book is the one in which he quotes from Germaine Greer's *Daddy, we hardly knew you*: 'Libraries are reservoirs of strength, grace and wit, reminders of order, calm and continuity, lakes of mental energy ... In any library in the world, I am at home, unselfconscious, still and absorbed.'

I have been there, and clearly I was not alone. ■

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# The octogenarian revolution

**A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924**, Orlando Figes,  
Jonathan Cape, 1996, ISBN 0 1402 6464 7 RRP \$39.95.

**D**URING THE WAR I carried the image of Stalin with me everywhere, on a match box holder. The photo showed him lighting his pipe, benign, benevolent and wise, just as I thought him.

Yet Stalin had a prime responsibility for some of the most horrible crimes in history. Even though I didn't know that when he was one of my heroes, it isn't a nice thing to live with even now, so long afterwards.

Small consolation that millions upon millions in the Soviet Union and throughout the world shared my hero-worship. For revolutionary socialism, seemingly epitomised by Stalin and the Soviet union, gave hope to masses of people who suffered wars, poverty, unemployment, inequality and exploitation, and who wanted to see old orders replaced by new ones. 'What about Joe?' our troops yelled at open-air film shows in the war zones to Australia's north when the Soviet anthem was not played along with the British and US: part serious, part joke, a recognition of the role and sacrifice of our Soviet ally.

Accusations that Stalin was a tyrant and the Soviet regime ruthlessly repressive came from sources we communists considered hostile: from a dreadfully biased press and radio, conservative politicians, and those who often opposed improved social justice, trade unionism, higher living standards for working people, racial and gender equality, and so on. They could not be believed. We simply scoffed at them. We 'knew' they were wrong. For when we joined the Communist Party of Australia so many of us gave ourselves completely to a cause, with a burning zeal, with blind faith. We believed that every cook would be able to run the state; we pooh-poohed the idea that human nature couldn't change; we thought wharfies, shop assistants and cane cutters would not only become familiar with Balzac

and Beethoven but could produce the poets, playwrights and painters capable of artistically distilling their lot.

Well do I recall it was a hard-line communist just after the war in the People's Bookshop in Adelaide who sold me Joseph Furphy's *Such Is Life*, another who strongly recommended Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* and yet another who first dragged me to hear a performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony at the Adelaide Town Hall.

Naïve, shyly romantic, sparsely educated, unworldly and a slow learner, I came from a sheltered, depression-oriented, lower middle-class background, and was amazingly ill-equipped to assume positions of high responsibility in an organisation

committed to the mammoth job of establishing a new society. A wry comedy to look back on.

By the time the realisation came that all my gods had failed and the dreams had dissipated, most of my life had gone. The world, someone said once, is a tragedy to those who feel, a comedy to those who think.

So, eighty years after the 1917 revolution, how strange it is for an old communist to look back on the wreckage of the communist movement! Astonishment, shame, guilt, disappointment, bring a numbness which will not depart. The despotic régimes should have fallen. Nevertheless, this brought great sadness because worthy ideals had brought grotesque nightmares for millions upon millions.

For well over thirty years the fact that Soviet society was authoritarian and no land of milk and honey gnawed at my guts. But still the hope remained that something good could be salvaged from the distortions and disasters. The awakening process has been prolonged, painful and seemingly never-ending. The enormity slowly sinks in while the blind spots fill gradually with bizarre silhouettes.

We did good things, of course, which we like to remember and should. Communists helped to improve industrial working conditions and living standards, the establishment of many a crèche, kindergarten or library was aided by the activities of local CPA branches. We had aptitude for enthusing and mobilising people and organisations to be active in campaigns against war and fascism, in support of Republican Spain, Indonesian independence and against atomic weapons and the Vietnam war.

We initiated no Red Terror, we



shot no one, we performed no acts of cruelty or oppression. Rather we suffered frequent victimisation, hooliganism, bans, legal battles and sometimes beatings and jail. And yet, and yet, if by some miracle of miracles a communist regime had been established in Australia during the first forty-five years of the CPA's existence, what record could we have had then?

In the second half of the 1960s, long after we had been advocating 'peaceful transition to socialism' as our goal, a veteran Party leader startled me by saying in my presence: 'When we take power we'll have to kill a bloody lot of people.' Naturally, this stuck in my mind. Firstly because of the certainty involved in the words 'When we take power', uttered at a time when our possibilities of 'taking power' seemed to me to be increasingly bleak. Secondly the vision of killing 'a bloody lot of people' wasn't on my agenda. I had neither the stomach for it nor the belief that such was the way to go. Furthermore, the speaker was an old man, of the old school, on the way out, whereas I represented the newer, more democratic and critical section of the emerging leadership of the CPA at odds with both the Soviet and Chinese hierarchies.

Those joining the communist movement did not come clutching well-read copies of *Capital* and *Anti Duhring*. Most members had no more than the most simplistic knowledge of Marxism. They joined the CPA because they had been through the Depression, suffered exploitation at work, had a gutful of war in 1914-18, or were attracted to the possibilities of a new society which seemed to be emerging in Russia. Many were inspired by the victories of the Red Army in World War II. The great bulk of communists were unionists, blue collar workers from the waterfront, mines, metal shops, building and transport industries. Largely self-educated, they were sceptical of intellectuals for not being practical enough.

In *A People's Tragedy*, Orlando Figes paints a vivid picture of a Russian Bolshevik worker, Semen Kanatchikov (1879-1940). Some of Kanatchikov's characteristics apply to many Australian communists of the 1930s to 1960s. He and his comrades were 'doers rather than thinkers'. They became

attracted to discipline and firm leadership. They like simple slogans and ideals. 'There was nothing theoretical or abstract in their Marxism: it was a practical black-and-white dogma that gave them a "scientific" explanation of the social injustice they themselves had encountered in their lives, and provided a "scientific" remedy.' The Party leaders had 'mastered' this science and the members were prepared to let those leaders do their thinking for them about most political issues outside their workplace.

In Australia, at least until the middle 1960s when the CPA began to criticise the USSR on matters of democratic rights, the Jewish question and then the invasion of Czechoslovakia, we were taught that the



hallmark of a good communist was 'his' attitude to the Soviet Union.

My studies of the 1917 revolution and the building of the Soviet Union were based mainly upon *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* written under Stalin's direction and published in 1938. Therefore, my credentials have to be questionable when I venture the opinion that Orlando Figes' massive *A People's Tragedy* is a most impressive book.

As Figes, a young Cambridge historian, explains in his Preface, this is 'a social history in the sense that its main focus is the common people'. His book 'attempts to show, as its title indicates, that what began as a people's revolution contained the seeds of its own degeneration into violence and dictatorship. The same social forces which brought about the triumph of the Bolshevik regime became its main victims'.

Figes dwells upon the human factor, the 'complicated individual tragedies'. He concentrates on the fortunes of a number of individuals, particularly Maxim Gorky and Prince Lvov, the liberal democrat who became Prime Minister of the Provisional Government.

The dreadful deficiencies, inanities and horrors of the Tsarist regime, which caused mass resentment and revolt, are examined as well as the efforts of landowners, liberal democrats, peasants and workers to obtain relief from injustices. Peasant uprisings, the rise of revolutionary circles, revolution in 1905-6, World War I, get emphasis as well as the attitudes and foibles of the Tsarist nobility, the military hierarchy, the clergy and the liberal democrats. So too does the overthrow of the Tsarist regime, the establishment and fall of the Provisional Government, the rise of the Soviets, the dilemmas of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, the in-fighting among the Bolsheviks, the seizure of power and the civil war which followed.

The Bolsheviks had significant support among workers and soldiers. More particularly, they acted in a tumultuous situation in which rapturous crowds throughout Russia greeted the fall of Tsardom and lived in eager expectation of the 'peace, land and bread' which the Bolsheviks promised. A return to Tsardom was not a mass desire. But events

stymied the real possibilities of peace, land and bread for a long time and the Bolsheviks used force to maintain and consolidate their hold on power.

By January, 1918, after Bolshevik troops fired on a big demonstration in support of the Constituent Assembly, killing a number of people, an infuriated Gorky, who had witnessed the events, asked prophetic questions: 'Ask the "People's" Commissars, among whom there must be decent and sensible people: Do they understand that ... they will inevitably end up by strangling the entire Russian democracy and ruining all the conquests of the revolution?'

Figes has an eye for good anecdotes. Alexandra Kollantai had a turbulent career as feminist and Bolshevik with a record of outspokenness and dissidence within the Party and a succession of lovers among Party stalwarts. She became People's Commissar for Social Welfare. Five days after the revolution she drove to a large government building to take charge of what had been the Ministry of Social Welfare. The old liveried doorman looked her over suspiciously, unable to believe a woman

could be the new head. He slammed the door in her face. She had to return later with soldiers. Hardly an auspicious beginning.

After the defeat of her Workers Opposition grouping within the Party, Kollantai was sent into diplomatic exile in 1923 as Soviet Ambassador to Sweden, a post she held for many, many years. She was, I believe, the first woman ever to hold an Ambassadorship. Unlike most of her closest Bolshevik colleagues of the Workers Opposition, rather miraculously she escaped execution in Stalin's purges of the 1930s. And during her diplomatic sojourn it is alleged she 'got off' with the Swedish King.

Figes relates a fine tale about the first delegation to discuss peace with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk. It was led by Kamenev and Yoffe, with symbolic representatives from soldiers, women, workers and peasants. Driving to the railway station, Kamenev and Yoffe suddenly realised with alarm that they had no peasant representative. Then they spied an old peasant trudging through the snow. He looked the archetypal bearded Russian peasant. They picked him up, found he was a Left Social Revolutionary and talked him into going with them to Brest-Litovsk to make peace with the Germans. And so Roman Stashkov went into diplomatic history. He became a star at the Conference and its banquets with his primitive table manners and love of strong drink.

According to Figes, the civil war found most people wanting nothing to do with it: 'they kept their heads down and tried to remain neutral'. Isaac Babel recorded that while both sides claimed to be fighting for justice both pillaged just the same. Nevertheless, the Whites represented the old Tsarist order and possessed no democratic policies that attracted peasants and workers. Prince Lvov emphasised this in 1920: 'We were mistaken to think that the Bolsheviks could be defeated by physical force ... They can only be defeated by the Russian people. And for that the White's would need a democratic program.'

Inevitably, *A People's Tragedy* closely scrutinises Lenin's role in establishing a one-party state and the authoritarianism, harshness and terror which laid the basis for Stalin's later barbarism. Sometimes, however, Figes may draw the long bow. No real evidence is supplied for the repeated assertion that Lenin was a coward or for the suggestion he aimed for dictatorial power long before the revolution. But these are tiny blemishes in a 900-page, colourful and intelligent treatment of world-shaking

events so easily subject to prejudice and falsehood.

His analysis goes only to 1924, the year of Lenin's death, after which Stalin's hold on power strengthened. The Soviet Union was to advance economically and suffer disasters in the process. Heavy industry developed, living standards improved, collectivisation of agriculture was enforced, all at a tremendous human cost variously estimated at an almost unbelievable 10 to 20 million dead.

Nearly half a million of the ruling communist party members were executed and millions were arrested, jailed or sent to the camps. The so-called kulaks were eliminated, suffering appalling inhumanities. Forced collectivisation of agriculture and food requisitioning helped bring on famines. Whole populations whose loyalties were in doubt were shifted forcibly into Central Asia or Siberia: Germans, Tartars, Chechens and others. Then came World War II in which probably 20 million more soldiers and civilians perished with immense destruction of industry, housing and cities. Before that, in World War I, millions died. The revolution, the civil war, the Red and White Terror, the famines and disease had accounted previously for 10 million dead, according to Figes. How can the word 'tragedies' encompass such gigantic horrors and how can a population endure them?

**W**HEN THE REASONS for the Soviet Union's collapse are sought, those horrors must figure largely. Then, too, the economic stagnation of the 1980s and the long-term imbalance of gearing the economy to the military-industrial complex instead of to consumers, which was inspired by the cold war and Soviet paranoia about attack from the West, must loom as major factors together with persistent low agricultural productivity, food-stuff shortages and environmental damage of catastrophic proportions.

Yet the Soviet system possessed appeal in earlier years, a quasi-religious appeal to the faithful, a commitment to the socialist ideal which was exploited to justify even mass repressions. But this could last only so long. Material interest began to conquer fading ideals and Marxist-Leninist ideology more and more lacked credibility.

In that situation, when Gorbachev took over and loosened the hold of the authoritarian leadership, the bureaucratic elite, who did the bidding of that leadership and were incapable of thinking independently,

were placed in a terribly indecisive position. Lacking idealistic motives, with confused, uncertain and contradictory signals from above, they became impotent and powerless to stop the disintegration.

Revolution is a chancy business. Unfortunately, revolutionaries not infrequently become more barbaric than the tyrants they overthrow. The Australians who became communists did not do so because they sought positions of power or were would-be tyrants. Rather they believed the communist road would lead to equality, social justice and the end of poverty and exploitation. This was so, too, with the communists everywhere including the earlier leaders in Russia.

How then do good idealistic people become tyrants who will stop at nothing? It seems that ideologies and theories when turned into fundamentalist dogmas can justify anything. Fanatical ideology does not allow for qualms or scruples of conscience. And when such adherents attain power in a one-party state they tend to do anything to hold power. The Marxist-Leninist credo was liberally sprinkled with violence and authoritarianism to start with. The Stalinists toughened this ideology greatly. The corruption of absolute power and fear of opposition, invasion and defeat, did the rest.

The Russian Revolution of eighty years ago began a vast experiment—perhaps, as Orlando Figes suggests, 'the grandest in the history of mankind'. It went disastrously wrong. Stalinist Russia came to be equated with Hitler's Germany and their crimes against humanity appear to be equally appalling. Yehudi Menuhin may be right to claim that our century raised the greatest hopes ever conceived by humanity but destroyed all illusions and ideals.

What will happen to the lands and people that made up the Soviet Union remains to be seen. The significance of the fall remains to be analysed. Old communists are not the only ones to feel stunned. Neither the political right, the social democrats or the scattered remnants of the communist left have grappled significantly with the new situation.

The ghosts of 1917 may haunt us all for a long while to come. And at least one old communist often starts in fright at the apparitions. ■

**John Senny** joined the CPA in 1942. He was Victorian Secretary 1963-1974 and national chairman 1972-74. He relinquished all positions in 1974.

# Headspace

**The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber, Nicholson Baker,**  
Vintage, 1997. ISBN 0 09 957971 5 RRP \$16.95

**N**ICHOLSON BAKER IS A NOVELIST, and I'll be frank: I've not read any of his four novels. *The Size of Thoughts* is not a novel, but a book of 17 essays and one lengthy bizarre.

If the collection as a whole is about anything in particular, it's about thinking. Two pieces stand out displeasingly, as being nothing more than what they were first intended to be: a speech at a wedding and a review of a novel. But the rest sparkle with curiosity, exuberance, an ironically observed and playfully handled obsessiveness. He is fascinated by what people do inside their heads; the book is a portrait of the creative and life-enhancing power of mental activity, of the power of reading and writing to repel boredom, to generate and satisfy interest.

The final and longest piece in the book is 'Lumber,' a 147-page work of 'ham-scholarship,' which he also describes as an exercise in 'lexicography.' The word 'lumber,' chosen (he pretends) arbitrarily, is treated as either the locus of a line of influence from one author to another down the generations, or as if it had a life of its own, like a computer virus. 'Lumber' is a record of his searches through texts, occasionally under his own steam but more frequently via concordances or the search mechanisms of electronic literary databases.

Baker seems to have begun writing the piece as a review for *The New York Review of Books* of the CD-ROM *English Poetry Full-Text Database* (Chadwyck-Healey, 1994, priced at US\$47,500), which grew way beyond publishable limits, but he makes no secret of the fact that he's been collecting occurrences of the word 'Lumber' for years, perhaps since he first became aware that the usual American understanding of the term ('felled timber') was not the one intended in most English poetry and prose (roughly, 'an accumulation of old household stuff').

Perhaps the piece is revenge for feeling a private sense of shame about this, akin to what I felt when as a fresher I discovered that 'Gerter' and Goethe were the same writer. Then, for the sake of textual structure, the account of the search is driven by the desire to find the (or a) source for Pope's

use of the word in a couplet of *An Essay on Criticism*: 'The Bookful Blockhead, ignorantly read / With Loads of Learned Lumber in his Head.'

He pursues the word through the works of Pope's predecessors and potential influences, weaving in, I would guess, every lumber reference he has ever found. It sounds dry, perhaps, but it isn't. In the midst of so much out-of-the-way learning (although, as he says, with so much on CD-ROM, nothing is more out-of-the-way than anything else anymore), the focus is on the personal and gossipy side of scholarship, and he makes no bones about the adventitious connections that are required to drag in—via allusion, parenthetical observation, lists of coincidences, barely relevant footnotes—all of his discoveries. It's very chatty, although rather unreadable-aloud (despite there being another piece in the book, called 'Reading Aloud'), mainly due to the sentences within sentences that are caused by footnoting and quoting.

In a sense it's about the pleasures of reading, and specifically about that pleasure which is neither the hunger for narrative nor the sensuous experience of poetry. 'But only the poets and storytellers have eyes,' he says, implicitly inviting his own readers, with 'Lumber' and a whole book of other essays before them, to contradict. A pleasure of reading is the pleasure of finding things and understanding them, of believing that in reading you're making unique and significant connections with ideas and people. Another pleasure is Baker's own highly-wrought language and imagery. For instance, he describes as 'the great scholarly worry,' 'the fear that too much learning will eventually turn even an original mind into a large, putty-colored regional storage facility of mis-labelled and leaking chemical drums' (which is, of course, itself another lumber-image).

It is also about intertextuality, the fact that books are made out of other books, that whole academic industries are made of little more than this. As he comes to some conclusion about Pope's source, the piece is not the proverbial footnote to history, but the history of a footnote.

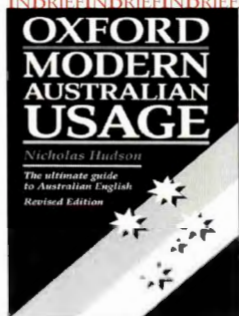
If we are tempted to regard the exercise

as pointless, trivial or dull, Baker cannot be accused of taking it seriously. He asserts, 'horrid Pothers over tiny cruxes are exactly what we need from commentators ...' If, on the other hand, it's a parody of scholarship, a thesis without a thesis, it's an affectionate one. The writers whose works are the snail-trail of their reading of other books (scholars, and people like book reviewers ...) have a place as contributors to a conversation about language, which viewed from a certain angle, constitutes the ongoing history of literature. He firmly identifies (and identifies with) 'the good kind of pedantry, the kind in which playful fierceness and a motley flutter of cognate or merely ornamental references ["a Rhapsody of rags," Burton or Donne would call it] colorfully and contentiously and self-parodically coexist.' (We are left to wonder whether or not he has actually found the parenthetical phrase in Burton or Donne.)

**B**AKER IS ATTRACTED TO DETAIL, and as might easily be guessed, is an enthusiastic list-maker, and bursts into list-making at the least provocation. The second longest essay in the book concerns the world-wide shutting down and throwing out of our longest and most detailed lists—library card catalogues. 'Discards' gained, on first publication in 1994 a certain notoriety in librarianship circles, as it identifies all sorts of mean and irrelevant motives for what Baker sees as an act of technocratic barbarism—'shortsightedness and anti-intellectualism.' Each catalogue has its interesting histories and eccentricities, but Baker is more concerned about how well the replacement electronic databases work, and what they do to knowledge.

If the alphabet is a pretty arbitrary way to organise knowledge, at least human cataloguers and filers understand words and 'the concept of human identity,' and could create and observe elaborate sub-hierarchies in the card catalogue that represent the tree of knowledge.

Here is a recent experience of my own: I wanted to find any work that treated the dictionary as a genre of literature. The card catalogue may have supplied, 'Dictionaries—Literature,' or 'Dictionary (Literary Genre),'



**Modern Australian Usage**, Nicholas Hudson, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2nd. ed. 1997. ISBN 0 19 554131 6 RRP \$19.95

When I was at school there was American English and there was English English, and we were left in no doubt as to which we should speak and write. Partly owing to the importance and number of those speaking and writing American English, and partly to the fact that some American usages have logic or history on their side, things have changed. We now speak and write a combination of

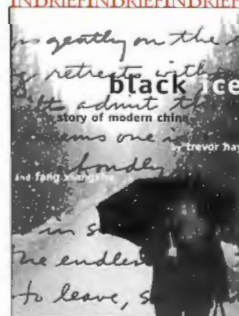
American English and English English, along with some usages that are all our own. (Does any other English-speaking country use 'nature strip' for the often desiccated bit of grass in front of some houses?)

This sets us a task and provides us with an opportunity. The task is to describe current Australian usage; the opportunity is to pick and choose from the two traditions. Hudson does both admirably. He tells us that 'colour' and 'color' are both acceptable, and why we should favor 'color'—it was Noah Webster, not Samuel Johnson, who had history on his side. The opposite is true of 'center'; here Webster imposed for no good reason. He gives the complex rules for using 'will' and 'shall' (according to which,

for instance, 'You will do your homework' is a prediction, 'You shall do your homework' an instruction), but strikes exactly the right tone by remarking that 'those who believe life was not meant to be easy can seize these rules and try to follow them'. He is excellent on sexist language, pointing up the mistake of holding that 'man' is always available as an inclusive term with the example 'Man suckles his young'. At the same time, he rightly insists that we should not lose terms like 'no-man's land' and 'man-eating lion'.

The book is a delight, and very useful. ■

**Frank Jackson** is Professor of Philosophy in the Institute of Advanced Studies, ANU.



**Black Ice: a story of Modern China**, Trevor Hay and Fang Xiangshu. Indra Publishing, Melbourne, 1997. ISBN 0 9587 7186 3 RRP \$19.95

*Black Ice* is the second literary collaboration between Trevor Hay and Fang Xiangshu. Their earlier work, *East Wind, West Wind*, travels close to their respective personal experiences. It discovers remarkable resonances between injustice and social control in China in the 1980s and Australia in the same period. Unlike *Wild Swans*, whose phenomenal success tended to overshadow other works about China in the early nineties, *East Wind, West Wind* looks in two directions, both east and west, and creates the impression that no society is immune from the forces which were rampant in China both during and after the Cultural Revolution. It is sceptical about any such idea as the promised land.

*Black Ice* covers a broader span of years than *East Wind, West Wind*. It follows the character of Mo Bing who works as an undercover agent against the Nationalists in the mid forties and becomes pregnant to the man disguised as her husband, Wu Jingen. After the revolution, she marries a party operative, Li Nanting, and their relationship develops in a vortex of traditional familial ties and Maoist ideology. Nanting fights in Korea and, having been a prisoner of war, is repatriated to Taiwan. Mo Bing thinks he is dead and continues life as a widow of a revolutionary martyr, until she is denounced during the Cultural Revolution. Her son, Weiguo, a revolutionary guard, then holds her in contempt. Mo Bing is eventually rehabilitated. As an old woman, she is visited by the children of Nanting's Taiwanese family. All this in less than two hundred pages. The narrative moves swiftly and purposefully. It is full of small, sharply focused vignettes.

*Black Ice* is presented as 'rediscovering for English literature authentic Chinese

cultural and linguistic forms.' I do not have the background to comment on this. As an uninitiated reader, this book stands on its own as a powerful account of disillusionment, a theme it shares with *East Wind, West Wind*. In old age, Mo Bing struggles to come to terms with what she has witnessed:

*Now she felt angry to be alive, just to be some kind of lone recorder of truths, in spite of herself. Weiguo had not lived to hear the true story of new China, but she had lived to tell a broken, mocking tale no different from millions of others.*

Disillusionment, of course, only happens to people who dare to hope in the first place. *Black Ice* has so many sudden narrative turns that the disillusionment of its characters is always unexpected. Neither of Trevor Hay and Fang Xiangshu's collaborations has been cynical. They just hope to discover the facts. ■

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or 'Dictionaries in Literature.' All I could drag out of the online system were entries for 5,000 Dictionaries of Literature. The university's card subject catalogue was wheeled away months ago.

THESE TWO ITEMS almost stand on their own. Other essays in the collection are some elegant secret histories (Baker is not afraid of serious research, either reading or interviewing) of model aeroplanes, movie

projectors, punctuation and nail clippers; two collections of accumulated textual scraps, and the first three pieces in the book, including the title essay, 'Rarity' and 'Changes of Mind,' which set the scene for everything else.

Anything is a valid pretext for intellectual activity, particularly if, like Baker, one has reserves of sympathy that can extend to neglected books, neglected bits of his own writing, even 'the chair in your living room

that no one sits in.' Thoughts can come in all sizes, he asserts, and some can fit in an epigram, some an essay, some a book. All have a power—and this is the power of commentary—to convert the useless to the oddly beautiful. The desire to throw a textual net around things is futile but not, in the end, meaningless. ■

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Company B's *Black Mary*, 1997. The actress is Margaret Harvey. Photographer, Heidrum Lör.

**A**CITY THAT WINS the right to host an Olympic Games is also required to mount an arts festival during each of the four years of its 'Olympiade' leading up to the games themselves.

Sydney's Olympiade begins this year, so it has duly obliged by staging the first of its Olympic Cultural Festivals, entitled the *Festival of the Dreaming*. This has focused on the culture of indigenous peoples, specialising in the performing and visual arts of Australian Aborigines, but with some notable visiting artists representing the indigenous peoples of Canada, America, New Zealand, Greenland and Korea.

Next year's festival and the penultimate one in 1999 are both to be directed by Andrea Stretton, while Leo Schofield has the 'Big One' in the Games year of 2000.

This year *Festival of the Dreaming* director, Rhoda Roberts (an Aboriginal actress of the Bundjalung Wiyegal people) seems to have had a pretty free hand in selecting her content. A number of specially commissioned new works have thus appeared alongside hand-picked remounts of shows which have made an impact elsewhere in Australia. Then there were

the overseas invitees—in a festival which ran from 14 September to 6 October. It should be added that, while this Festival's aim was to ensure 'indigenous authorship and control', much of the work has been presented in various forms of collaboration and co-production between black and white artists and/or organisations.

In many ways, Roberts' festival has been a considerable success, although it has been dogged by a lot of bad luck. Bad weather, for example, led to the cancellation of some performances of the high-profile Marrugeku Company's *Mimi* (a spectacular collaboration between the Kunwinjku people of Western Arnhem Land and the stilt-walking white performance company Stalker in the Centennial Park Amphitheatre). Another show, a Perth collaboration between Nyoongah and white actors, *Bidenjarreb Pinjarra* (dealing with the Pinjarra massacre of 1834), lost most of its Belvoir St Theatre season owing to the death of a blood relative of actor, Kelton Pell, toward the end of the show's run at the Parramatta Riverside Theatre. This show thus did only two 'downtown' Sydney performances on the last Sunday of the Festival.

Bad luck of a different kind befell Belvoir St Theatre's Company B when its season of Julie Janson's *Black Mary* (an epic play about Maryanne Ward, the black wife of notorious bushranger Captain Thunderbolt) was halved because of the collapse of the portable seating in its newly-acquired secondary premises in the old Wilson St Carriage Works in Redfern.

Finally, in this unhappy tale of cancellations and postponements, one of the special commissions for the *Dreaming* Festival—the Bundjalung-language version of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*—was deemed by its director to be unready for its advertised opening night, and was postponed for a week. Even then, the young Redfern lad playing the Boy was clearly unready for public performance and read his lines haltingly from a photocopied script.

Another general problem for this otherwise estimable event is that it seems to have been the best-kept national secret outside Sydney. The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a daily diary of (and carried massive display advertising for) *Festival of the Dreaming* events, but it sadly gave no

explanations for cancellations and postponements of shows. The *Australian* and the *Financial Review* carried some features and reviews but otherwise, the event was hardly known outside the Emerald City. I would have thought an event of such national significance was worthy of much more nationwide publicity and media attention than it seems to have got.

That said, the talk of Sydney Town would suggest that there have been some genuine and memorable highlights in the cultural Olympiade thus far. Those who got to see *Mimi* have raved about its blend of visual effects, impudent humour, eclectic movement and music and the interesting relationship between humans and the Mimi of the spirit world. Bangarra Dance Theatre also lost no fans with its new work *Fish* in the Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre and those who saw *Black Mary* found it a really interesting experience, not least because of its use of the huge space, complete with bush landscape and horses.

Another highlight has been the series of seven solo shows running in the SOH Playhouse under the generic title of *Wimmin's Business*. Having seen Wesley Enoch's and Deborah Mailman's outstanding *7 Stages of Grieving* and Ningali Lawford's whimsical and moving *Ningali* elsewhere, I am not surprised that they also impressed here; they are both fine festival pieces and fascinating indications of the new directions in which Australian indigenous performance is heading. Other well-received solo pieces included Queenslander Leah Purcell's *Box the Pony* and Canadian Margo Kane's *Moonlodge*, both dealing in different ways with the ramifications of being separated from their mothers.

One of the more intriguing productions in the festival was the all-black production by Noel Tovey of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Sydney Theatre Company at the Wharf. There were certainly some fascinating gimmicks, especially Titania's fairy bower in the form of a mobile waratah and the widescreen, computer-generated graphic projections that took us from the classical colonnades of Athens to an oddly Disneyesque enchanted forest. Likewise, the whizzing Rainbow Serpent that heralded Oberon's entrance was pretty dazzling as an effect. Tovey's programme note stressed the match between the spirits and serpents in Shakespeare's play and those of Aboriginal dreaming, although I'm afraid I found the imagery a bit bewildering. In Shakespeare,

the serpent is a symbol of evil and danger (as in Hermia's frightening dream in the forest), the spirits are inclined toward the sinister and the 'dream' is a time of unreality. I wouldn't have thought these were quite the connections we're supposed to make. The gimmicks were laid over what was really a pretty conservative, unerotic and emotionally lightweight interpretation of the text. Apart from the whizzbang computer graphics, the production design (with the court characters dressed in white Elizabethan outfits, the fairies draped in leafy tatters and Bottom 'translated' with naturalistic ass's head) looked like something from the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, circa 1950s—except that everyone was bare-footed.

**T**HE PERFORMANCES WERE PATCHY, but Melodie Reynolds, Tony Briggs, Gary Cooper and especially the accomplished Deborah Mailman were good as the lovers, Tessa Leahy made a terrific Hippolyta/Titania double and Lafe Charlton was a scream as Thisbe.

In the end it was hard to see what the point of this production was; it might have been more interesting had, say, Helena and Lysander been black and the others white.

However, right from the opening lines of *Ngundalelah Godotgai* ('Where did you sleep?/In a ditch'; 'Did they beat you?/Of course they beat me') we had the impression of powerful resonances between Beckett's timeless tramps and Bradley Byquar's and Anthony Gordon's alienated and homeless Bundjalung pair, in their bleak, red ochre landscape backed by ultramarine sky.

Translated by Mick Walker and directed by Clara Mason of the James Joyce Foundation, this version of *Waiting for Godot* actually worked on a number of levels. As well as reading Didi and Gogo as deracinated Blackfellas hopelessly waiting for a better fate—but maintaining a desperate solidarity and their half-remembered, time-honoured rituals the while—we could also speculate on a reverse-racist reading, especially in the way they and Pozzo treat the white-faced Lucky Max Cullen) as a dilapidated bell-boy. At times they sympathise with the victim, but as soon as Lucky bites Estragon they collude with his oppressor. This was a production rich in detail and ambiguity and snatches of its often brilliantly opposite dialogue have kept flashing back to me. There was, for example, an ominous intake of breath each time the hapless pair

attempted to hang themselves.

With all due respect to Noel Tovey, if ever there was a Whitefella play crying out to be interpreted by Blackfellas, *Godot* is surely it. In its best moments (and they were many) the play was well-served by Mason's production, by its four principal actors and by the whole idea of translating it into an ancient Australian language. Not the least of this production's ironies derived from the fact that the Bundjalung language has no words for the time of day, days of the week, or even for watches. Probably its funniest line, therefore, was Didi's 'It was millions of years ago: in the nineties'—in reference to a time when life was happier!

Another play based on memories of bitter/sweet past times was the late Roger Bennett's *Up the Ladder*, remounted as a tent show for the Festival, and for an extensive Victorian country tour, jointly by the Melbourne Workers Theatre and the Brisbane-based Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts.

This play's events are remembered in flashback by fictional Johnny Molloy, who achieved some success as a boxer in the 1950s, first in the touring boxing-tents which were part of every country show in Australia from the 1930s to the 60s, and later in the professional ring. The play's ring of authenticity is undeniable (Bennett's father Elly was one of Jimmy Sharman's famous troupe for some years) and, for all its occasional dramaturgical clumsiness, its knockabout participatory humour and poignant portrayal of a family of real battlers continued to entertain and move its audience.

It attracted the biggest Aboriginal audience I saw at any of the productions. Its message—that the most disadvantaged people in the land could be somebody when they were 'up the ladder' on the lineup board outside the boxing tent. The production gained added bite from the uncanny likeness to Lionel Rose of Colin Mitchell, playing old Johnny's young protégé, whom he is training up for a genuinely professional career.

But this whole Festival also celebrates indigenous artists' climb 'up the ladder' of professional status and success. And, clearly, enough point-scoring punches have been thrown in this first festival of the cultural Olympiade to suggest that Australia will be a suitable house of artistic stoush in the three years still to come. ■

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

# FLASH IN THE PAN



## Cuties on the QT

*LA Confidential*, dir. Curtis Hanson, from the novel, by James Elroy (cinemas everywhere). This is a classy, smart film. It has a complicated, intriguing plot, not immediately predictable. And it looks beautiful too—a little reminiscent of *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

*LA Confidential* is about police corruption, set stylishly in '50s Los Angeles. The cops put their top crime boss away, then take up where he left off.

Russell Crowe, Kevin Spacey, and Guy Pearce play three of the LAPD's finest. Crowe plays Bud White, your blokes' bloke, who's good for leaning on crims as required and does the knight-in-shining armour thing in his spare time.

Spacey's character is Jack Vincennes—full of himself, hob-nobs with the show-biz crowd as 'police-behaviour' advisor, has all the connections and enjoys his corruption extra-spicy; while Pearce's Ed Exley is the adult-version of the kind of kid you loved to hate at school: that goody-two-shoes, four-eyed, smartypants who'd dob you in for chewing gum in class. You know the type. Neat-as and ambitious as hell. He doesn't plan to do anyone any favours; he thinks strictly by-the-book works and will work himself all the way to the top, quick smart.

But Exley suffers a major change of heart somewhere in the middle of this film.

The line-up just keeps coming. Danny De Vito is brilliant as Sid Hudgens. He

narrates the film, as your own personal sleaze-ball journalist and editor of a gutter-press rag he calls, *Hush Hush*. According to Hudgens, all his dirt is 'off-the-record, on the QT, and very, very hush, hush'. Kim Basinger plays the love-interest and the high-class hooker, Lynn Bracken, aka 'Veronica Lake'—one of the LA ring-ins who didn't quite make the acting scene. LA's prostitution ring caters for everyone: 'Everything you desire', including the girls 'cut' to look like film stars. In one scene, Ed Exley mistakes the real McCoy for a manufactured version.

There's a huge body count in this film. And it's great.

See it twice.

—Lynda McCaffery

## To be sure

*The Last of the High Kings*, dir. David Keating (independent cinemas). In the summer that Elvis died, Frankie Griffin, a gangly Irish adolescent, (Jared Leto) is waiting for the results of his final school exams. He doesn't expect them to be much good.

It's hard to know what Frankie does expect to be good. His father (Gabriel Byrne) is an itinerant actor who, in a blaze of self-dramatisation, heads off to take a role in New York, leaving his mother (Catherine O'Hara) to pursue her passionate interest in Irish nationalism and politics. Ma's summer is made when an election is called and she can devote her energies to the cause of her

friend, Jim Davern (Colm Meaney), who is standing as a candidate. Unluckily, Frankie has taken a liking to a girl who is campaigning for someone else. Frankie's ma is not a woman for compromise. She believes her children are descended from the High Kings of Ireland. She won't have them dabbling in causes that she can't affect.

*The Last of the High Kings* is a likeable film, but not one to leave you breathless. Frankie's uncertainty in every aspect of his life is played skilfully against the dogged certainties of his mother. There are some superb moments of Irish self-satire, such as in the figure of a taxi-driver (Stephen Rea) who claims to have had all the greats of recent Irish history right there in the very seat where the passenger is sitting now. Other moments, such as when da quotes to his son from Polonius' famous advice column, tend to cloy, in this case because the poignancy of the scene and its comedy don't live comfortably with each other.

This film depends largely on its characterisation. Some of it is rich. Some is facile. But Frankie's results turn out to be not nearly as bad as he expects them to be; *The Last of the High Kings* also gets through.

—Michael McGirr

## Ultra-montane

*The Full Monty*, dir. Peter Cattaneo (general release). Robert Carlyle has a damn good ear for an accent. Those used to his Scaw'ish as Hamish MacBeth will be moved to admiration at his effortless Yorkshire as Gaz, an unemployed steelworker desperately trying to keep up with maintenance payments.

The beginning scene shows one of those civic-brag promos from the early seventies, accompanied by that relentlessly bright orchestral pop that all sounds the same. Sheffield, we're told, is a burgeoning place, full of industry and entertainment, and with a bright future ... Cut to Gaz, with tubby pal David and Nathan, his twelve-year-old son, poking round for scrap metal in the same factory that was so busy in the promo clip. Now it's derelict, as is much of the North's industry. Wives can get work as petty managers in the new economic order of service industries, but the men have been castrated—nothing is *made* any more.

Ladies' Night at the local brings things into focus for Gaz—the women he knows have become howling bacchantes, urging the male strippers to get it all off. (They never do, it seems; Men at Work and



Chippendales keep their secrets—maybe they should: some of those lads look as though they've stashed the week's groceries in there.) So the only thing dispossessed, ordinary-looking ex-breadwinners can do is to strut their stuff and reveal all—the full monty. Opinions vary as to the phrase's derivation, with one school of thought reckoning it's about Field-Marshal Montgomery of World War II. Another offers Monty Python: as in *python*, get it? And in fact, the most inept dancer of Gaz's troupe is there solely because of his, well, pythonic proportions.

The film will make you smile a lot. There are scenes that you recall with pleasure, like the one in the dole office when the piped music starts Gaz and the rest of the lads doing their bump and grind—but discreetly. This is Yorkshire, you know, not bloody 'Ollywood. —Juliette Hughes

## Car sick

*The Daytrippers*, dir. Greg Mattola (independent cinemas). If you've ever experienced a claustrophobic Christmas day or family holiday and loathed it, this film isn't for you.

*The Daytrippers* is too close for comfort, as an overbearing mother and insipid, brow-beaten father would be if you lived with them—in their car.

This unlikely story sees the elder daughter Eliza (Hope Davis), confused by a love-letter she discovers in her husband's clothes, go to her mother for help.

And boy, does she get it.

Unfortunately, the whole family—mum, Rita, (Anne Meara), dad, Jim (Pat McNamara), sister Jo (Parker Posey) and boyfriend, Carl (Liev Schreiber)—get involved.

They all head off to town—New York—in the family stationwagon to confront Louis (Stanley Tucci). Cosied-up in the car, Rita starts chatting up Jo's boyfriend. She discovers he's written a novel. And of course, wants to know all about it. And all this to a backdrop of muzak. And it gets worse ...

Louis isn't at work. But he's supposed to turn up to a work-do later that evening. Rita won't back off. She leads Eliza to his office, and starts rifling through his papers, dialing the last number called and the like. They find an address on Sandy—author of the note—and go in search; a search which continues until they eventually find Louis, at a quite different party, much later that night ... and, you guessed it, he's not alone.

Anne Meara does the gently-bullying, manipulative mother to a t. You have to wonder though why Eliza lets her completely take over that way. Happily, she finally gets some courage: to paraphrase—'Get me the hell out of this car.'

My sentiments exactly.

I wish I hadn't got in.

—Lynda McCaffery

## Zero Hero

*Hercules*. Disney, (on general release). Before I went to see this thing (not a movie—call it whatever you like—this is something else), I was handed an ugly little figurine made of battleship-grey plastic. There was a superficial cartoony confidence about its outline that spoke of Disney, but it had a nasty, pointy-fanged face. 'It's "Hades, Ruler of the Dead", or something. We've got two of them,' said my friend, the mother of a three-year-old. 'They give them away at McDonalds.'

Just imagine it—'A Junior Burger, please.' 'Some fries with that?' 'OK.' 'Plastic figure of the King of Hell with that?' 'Yes please.'

It's not often you get a chance to see such a flight of cashed-up banality as Disney's *Hercules*. They got Gerald Scarfe to oversee the production design and that hurts, because Scarfe has always represented for me something harshly good—an angry, Bacon-influenced eye, too intelligent for this trash. The result is a plastic travesty of the myth of Heracles. (They use the Roman name for the hero because of its familiarity but kept the Greek names for the other characters. Why? Well for one thing, they'd have to call Hades Pluto ...)

OK. So *Hercules* according to Plastic Travesty is the beloved *legitimate* offspring of Zeus and Hera (who for some reason is drawn with a nose smaller than Latoya Jackson's). The snake he kills as a baby is sent by nasty old Hades, for whom you might feel sorry if it were a movie instead of a Travesty, because he has to carry all the evil. (In the original, as if I needed to tell you, it was Hera, jealous over one of Zeus' dalliances.)

But the barrel is well and truly scraped when it comes to *Hercules'* romance with Megæra, better known as 'Meg'. The animation conveying his youthful lust and her femme fatale sultriness is so coyly purulent you want to vomit—Disney and sex is a bad, bad combination. I don't want to talk about it any more, OK? It's certainly not fit for children.

—Juliette Hughes

## Gene dreaming

*Gattaca*, dir. Andrew Niccol (cinemas everywhere). According to Niccol's *Gattaca*, in the 'not-too-distant-future' there are two classes of people—designed and undesigned. For parents who choose a designed child, conceiving is a little like wandering the aisles of a supermarket, only the shopping trolleys are a little smaller—try test-tube sized. For undesigned children it's the familiar, less high-tech, wink-'n-nudge method.

Vincent (Ethan Hawke) is born into the wink/nudge (or 'In-Valid') class, wearing his genetic 'defects' on his sleeve, as it were. He is skinny, unco, a glasses-wearing type (looks a bit like Einstein). His brother (Loren Dean), on the other hand is a test-tube delight—taller, stronger, smarter. Or is he?

Vincent has always dreamt of exploring space, but because he is an In-Valid with a genetic pre-disposition to heart disease, *Gattaca* (a futurist NASA) will only employ him as a cleaner. Understandably dissatisfied with his lot, Vincent buys himself a new identity, via the gene for 'following your dreams' and the one for subterfuge. Armed with this new defect-free profile he becomes Jerome, a star navigator at *Gattaca*.

When love (Uma Thurman), murder, and the discovery of an In-valid eyelash threaten to expose Vincent/Jerome's counterfeit life, he has to call on that most invaluable of In-Valid genes, 'Human Spirit', to see him through.

*Gattaca* is a handsome film, and captures this improbable future with a certain cool visual style. But it doesn't have much new to say. *Blade Runner* was covering this terrain years ago and, for my money, with a lot more panache.

But a good cast covers for a lot of the silliness in this film. Gore Vidal is expert as *Gattaca's* director and Ernest Borgnine was simply born to play the role of salt-of-the-earth (but not of the test-tube) janitor, Cæsar.

Michael Nyman's musical score is pleasing but not remarkable, but if *Gattaca's* twelve-fingered concert pianist is really just a blink away, Nyman's scores may well be a good deal more remarkable in future.

—Siobhan Jackson

WATCHING  
BRIEF



# Meals on wheels

**T**HE LADIES, God bless 'em.

I love their voices: boomy, bassy, contralto-to-baritoney. Jennifer Patterson and Clarissa Dickson-Wright are what Brits love about Britain: eccentricity, definitely not daftness, done unselfconsciously, though they are sharp as two very large tacks. They have big voices, big appetites, big balloony bodies, especially Clarissa, who is built on an heroic scale. Patterson, who at 'between 60 and 70' rides a motor-bike around with Dickson-Wright in the sidecar, lives with her elderly uncle and has cooked professionally for many years, notably for *The Spectator*, which sacked her after she got cross and chucked some crockery out of the window. (They immediately rehired her as their food columnist.) Dickson-Wright's mother was Australian, but there is no hint of an Australian accent. She admits freely to having blown her million-pound inheritance before giving up the booze. Her grandmother, she says, acquired her large fortune 'on her back' marrying a series of rich men who 'died happy'.

She often comes out with things like that, and it makes very good viewing. She became a caterer to houseparties, and even took courses teaching 'etiquette to yuppies' who apparently couldn't trust themselves around an artichoke without expert help.

*Two Fat Ladies* (ABC Thursday 8pm) at times reminds me of a French cooking program I saw a few years ago on SBS, although *TFL* is far, far better. The episode I'm thinking of should have been called something like 'How to kill your hubby with kindness'. It's the spinach I remember most: 'Ah oui, les épinards!' cooed mesdames, as they seethed the bunch of spinach in half a pound of butter, sweated it with a pint of cream and worked a wedge of grated gruyère into it. 'Eet waz ees favvoureet', said one. 'Whose?' 'Her late 'usband', said another. 'Mine too', said yet another. The kitchen was full of widows, and you didn't have to look far for the weapon that delivered the departed messieurs their *coups de grâces*.

It's entirely possible that only women could survive *TFL*'s cuisine as a staple diet for very much past fifty—men be warned. Clarissa's bubble and squeak, prepared for the priests at Westminster Abbey (both women are devout Catholics and attend Mass together) is done in lard. None of this wimpish mucking about with polyunsaturate sprays and non-stick pans. If you don't want the food to stick to the damn pan, put plenty of lard on it. Right? That said, it's fantastic to see real gusto in cooking again. They really just don't care about heart-health ticks, lo-fat this and that or waistlines. 'I love cream: it's so unctuous', says Jennifer. Yogurt is for vegetarians, (poor things), or people with weak tummies. She smokes, was expelled from

convent school for doing so, has long red nails and a tendency to break into gravelly (yet tuneful) song during conversation with Clarissa, who quotes Shakespeare with her, reminisces about a misspent youth and joins her in various animadversions: Dutch vegetables, (huge, tasteless and inclined to rot quickly) Golden Delicious apples (good for nothing at all) and vegetarians (poor things).

They don't care much about clothes, either. Clarissa wears big blouses and long skirts and Jennifer (who isn't what I'd call *fat* anyway) mostly wears big blouses and trousers. They both go in for terrifically sensible shoes, although I loved the episode where Jennifer went on strike and refused to walk another step because her feet were killing her after they had walked two miles to a farm that raised real eggs from chickens that could walk. 'Look at the lovely cock with his punk hairdo!' they crowed. But the day was hot, there were cakes to cook. 'I'll just sit here and wait for something to happen', said Jennifer. And they went back to their kitchen perched on the back of a milk

float. Good stuff, and a tribute to the producer, Patricia Llewellyn, who has wisely given them their heads, permitting mass ad-libbing.

They are a huge hit in Britain, where their cookbook is a bestseller. It will probably unseat *The Liver-Cleansing Diet*, which has been in the Australian top ten for yonks, making people buy that ghastly soy milk. It will be a good thing if it does sell well. We need to start enjoying food without guilt again. Is there a fat person in the entire Western world who isn't fully aware of what he/she must do if thinness (read 'society's acceptance') is to be achieved? We all know

the entire low-fat, high-fibre, lots-of-water-and-exercise-thing better than our bibles. The reasons that many of us are getting fatter are complex and have little to do with the conscious brain that reads the daily exhortations to be a proper little eater of proper little things. One's unconscious is a crafty rebel, lurking under the surface like an iceberg puncturing the Titanic of the dominant paradigm. Stuff you, it says, in more ways than one.

Jennifer and Clarissa don't bother with all that: they love food, and love it robustly. They aren't afraid of it, or, one suspects, anything much. It's not the enemy, it's glorious stuff to be enjoyed in the selection, preparation and eating. Their enjoyment is rich, rabelaisian and infectious. Despite their delight in flesh, fish and fowl, this vegetarian (poor thing) isn't put off; they're honest enough to go shooting when they want game. It's good that the country that gave the world Kate Moss, Jodie Kidd and Princess Diana has also given us Sophie Dahl, Dawn French and the *Two Fat Ladies*, God bless 'em. ■

**Juliette Hughes** is a coloratura soprano and all-round enthusiast.





## Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 58, November 1997

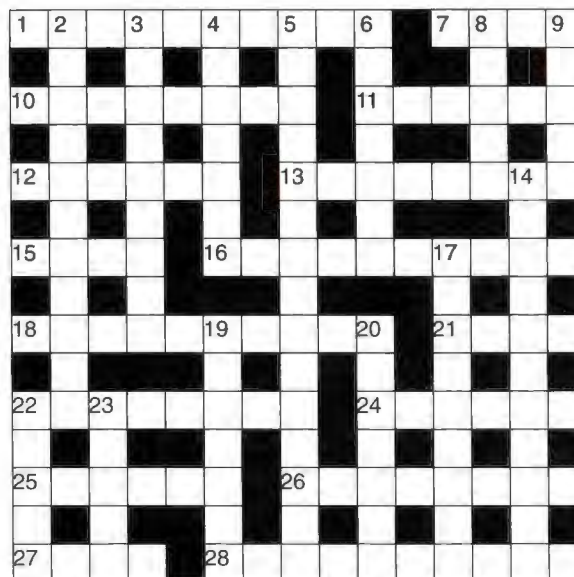
### ACROSS

Devised by Joan Nowotny IBVM

1. The kangaroo is a natural, perhaps, for this description. (10)
7. Scotsmen return to practise a rort? (4)
10. Food beside the spring? It's hard to bid leave! (8)
11. Why change quotes already tendered for the hats? (6)
12. A rocky rise to the right of the range. (6)
13. Strange Arab in Rolls Royce briefly spotted in country town. (8)
15. Order it or forget it! (4)
16. In unusual circumstances, you reportedly type unfinished clause about the tree. (10)
18. Ointment often used as sun-protection, smoothly mixed, endlessly produced the mineral sphalerite. (4,6)
21. Sizeable sum for groom! (4)
22. Double the fruit, say, and you'll get the disease? Quite the reverse! (8)
24. Eat some aspic as a balance to this juicy melon. (6)
25. Take another look at the report. (6)
26. Drink mixed ice and soda, you say? How voracious! (8)
27. Stagger back and grin salaciously. (4)
28. Make fun of mother curled up in the nest? Nothing could be lower! (10)

### DOWN

2. Kakadu, for instance, could be a ruin, immune from civilised contact, if this were present, according to some. (7,4)
3. The metal spasm is not practical. (9)
4. Mean to state date of birth? (7)
5. Many a 1-across lives in this paradoxical situation—as if UK were Europe or Madagascar Africa, for example. (6-9)
6. As is to be expected, neither sharp nor flat. (7)
8. Spirit found in empty cab? Trouble is it was finished down to the last scrap. (5)
9. Mother's first-class, in the view of these old warrior tribes! (5)
14. What's lost on them is made up on the swings, perhaps. A fair control of traffic? (11)
17. The constituents of soap, I must remember, are found in this element. (9)
19. In sounds as if you could find yourself between shelter and endless wind on this western headland. (7)
20. If possible, leave leaders of northern contingent in a small area surrounded by the enemy. (7)
22. Her gemstones are emerald or aquamarine. (5)
23. 25-across sounds like light entertainment! (5)



### Solution to Crossword no. 57, October 1997



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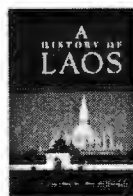
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