EUREKA STREET

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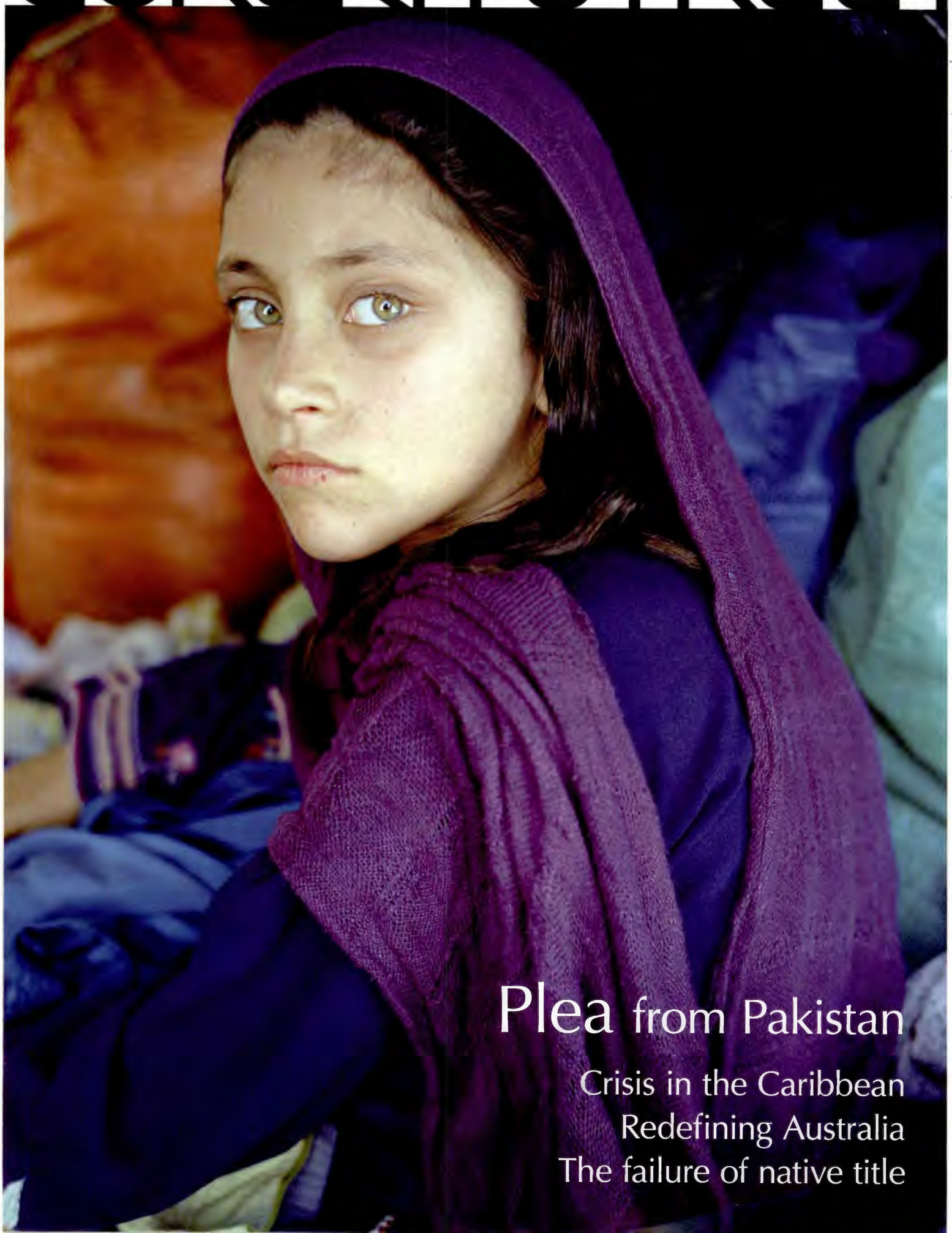

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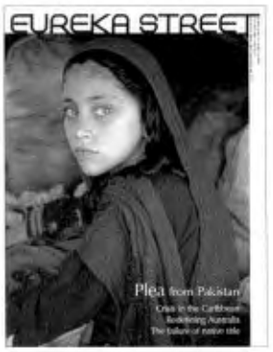

eureka street /ju:'ri:kə stri:t/
I have found it! The exultant cry of 'eureka'. A way, a public road in a city or town, a path to a rebellion. A way of questioning, a place of discovery, a distinctly Australian forum for conversation and new ideas. There are many paths, but there is only one *Eureka Street*.

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EUREKA STREET

A MAGAZINE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, THE ARTS AND THEOLOGY
VOL 16 NO 2 MARCH–APRIL 2006

COMMENT

LETTERS

COLUMNS

THE MONTHS' TRAFFIC

FEATURES

POETRY

IN PRINT

THE SHORTLIST

FLASH IN THE PAN

PUZZLED

Peter Norden

Commonwealth death tally

THE NATIONS OF THE COMMONWEALTH are indebted to Britain for many things, but one unfortunate legacy that 37 of the 54 Commonwealth countries owe to former British rule is the death penalty. Of those Commonwealth countries that retain the death penalty as part of their criminal code, seven have carried out executions in recent years: Bangladesh, Botswana, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Singapore.

Singapore is one of the world's leading executioners, with more than 400 prisoners having been hanged there since 1991. With a population of just four million, this gives the Singapore government the dubious title of having the highest rate of execution of any country in the world.

The Singapore Penal Code provides for a mandatory death sentence for a broad range of different offences, including murder, attempted murder and 20 different drug offences. In such cases, the criminal court is deprived of any discretion to weigh the evidence in order to consider the circumstances in which the crime was committed. Resultant decisions are often observed to be arbitrary and disproportionate to the crime. This is certainly not a legacy of the British courts which have maintained a reputation over a long period of time of giving the accused a fair trial and a transparent process of investigating criminal actions and imposing criminal sanctions.

Singapore's enthusiasm for putting a noose around the neck of criminal offenders now marks it out for special attention in the worldwide community. The United Nations and the European Union have both raised their concerns in international forums, such as a recent session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The Singapore government's official response was simply: 'The death penalty is primarily a criminal justice issue, and therefore is a question for the sovereign jurisdiction of each country ... the right to life is not the only right, and ... it is the duty of societies and governments to decide how to balance competing rights against each other.'

It is clear that the right to life is not the only right, but in most societies it is now recognised as an absolute one, against which other rights are to be balanced. The right to have private property, to accumulate wealth, to build a prosperous society, and to defend one's privacy and independence are all to be balanced by a deeper, more abiding right to life.

In those Commonwealth countries that are actively executing their own citizens and foreign nationals, it has become clear that those who lose their lives to the power of the state represent the most vulnerable, marginal, economically deprived members of that society. When you consider the case studies of those who have been executed by the Singapore government in recent years, this becomes quite clear.

Many Australians were awakened to this fact when an Australian national, Nguyen Tuong Van, found himself on death row in Changi Prison. The imposition of a mandatory death sentence was widely recognised as unjust in this particular case. Moreover, as was clearly attested by his honourable legal representatives, this young Australian had admitted his guilt, co-operated with authorities in Singapore and Australia and had so much to offer, were his right to life to be acknowledged by the Singapore government.

The voices of so many Australian people fell on the deaf ears and hard heart of the Singapore government during the final months. Australian government officials and representatives constantly reported that they had engaged in numerous private negotiations and representations with the Singapore government. With several weeks to go before the execution occurred on 2 December, both the Australian Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister suggested that they had done all that was possible. Many in Australia would have liked to hear a clear statement from the Prime Minister that he opposed capital punishment and the execution of this young Australian.

While many Australian people remain divided on the question of capital punishment, we can rejoice in the fact that in this country there is public debate about the issue. In Singapore, where the media is under such tight government control, little if anything is mentioned in the popular press, and only occasionally does a state-sanctioned killing get reported.

How can this matter be raised in the public forum so that citizens of Singapore have the opportunity of reflecting on different perspectives on such a critical moral and ethic issue, away from the media control imposed by such a repressive political regime? The Commonwealth Games provide such an opportunity, with large numbers of visitors from countries that still sanction death by hanging expected in Melbourne at this time.

One of the most inappropriate preoccupations of Olympic and Commonwealth Games is the so-called medal tally. How one could ever compare the cumulative performances of athletes, in terms of gold, silver and bronze medals, from such a broad range of Commonwealth countries is far from clear. The recognition of individual performances by individual athletes is to be commended. The odious comparisons made between countries of such diverse population sizes and economic prosperity make it a ridiculous activity, which only countries like Australia, New Zealand and England seem to enjoy.

Instead, perhaps the spectators attending the Games from those Commonwealth countries that persist with the state-sanctioned hanging of human beings might be moved to deeper reflection by the public presentation of a death tally, indicating the number of lives lost by hanging in the previous four years. Such a demonstration would lead us all to a deeper appreciation of the common value that many Australians attach to all human life. ■

Peter Norden SJ is policy director of Jesuit Social Services and pastor at St Ignatius Church in Richmond. He is also convener of the Victorian Criminal Justice Coalition and an adjunct professor at RMIT University in Melbourne.

The getting of values

The article by Freya Matthews ('The art of discovering values', *Eureka Street*, January–February 2006) is interesting and thought-provoking but I wonder whether it really advances understanding of the subject. I suspect the writer takes the same position that is also criticised in others. For example, towards the end of the article we read, 'Children who become such independent thinkers will be well equipped to respond appropriately to future situations ...' There is, in this, a quite clear value placed on 'independent thinking'. There are many who would question that.

Others may well advocate instead that children need to first learn the mores and values of their culture. These may emphasise such things as honouring parents, obedience to authority and responsibilities to family and community. In one sense this is really no different to the importance of learning the oral and written language of their society. Without such grounding they can never learn to use language creatively and in ways that enable them to communicate with others.

I think it's a bit unfair to describe Brendan Nelson's proposal as something that would lead to asking children to 'swallow a state-sanctioned nine-point code'. I also suspect it is naïve to think children can talk through the issue of morality without first having some grounding in a moral code of some sort. It's like asking them to talk without ever having learnt speech.

Joe Goerke
Lesmurdie, WA

Niger's sorry plight

Anthony Ham's 'Anatomy of a famine' (*Eureka Street*, November–December 2005) turns the spotlight onto Niger's sorry plight yet again, by presenting a background of causes for that country's 2005 famine. And it is good information indeed.

That sad nation has been placed in a most parlous position in regard to providing the basic necessities for its 13 million people. Yet, in 20 years' time, it will have to cope with an extra 13 million more than those who are already in need. The stressed womenfolk are currently burdened with an average of eight children each. The population increases at 2.8 per cent a year.

Anthony Ham wrote that Niger was a land of plenty in 1950s. For the then population it might very well have been. Even without the environmental predation foisted on the countryside, so adequately described by Anthony, the basic needs of an extra nine million since then would impose heavy burdens.

Colin Samundsett
Farrer, ACT

Vale the joy of print

It was with great sadness that I read your letter outlining changes for *Eureka Street*. While understanding that it was a hard decision that you have made with care and thought, I will miss the hard copy immensely.

I carry it with me on trains, trams, buses, planes, in the garden at coffee times, in waiting rooms, in bed for 20 minutes before falling asleep.

I have always looked forward to the physical pleasure of opening the packet, browsing and then mentally deciding the order of reading the most stimulating and rewarding of articles, etc. from such a wide range of people. Online will have nowhere near the same attraction.

It is a sad indictment of our current community values that I can go into the local small country town newsagent and find 20 almost identical glossy productions on 'lifestyle', all of them equally vapid and consumerist-oriented, yet barely find one publication that has any challenging stimulation.

My best wishes to you all for the future. I will continue my subscription even though the smell of the print doesn't come through online.

I use online for information rather than knowledge and stimulation. Perhaps I need to reorder my priorities.

Roger Borrell
Port Fairy, VIC

The poorer for it

It is with a considerable sense of loss that I take note of your letter [informing subscribers of *Eureka Street*'s move from print to online magazine]. In fact, it has taken me the best part of a week before I had the heart to take up my pen to respond. Not that your decision came wholly as a surprise: I could not help but notice that *Eureka Street*, like many another quality magazine, had been struggling to survive. Although I wish you well in your new venture, I will not be joining you in it as I still prefer the printed page to the computer screen. But I shall miss reading—and quoting—*Eureka Street*.

So much for my personal disappointment—but there is another aspect which I would briefly ask you to consider. I bought my first copy of *Eureka Street* (it was the one with Dean Moore's marvellous Eastertide cover) at a news-stand. Not long after becoming a subscriber I remember being thrilled to see a lady reading the magazine in a public space. This physical presence of *Eureka Street* meant something.

As one who has particularly valued *Eureka Street*'s strong stance on social justice, it seems to me especially regrettable that a 'magazine of public affairs, the arts and theology' should become invisible, as if it were going underground. In my view this leaves not only many of your readers, but the nation as a whole, poorer—and more vulnerable.

J. M. T. Groenewegen
North Ryde, NSW

Correction

It was Sir Eugene Goossens who was associated with Sydney identity Rosaleen Norton, not Sir Charles Mackerras, as D. L. Lewis stated in his review of Robert Holden's book *Crackpots, Rebels and Ratbags*, in the January–February issue. We apologise to Sir Charles for this error.

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Terrible paradox

WAR GAMES ARE NOT CHILD'S PLAY

Downstairs in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra is a 'Discovery Room' aimed at children from kindergarten age to years 6 and 7. The room has a mock-up trench, the bridge of a World War II Corvette, an Australian kitchen/dining room, circa 1939-45, and a bivouac/command post from the Vietnam era. It is also given a 'one-family' theme via photographs of three generations of men from an Australian family who served in the two world wars and Vietnam. Children visiting the Discovery Room are encouraged to dress up, the boys as combat soldiers or seamen and the girls as nurses.

The last time I looked in the Discovery Room was during school holidays. Lots of kids were running around in their borrowed uniforms and I overheard one of the museum's volunteers, an older woman, talking to some parents. They were looking at the photos of a family. One shot depicts a helicopter, picking up soldiers in the jungle in Vietnam. The volunteer was telling a story about the day a Vietnam veteran was looking at the photographs in front of some kids. The vet said how brave the chopper pilots were and how he had been rescued by one when he was wounded. 'The kids had eyes like saucers.' The veteran described how difficult it had been for the airmen to get him aboard the helicopter because he was 'slippery with blood. There was blood everywhere.' The volunteer turned to the parents. 'Of course *we* would never tell the kids things like that.'

As I walked through the rest of the museum, it struck me that many of the galleries had something childish about them. The Vietnam exhibit, for instance, with its Bell helicopter and life-sized soldiers on patrol that reminded me of Action Man toys I had played with as a kid. Upstairs, you can look at the WWI dioramas. Though the purpose of these is avowedly again to show 'what it was really like', they remind me of nothing so much as playing with toy soldiers when I was a kid. In the WWII galleries, you can stand in a simulator, which gives you the noise sensation and vibration of a Lancaster Bomber taking off. Very exciting.

The point I'm making may seem obvious: if you take the terror, killing and maiming out of war, what you have is something like a kid's game, a parade with drums and bugles, or a church remembrance service. The emotions evoked by 'remembering' in these contexts tend to obliterate the fact that war is about killing and maiming and the terror consequent upon that activity. We remember in order to forget.

The word 'sacrifice' is particularly potent and leads to the false analogy, common in the literature of WWI, that likens the soldier to Christ. But Christ is not part of an army whose avowed intent is to kill the enemy in combat. The idea of the soldier as Christlike tends to elide the killing. It enables us to remember the fallen as victims rather than perpetrators; it enables us to remember *and* to forget.

Testament of Youth, Vera Brittain's autobiographical study of the years 1900-1925, tells the story of a young English woman's experiences before, during and after WWI in which she served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse. Her brother, Edward Brittain, and his friends Roland Leighton, Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow were all of the generation who completed their Public School education in the fateful summer of 1914. All of them volunteered. All were killed in the course of the war, including Leighton, who had become her fiancé.

Brittain's account of her losses is sheer. But her book is not emotionally indulgent. There are some challenging and clear-eyed perceptions about the human response to war that go beyond conventional renditions of 'tragedy' or 'pity'. In the following passage, Brittain analyses the nostalgia she feels on recalling her arrival at Malta, aged 22, to work as a nurse, in late 1916:

> It is, I think, this glamour, this magic, this incomparable keying up of the spirit in a time of mortal conflict, which constitute the pacifist's real problem—a problem still incompletely imagined, and still quite unsolved. The causes of war are always falsely represented; its honour is dishonest and its glory meretricious, but the challenge to spiritual endurance, the intense sharpening of all the senses, the vitalising consciousness of common peril for a common end, remain to allure those boys and girls who have just reached the age when love and friendship and adventure call more persistently than at any later time.

When I taught undergraduate midshipmen and cadets at the Australian Defence Force Academy, this passage always created a heated discussion on attitudes to war and motivations for career choice. Every year, around Anzac Day, I want to share those discussions with a wider audience. For it seems to me that Australia, in its obsession with Anzac, Gallipoli and the military tradition that stems from that squalid defeat in 1915, is in danger of placing the 'glamour' of war at the heart of its cultural mythology. I do not mean by this that parades, memorials, services and ceremonies *intend* to glorify war, or that they lack a dimension of honouring the dead. Rather, what concerns me is the artificial and vicarious reproduction of emotional responses to war like those described by Brittain at the expense of other, balancing perceptions about the loss and cost of war and the aim of combat: to kill 'the enemy'.

There are no easy answers to the dilemma of how best to memorialise war. The need to comfort the bereaved and to honour those who have been through the shattering experience of combat is obvious. That in attempting to do so we create the conditions that will encourage future generations to think of war as glamorous and sacred, an activity that confers a special status on 'ordinary' men and women, is a terrible paradox.

And it is not simply a question of reintroducing maiming and killing to the public via photographs on the television or in the War Memorial. The only physical pain we ever feel is our own. Fear at second hand is a titillation. Images may be seen as exciting, invigorating, and vicariously moving. We like to look at horror through parted fingers. The popularity of graphic war films stands as a reminder of how fascinated human beings are by war.

It would be good, I think, if the War Memorial could incorporate into its displays something, somewhere, about shell-

shock, battle fatigue, post-traumatic stress syndrome and the impact this has had on the lives of thousands of Australian families over the years. Something about the difficulties of homecoming after war would be salutary. I also would like to see the Discovery Room try at least to introduce into its rationale the idea that war isn't all fun and games.

The Englishmen of Vera Brittain's generation were schooled in such a way as to embrace the idea of sacrifice in war for country and Empire. It would be nice to think that Australia in the 21st century might find something other than the Anzac myth to define its identity.

—Adrian Caesar

Searching for Suggan Buggan

SHANGRI-LA IN THE HIGH COUNTRY

In 1933 a young English schoolteacher living by the river at Woodford Green in Essex wrote a novel that had a quiet impact on our world. James Hilton had never been out of England, but his *Lost Horizon* described a paradise clinging to the edge of a precipice somewhere in the mountains of Tibet. Tibetans call this sort of place a *beyul*. Hilton called his Shangri-La.

The dream of an unspoiled paradise has stayed with us, as has Hilton's fanciful name. Deep in the buttoned-up breasts of modern city dwellers beats the urge to get away—from traffic, from pollution, from people like ourselves. Wilderness calls, and for some, mountains call loudest of all.

In the 1950s I met John Hammond, one of Britain's so-called 'hard men'—those who were doing the toughest mountain climbing then. Edmund Hillary, the first to be knighted, reached the top of Everest in 1953, a tremendous feat of endurance, unlike the walk it is today. But John Hammond was the most interesting, quite different from the others, a suave, urbane man you could never quite imagine wielding a piton or struggling through a blizzard up the sheer face of a peak.

It was Hammond who convinced me I had to come to Australia. 'It may be the

summa theologiae

Liturgy in a time of terror

Cambodian wedding ceremonies are highly ritualised affairs, predictable in their parts. But they are also responsive to cultural change. In one of the signs of mutual service, for example, the bride used to peel a banana and offer it to her husband. More commonly now, she lights his cigarette. The video and its preparation, too, are now integral to the ritual.

Liturgy is like that. When it is alive, it is a drama with a given shape, but one that is responsive to the culture and conditions in which it is celebrated. Where its fixed and unalterable character is stressed and its authenticity is identified with words and actions fixed in their detail, it is paradoxically most vulnerable to infection by its cultural environment.

The responsiveness of ritual to culture is evident in an Australia increasingly shaped by fear of terror. Secular liturgies of travel and sport are now incomplete without uniformed security that addresses any deviant voice or action, warnings to be alert to unattended luggage and suspicious behaviour. Police warn off artists who take photos of industrial sites. Fear and anxiety express themselves in ritual that mimics menace, asserts boundaries between the safe and the suspect, privileges identity over difference, and promises safety to those who graze within the boundaries.

The rituals of security challenge Christian liturgy. In the drama of the Eucharist the participants identify with a man who chose to live insecurely, was tortured and killed in a demonstration of state terror, and was raised from the dead in mockery of such terrors. Through the enactment of his death, people are brought into solidarity with God and with one another, particularly with those excluded in the name of security. The liturgy does not promise security but freedom from the fear of death.

You would not want to alter the starkness and universal significance of that drama. It comprehensively judges the rituals of security. But at a time of insecurity, liturgy itself can become a focus of anxiety. This infection by culture can be seen when the authenticity of liturgy is judged by the exact and unvarying repetition of each word and action as prescribed. When, in the name of opposition to the prevailing culture, the fear of ecclesiastical disapproval dominates the shaping of liturgy, the celebration of liturgy mimics the culture.

In a time of terror, daily life and liturgy alike demand boldness. Twenty years ago, many Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees died when their camps were shelled. The survivors were relocated in an inhospitable part of Thailand. It was Christmas time. A French priest who had walked with the refugees celebrated the Christmas liturgy on a piece of blue plastic stretched over the earth. He used makeshift cups and plates, wore no vestments except the Cambodian scarf. He began in tears, saying, 'Today we share the utter poverty of Christ.' He then invited them to chant the prayer for forgiveness.

Celebrated with such fidelity and freedom, liturgy has power to drive out fear. ■

Andrew Hamilton SJ writes regularly for *Eureka Street*.

archimedes 

Positive thinking

SUMMER AND EARLY AUTUMN in Australia—Christmas, warm weather, holidays and relaxation, a glut of sport, the start of a new year—are generally a time of optimism and hope. And a good thing for science, too. Last year ground to a halt in a flurry of lies and deception over stem-cell research in South Korea, continuing controversy in the United States over Darwinian evolution, a depressing avalanche of new findings confirming the march of climate change, and the seemingly inexorable spread of bird flu.

So, in the spirit of the times, Archimedes thought to write a column about positive, upbeat happenings in science—the things to which we often pay too little attention. In the past year, for instance, we have begun to learn a lot about bird flu, and how to cope with it. We even have vaccines that look promising, one of them Australian. And Australian research has also led to another vaccine of a different kind which gives almost total protection against the major viral cause of cervical cancer.

But that's not the kind of science that lingers in the public domain. Instead, it's the research that produces politically, socially or morally inconvenient results that remains uppermost in people's minds. The results of scientific research feed into and are filtered through society. They are subject to the political process and can be used for good or ill. Often they create as many difficulties as they solve problems.

Often research projects such as those listed by Archimedes at the beginning of this column as good and optimistic turn out to raise difficult questions over how the results will be employed.

The more we learn about bird flu, for instance, the more obvious it becomes that the most efficient way to stop any potential pandemic is to confine the virus to birds. That means massive culling and vaccination of domestic poultry, and finding ways of keeping the virus separate from its wild migratory relatives. Anywhere this is not done can serve as a potential reservoir for infecting the rest of the world. But while some affected countries such as Japan and Thailand have the resources to able to act effectively in this way, others, such as Vietnam and some African nations, clearly do not.

It will be interesting to see who will provide these resources. Because of the risk of losing his livelihood, an Indonesian farmer needs to be compensated for reporting bird flu in his flock. Which of the rich nations will decide to provide money for that purpose rather than using it to prod their own pharmaceutical companies into generating protective vaccines for humans?

Then what of the cervical cancer vaccine? Surely, that's unequivocally good? Unfortunately, in order for the vaccine to be fully effective, girls have to be inoculated before they become sexually active. Who decides when that is? Already this issue has caused rumblings from conservative and fundamentalist groups.

Perhaps we need to spend less time trying to denigrate inconvenient research, and more time learning to live with it—recognising that curiosity, science and research are normal important parts of our society, instead of assuming they are a creature of Dr Frankenstein. ■

Tim Thwaites is a freelance science writer.

flattest and driest country on earth, old boy,' he said in his languid Oxford drawl, 'but there's some excellent trout fishing, and it's got its own Shangri-La.'

This Shangri-La of Hammond's had the curious, equally unforgettable name of Suggan Buggan. He told me it was near the Black–Allan line. The line, I was to discover, is that straight stretch of the NSW–Victorian border running from Cape Howe to the nearest source of the Murray. In 1870 Alexander Black from Victoria and Alexander Allan from NSW were hired by their respective governments to survey the disputed border. It took them two arduous years to draw an agreed-upon line through some of the country's most rugged terrain.

Late in the 1950s I followed Hammond's advice, and went on several field trips to study the rocks abundant in the area that Black and Allan surveyed. My colleagues and I made detailed geological maps of it, and were astonished by the work the two Alexanders had done. The area was rough and inaccessible. The highways between Melbourne and Sydney were dirt for the most part, and the few roads into the mountains were little more than tracks. Hammond was right: this was wonderfully wild country. Trudging through it I learned a great deal about Australian granites, stumbled on a couple of crashed aeroplanes, and caught a lot of trout, but failed to find his mysterious Suggan Buggan.

Fast forward half a century. After years away I returned to Australia and thought about Hammond again, who had disappeared trying to climb the south face of Mt Cook in New Zealand. I recalled my treks through the Australian Alps and Hammond's elusive Shangri-La. This time, I told myself, I was determined to find it. I logged onto the internet, tapped in the letters, and there it was. A valley, a tiny bark-hut schoolhouse, beautifully preserved. A real-estate company selling property in the area. A few tourist blogs. I was determined to go. I had a letter from a friend in British Columbia who wanted a taste of the Australian bush. He flew in from Vancouver, we packed the car with enough supplies to furnish Burke and Wills and off we went.

I noticed huge changes in the country, the most remarkable to begin with being the roads. The Barry Way led straight into the area, and many of the tracks

were paved. There was much less snow but many more visitors, and it was now a national park.

And there lies the conundrum. If each of us seeks our Shangri-La, will there be any Shangri-Las left?

The days of white exploration had ended when James Hilton wrote *Lost Horizon*—the realisation of this could have compelled him to write it. Another world war was looming, an escape to a perfect utopia was alluring, as it is now. After the war, there was the bomb. The atomic age had all those men climbing, when John Hammond found his version of James Hilton's paradise. Perhaps what was driving me to seek it were the tensions of our own beleaguered age. But wherever we go, there's no escaping. We lug our flawed selves in our backpacks, and if we no longer believe in the right to exploration, we believe in tourism instead.

I had no trouble finding Suggan Buggan this time. The tiny two-room schoolhouse, built in 1860, ten years before Black and Allan began surveying, was just as Hammond had described it—the irony being that tourism made this possible, in a place where history is kept more alive than just about anything else.

It was all so utterly changed, perhaps irreparably so. The Snowy River Scheme had diverted most of the water inland. The bulk of the rivers Hammond saw have shrivelled, and most of the trout had gone. As for the native fauna, it was depleted too. A wombat, a possum, was scarcely to be found. I saw one dead quoll.

The hand of the national park seemed far too heavy. My Canadian friend was shocked to learn that rangers were using the chemical 1080, banned in most countries, to 'kill off harmful predators'—dingoes and other feral animals. The problem is, it kills native animals too.

The dream of Shangri-La lies at the heart of the dilemma. Tourism, the salvation of many rural economies not only in Australia but around the world, is the market's answer to the call of the wild. But we're kidding ourselves to imagine there's no harm in it. From Everest to the Rockies, the marks are evident: invaded habitats, garbage middens, dried-up streams. Not to mention the unintended consequences of well-meant intervention, like hydro-electric schemes or the misguided use of poisons to reclaim an area for its native species.

It's a tough nut to crack, and if I had the answers I wouldn't be writing this. But it may be time to revise our thinking about our Shangri-Las.

—Anthony Taylor

A missionary's lonely ramble

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ST CUTHBERT

The British Ramblers Association has 143,000 members. They swarm over countryside where ancient routes to market trod by English and Welsh peasants are enshrined in law. Walkers on 208,000km of public rights of way are allowed to open farm gates, split herds and, if the farmer has planted crops over the path, trample those crops.

But only dwindling numbers tackle any of Britain's 19 National Trails. These range from the self-explanatory South-West Coast Path to the more opaque Peddars Way. In the 1960s the 430km Pennine Way was churned by hordes of ramblers into a mud slick thirty metres wide. When I walked it in high summer a few years ago I took a tent. I thought I'd be banished to the lawns of overflowing hostels. The tent turned out to be dead weight. I had whole buildings to myself and met three other walkers, all retired.

The decline of the long-distance walk is a cultural shift. Many Britons now wouldn't contemplate holidaying at home, especially in the chilly north where the classic trails are. They chase the sun. The young focus on Europe, where food and fun are done with finesse. They enjoy superior beaches and ski slopes, though they themselves are overall less active. Doing something truly arduous in your free time is not the idea. The Continent can also be relatively cheap. With no-frills airfares you can, perversely, spend less weekending at a French resort than going out in London. And though rambling is as popular as ever—and 20s to 30s walking groups are the new marriage market—many don't have time for a week-long bash through entire counties. That would need the patience of a saint.

Against this background a friend and I decided to walk St Cuthbert's Way: two Australians tramping 96km from southern Scotland to northern England, midweek in mid-November. The trail opened in 1996, a rare joint effort by local bureaucracies. They all wanted tourists to visit the Borders, a barren region outshone by the Highlands to the north and Yorkshire to the south.

Rodney and I begin in Melrose, where Cuthbert, seventh-century monk, began his ministry. As we set out, I consider what this man might teach today's rambler. He was a tireless missionary who roamed far and wide. He loved nature and solitude, took life at a slow pace and never liked being far from the sea—which is where we're headed. He befriended animals, a skill that might be worth our acquiring, and at times slept rough in the hills, which might become unavoidable.

On the pilgrims' path we encounter a surprised and lonely housewife who takes one look at us on the doorstep and orders our clothes off—to wash them. Well off the path, we stay with a married couple who talk to us incessantly. We suspect their marriage is boring them both. And, unlike Londoners, they are remote enough to still find Australians exotic. Finally, for real exoticism, we stay with a Gypsy woman in a place called Romany House. In the morning we grill her on her Eastern ancestry until she gently boots us out.

We detour around flooded valleys that stink of rotten hay. The water theme climaxes with our set piece finale—a five-kilometre walk to Holy Island at low tide. It's a nervous exercise in timing, but at sunset we arrive where Cuthbert, now Bishop of Lindisfarne, ended his career. We stay at the local pub, in whose dining room we order multiple main courses and leaf through *Country Life* magazine. After four days on the road we are bit over one another's company. After all, we hadn't met a single other walker. ■

—Martin Elliott

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by the way 

One more time around

Is it just me, or is it always a bit strange at the start of another year? As if you can feel the earth and the sky and the ambience of things shifting wearily into another gear with a here-we-go-again crunching of cosmic cogs.

There's a novel by Thomas Hardy called *Two on a Tower* in which a young man named Swithin decides to visit the small rural church in which he will be married the next day. At dusk he enters the silent church, rejoicing in visions of the morrow. But Hardy, in that sleeve-twitching way of his, directs the reader's gaze to the floor. And there we see flagstones worn concave by the thousands who had preceded Swithin, buoyed with the same hopes and plans and anticipated joys and, by implication, disappointed. Happy laughing Tom Hardy was merely, as he put it, trying to demonstrate how 'infinitesimal (are our) lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe'—a truth which, no doubt, we could do without most of the time.

It does require considerable personal, imaginative deception to convince yourself that anything genuinely *new* is going down as the year gets under way again. That's why New Year's resolutions almost invariably fail. Too soon the euphoria that fuelled the lie about 'new' wears off and you realise that nothing's changed really and resolve of whatever kind will have to survive the same old quotidian assaults that were so persistent and insurmountable last year, and the year before that, and the year before that. And so you inexorably approach the what-the-hell stage of the new year and before you know it you're back at work, the holidays are over, winter's on the way and—is that sniffle the first sign of flu? The explanation of this annual return to unwanted realities, it may surprise you to know, is the second law of thermodynamics.

Which states, in brief, that entropy proceeds in a closed system; or, to put it in a way you and I can follow: *things fall apart*. Everything is slowly decaying, degenerating. So, if you neglect your lawn, it runs to seed. If you don't look after your car, it rusts. Paint peels, joints open, tiles shift, pipes clog. Why, you might ask—and I ask this myself, frequently—don't things *improve* if you leave them alone. Given the option of improving or getting worse, why do they always go bad?

For example, if you've just served dinner—a casserole, say—and the phone rings and it's your old Aunt Tilly and you can't hang up on her or even cut things short because she's rolling in it and childless, why shouldn't the dinner, sitting there on the table, get *hotter*—instead of gradually congealing into a brown, cracked, lumpy, silicone-looking geographical projection which, after an hour and a half's full and frank discussion of Aunt Tilly's cat and the leak in her lounge room roof, you discard in favour of a toasted cheese sandwich and a bottle of red?

Scientists tell us that things get worse and not better because of the nature of energy flow but the real reason is we live in a *vale of tears*. This is where science meets religion but such a recognition is not, as might seem, a desperate grasping at 'intelligent design'. The second law of thermodynamics and the fall of Adam and Eve may between them have got us on the ropes, but that doesn't mean we have to capitulate. Evolution, in which the laws of thermodynamics play a shaping role, is the radical explanation of our world and our place in it. It is intelligent design (aka creationism) that runs for cover and seeks the conservative way out of our enigmas and dilemmas.

Meanwhile, though, the *third* law of thermodynamics—and you'll find a surprisingly large number of people are unaware of this—states in essence that when things are brought to a temperature of *absolute zero* they attain a state of complete order! Don't get too carried away. Absolute zero is bloody cold. Nevertheless, you can see the light at the end of the, well, test tube or whatever they use for these experiments.

Let's imagine we all create, by an act of mutual imagination, a small place in our minds which we imagine to be absolute zero; then, into this compartment—at a certain signal, say at midnight on Australia Day or something—we all put into this place of absolute zero, by an act of imagination, John Laws and his poetry; Peter Costello and his ironed-on smirk; all of the shock jocks; Janet (let's-move-on-and-shrug-it-off) Albrechtsen; Barnaby (watch-the-bouncing-ball) Joyce; Philip ('in-relation-to-that-let-me-say-this') Ruddock; Alexander ('look, look, look, look') Downer; Amanda (airline security sucks) Vanstone; the Barmy Army; every single future, unctuous reference by John Howard to 'the Australian people'; Sam Newman; and numerous others we could name—I air only some of my own bugbears. And let's say that, as a result of our imaginative act, they're all brought to a state of perfect, though presumably freezing, order. Because we're on the frontiers of physics here, I'm not sure exactly where this would get us but it would have to be an improvement. It might even turn out to be what once was known in land rights circles as an 'extinguishment'. That would be something like a new start.

Anyway, Happy New Year. ■

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Country character

One of the set-piece questions asked of would-be cadet journalists at *The Canberra Times* in the early 1970s was about the future of the Country Party. Out of sheer sentiment, but also because the answers told one something about the applicant, I always asked the same question when I was interviewing and appointing 20 or 30 years later. The party had by now become the National Party and was a very different creature from that of Jack McEwen; its popular vote had fallen by nearly 70 per cent, and its numerical representation in the federal parliament had halved—and that in a bigger parliament. But the sort of speculation that gave one a sensible answer in 1970—about changing rural demography, about changing rural and regional economics, about differentiating the National product from that of senior Liberal coalition partners, and about the contradictions between pretending to be for free enterprise and believing in 'orderly markets'—held through all the while.

My grandfather was a founding member of the party nearly 90 years ago, and, although he stayed in until his death, he never ceased to say how much it had disappointed him. The party he had thought he had joined at Casino was to be something of a Peasant Party—an alliance of cockies, townspeople and rural labour with conservative morals, a vaguely socialist small-enterprise perspective and a deep suspicion of big business, manufacturers, big cities and domination by powerful interest groups. Instead, he said, the NSW branch of the party was fairly promptly seized by large squatting interests, particularly from the New England area, and had never effectively promoted the interests of rural people, as opposed to those of big farmers. Moreover, it was heavily anti-Catholic in northern NSW, with, as he said, the right of Catholic members such as himself restricted to a veto over which wealthy Protestant was going to misrepresent him.

But the character of the party varied around the nation. The Victorian branch was more strongly dominated by small farmers, the Queensland branch far more market interventionist. Branches in most of the other states had declined to next to nothing by the late 1970s: the West Australian branch was never much more than a tiny rump. As various leaders faced the fact of rural population decline, and the increasing lack of efficacy of state-subsidised marketing schemes for wool, wheat, milk and other produce, efforts were made to broaden the party's appeal.

There were, in doing this, inherent economic contradictions that accentuated the fact that the party's competition for votes has always been primarily with the Liberal Party, not Labor. And that has been a competition which, at federal level in particular, the National Party has been losing: the Liberals have always held more rural seats than the Nationals, and continue to take seats away from them whenever they are allowed to compete in an open market. The contest between the two parties is particularly fierce in Queensland and Victoria; at state level there is scarcely the pretence of coalition. The defection of Julian McGauran from the Nationals to the Victorian Liberals—and his declaration that there is scarcely any difference between the ideological approaches of the coalition parties—has spurred fresh discussion about the party's future, and about whether the Nationals would be better merging with the Liberals.

It will not happen. But the Nationals will continue to decline, even if their capacity to concentrate votes continues to give them seats in parliament. It will not happen because any merger would promptly create a new party that would continue to take votes away from the merged entity. That's quite apart from the capacity of new breeds of independents, such as Peter Andren, Tony Windsor or Bob Katter, to take seats from complacent Nationals. It will not happen because the party's leadership could not maintain their power, influence or capacity to acquire perks for themselves in a merged body. Not one current National Party minister would be in Cabinet or the ministry on intellectual merit, political skill or worthwhile ideas or ideals. It will not happen because some concentrated rural interests, such as the sugar lobby, could never achieve, particularly from a Liberal Party of open-market orientation, the boondoggles taken for granted in parts of rural Australia.

Indeed, the big problem can be seen in two ways. A dedicated National, for example, fears that the party is too much submerged inside the coalition, is seen by voters as being no different from the Liberals and not successful in achieving special benefits for rural constituencies. McGauran has aided this perception, but so have any number of Queensland Nationals, not least the Barnaby Joyce push who think the best way the party can maintain its vote is by loudly clamouring for attention and being seen to achieve particular outcomes. This outrages rural Liberals and more dedicated National coalitionists. But the anger of many Liberals is also about fundamental economic differences, and about the National Party's continuing fondness for intervening in markets, ambivalence about economic liberalism, and shamelessness about feathering nests, including its own.

Indeed it might all come together in the inquiry into the Australian Wheat Board's dealings with the Iraqi oil-for-food program. One can be fairly sure, given the flatness of the denials, that no one will ever prove that John Howard and Alexander Downer knew anything about kickbacks or corruption. With FAQ Nationals, however, intimate knowledge of murky deals is pretty much SOP. ■

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

David Corlett

Redefining the Australian nation

With the unlinking of the politics of asylum from the debate over national identity, Australia is now within reach of an opportunity to engage in much-needed policy reform

In late 2005, Australia's most famous asylum seeker family, the Bakhtiyaris, hit the headlines again. Nine months after they had been forced from Australia to Pakistan, Fairfax journalist Paul McGeough revealed that the Afghan government had itself concluded that Mrs Bakhtiyari was indeed, as she had claimed, an Afghan. The family's supporters jumped up and down, shouting, 'I told you so.'

The Australian Government stuck to its line that the Pakistanis had said that Mr Bakhtiyari was a Pakistani, and that was the end of the matter. Then, after an ABC *Lateline* interview was aired, the Government sought to even the score with the same I-told-you-so line. Alamdar Bakhtiyari had apparently admitted that the family had lied.

The following day Alamdar's confession was all over the media. Unfortunately, the ABC's admission that it had incorrectly transcribed the interview and that the boy had said that he blamed his predicament on his 'lawyers' and not his 'lies' received a whole lot less attention.

Notwithstanding this regrettable mistake, the treatment of the Bakhtiyaris was reminiscent of the fate that befell them while they were in Australia.

I began my book *Following Them Home: The Fate of the Returned Asylum Seekers* with a chapter about the Bakhtiyari case. My conclusion was that the family had been caught up in a larger conflict than one simply concerned with their well-being. It was a conflict about how Australia ought to respond to asylum seekers. But it was also more than this. It was part of a larger battle about how the Australian nation ought to be defined. I wrote that the family was positioned 'at the butt of a battering ram designed to demolish Australia's onshore protection regime and, to the extent this symbolised it, the Howard conception of the Australian nation'.

The struggle for national identity is often understood as an attempt by the Howard Government to redefine the Australian nation in response to the way it was constructed under Labor and, particularly, under the leadership of Paul Keating. But in many ways the Hawke/Keating governments continued work begun under Whitlam and—arguably more importantly—Fraser. Under Liberal and Labor governments since the early 1970s, the Australian nation had become increasingly imagined as an inclusive place, a place in which, within certain limits—notably a commitment to institutions such as the rule of law and parliamentary democracy—difference was tolerated and even celebrated. The fences associated with Australia's emerging immigration detention regime in the early 1990s marked the outward limit of that tolerance: if you arrived here without prior authorisation, especially if you arrived by boat, you were going to be treated harshly.

The struggle for the nation under Howard is, then, not only a response to the previous Labor administration, but a break from the past two-and-a-half decades of both Liberal and Labor governments.

Importantly, it is a conflict in which a group of people called 'ordinary Australians' are pitted against the 'élites'—a misnomer because it includes a pharmacist in rural New South Wales and a builder on Victoria's Surf Coast but excludes the most powerful media commentators and some of the wealthiest businesspeople in the country.

Keating—and to the extent that he was continuing the work of earlier prime ministers, they too—backed the special-interest groups, including Aborigines and multiculturalists, of the elites. These elites terrorised ordinary Australians with their politically correct views, chastising them for their history of stolen land and racial exclusion and preventing them from speaking freely about the direction in which they wanted their nation to go.

The fight to reclaim the nation for Howard's 'battlers' (another misnomer if it is taken to include the likes of Kath and Kim of Fountain Gate, for whom the battle is about deciding which of the interminable goods to buy next while excluding those whose disability pensions are threatened by current reforms) has been fought out on a number of fronts including on the questions of Aboriginal reconciliation and the stolen generations, and in the history wars, between 'black armband' and 'white blindfold' historians. It has also been fought out in the asylum-seeker area.

Because of this link between the politics of asylum and the politics of national identity, it was impossible for those who were interested in a more inclusive, more compassionate nation not to be interested in the way the politics of asylum was being played out. But engaging in the conflict for the nation did not always serve in the interests of developing better public policy in the asylum-seeker area. Indeed, for some people, the distinction between the politics of asylum and the politics of national identity and their roles within these two—as advocates for individuals and as activists for change both in asylum policy and in the national imagination—became blurred, as in the Bakhtiyari case.

There have recently been some positive policy developments, most notably those negotiated by the Liberal Party backbencher Petro Georgiou and his handful of supporters. These have resulted in the release of many asylum seekers from long-term detention. There is increased hope for those people who were granted only temporary protection after being recognised as refugees by Australian immigration officials.

The Pacific Solution is also largely obsolete.

How should we understand these recent changes? What allowed them to occur?

To be sure, the mid-2005 changes were the result of a number of factors. There has been a slow thaw in policy for some time. August 2004 amendments, for example, meant that temporary-protection visa

holders could apply to remain in Australia on grounds other than the ongoing need for protection. It is also true that the continuing indefinite detention of still considerable numbers of people was becoming increasingly difficult to defend, particularly since the boats had stopped coming.

I have suggested in *The Sydney Papers* that the key to the recent changes was the tragedy of Cornelia Rau. It was the Rau case that pushed the operation of our immigration system into public consciousness in a more meaningful way than has occurred before. Rau led to the Palmer Inquiry. And Palmer and Rau gave political momentum to the Georgiou group's push for reform.

Something else has also occurred to make change possible: Australia's approach to asylum seekers is no longer an important site in which the battle for the nation's soul is being fought.

There are two reasons for this. First, the boats are no longer coming. Since early 2002, only four asylum seeker boats that have made it to Australia, the most recent including 43 West Papuans. Whether you believe that there were other factors involved—including, for example, the fall of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, a better relationship with Indonesia resulting in authorities there discouraging boats from leaving, declining asylum seeker numbers internationally, the sinking of the SIEV X—the Government is convincingly able to claim its policy of stopping the boat arrival of asylum seekers a success.

More broadly, the Government is now unambiguously supreme in electoral terms and indeed in its attempt to redefine the Australian nation.

This is a discomforting analysis for those who would wish Australia to be more inclusive of the 'other', more generous, more respectful of human rights and dignity.

But it seems possible that through its very dominance the Government may be more willing to engage in a genuine debate about policy reform in the asylum-seeker issue than it has before. This is the positive side of the decoupling of the politics of asylum from the politics of national identity.

The highly politicised nature of the asylum-seeker issue has done little to assist in the creation of a more effective and more just system of offering protection to those who need it in Australia.

One of the things we learn from studying the response to the Cambodian boat arrivals in the late 1980s and early 1990s—and from the response to the so-called 'fourth wave' of asylum seekers—is that public stoushes can harm the cause of developing better policy in this area. The reason for this is that many Australians are not supportive of a more generous approach, preferring a hard line against unauthorised arrivals. Political parties that would seek too liberal a policy in this area would, it seems, only do so in a public way to their electoral detriment.

With the unlinking of the politics of asylum from the debate over national identity we are now within reach of the most significant opportunity to engage in policy reform for arguably the past decade, or even longer.

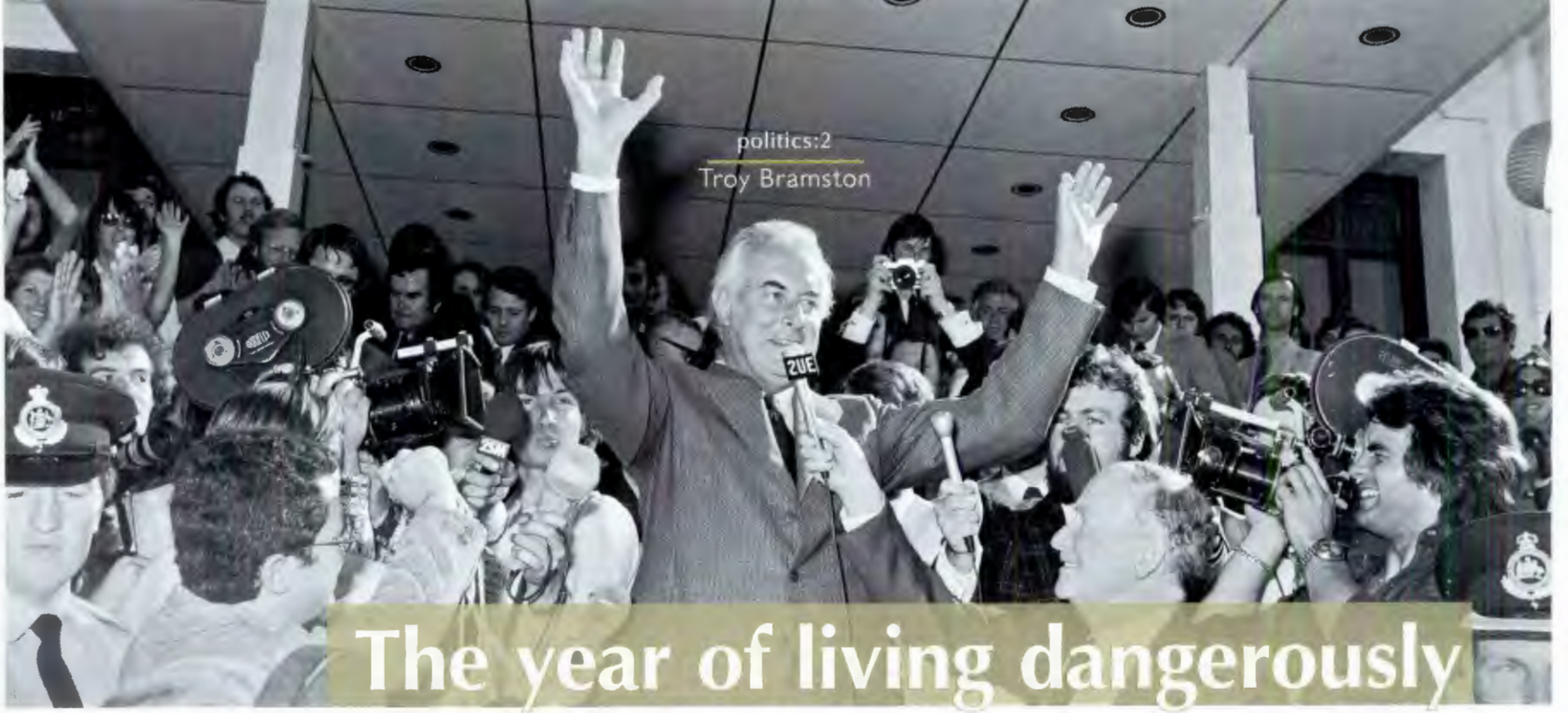
Maybe the cooler political environment, combined with the recent revelations of bureaucratic blunders and the contrition that the department is now displaying, mean that the time is right for real policy reform to take place.

And there are plenty of areas where reform is needed. Large numbers of asylum seekers are currently living in the Australian community without the right to work or to access publicly funded medical assistance, and with no welfare entitlements. Because of this, they have little chance to live—or even to return should they be found not to be refugees—with dignity. There are possibly hundreds—maybe thousands—of people who live with the trauma not only of the experiences before coming to Australia, but also of their time in Australia.

Then there are the mechanisms of silent exclusion, such as the interception at overseas airports of potential asylum seekers, which, without much in the way of hard evidence, we can only suspect is preventing such people from even accessing Australian territory, not to mention the protection determination process.

And there are those towards whom, as I argue in my book, we continue to have obligations, because we returned them prematurely to situations of danger and insecurity or because we sent them back as broken people. ■

David Corlett is a research associate in politics at La Trobe University and the author of *Following Them Home: The Fate of the Returned Asylum Seekers* (Black Inc, 2005).



politics:2

Troy Bramston

The year of living dangerously

The final year of the Whitlam Government was tumultuous, but despite enormous obstacles and ultimate dismissal, the government implemented a visionary and far-reaching policy agenda that forever changed the face of Australia

The 1975 Cabinet papers released by the National Archives on January 1 shed new light on the tumultuous final year of the Whitlam Government, illuminating above all the struggle of a government to implement reform in a hostile political and economic environment. These papers together with the previous releases illustrate the inner workings of the Whitlam Cabinets.

Comprised of Cabinet submissions, decisions and supporting departmental files, they reveal several constant themes: the determination to implement reform against the backdrop of a weak economy and an intractable political environment, a poisonous and distrustful relationship with the public service, a dysfunctional administrative style, a strong-willed prime minister, an ill-disciplined Cabinet dogged by scandal and crisis, and the warning signs that, had they been heeded, might have avoided the dismissal of the government.

In examining the totality of the government's records through the Cabinet papers, the most remarkable aspect is that they show how, despite enormous obstacles, a visionary and far-reaching policy agenda was implemented, forever changing the face of Australia.

Few areas of society were left untouched by the Whitlam program. While much of it was welcomed, the frenzied pace of reform and the economic impact meant that the government faced much opposition.

The 1975 papers reveal an active and determined government. In July Medibank was finally up and running, the Gurindji people were given title to part of their traditional lands at Wattie Creek, the Racial Discrimination Act was passed, Elizabeth Evatt was appointed Chief Judge of the new Family Court, the Law Reform Commission and the Consumer Affairs Commission were established, legislation set up the National Gallery and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, new welfare payments were made to support mothers and the homeless, the Film Commission and the Australia Council were created, and the new Australian honours system was introduced.

Internationally, Papua New Guinea became independent, the Vietnam War ended, and Whitlam and Indonesian President Suharto jointly supported the principle of self-determination for the former Portuguese colony of East Timor. In October, five Australian-based journalists covering the Indonesian incursion in East Timor were killed. It has been alleged that the government may have been informed of a pending attack. Yet, there is nothing new in these files; records relating to East Timor were released in 2000.

Right from the beginning it was a style of administration that foreshadowed later problems. Within days Gough Whitlam and his deputy, Lance Barnard, were sworn in as the first Cabinet, holding all of the portfolios between them. In 14 days, the duumvirate made about 40 decisions through media releases and the Executive Council.

With all ministers in Cabinet, decision-making was laboured. There was no Cabinet solidarity: ministers were free to return to caucus and fight battles lost in Cabinet. Paul Keating, a minister in the final weeks of the government, said the meetings 'were mayhem ... much of it entirely undisciplined'. There was little strategic leadership, planning or oversight by senior ministers. It was not until 1975 that an Expenditure Review Committee was established, a belated attempt to impose the fiscal discipline the government needed to govern effectively.

The economy is another key theme. After 23 years of conservative rule, ministers were eager to implement their reform agenda, much of which involved large-scale spending. However, the economy deteriorated due to rising unemployment, inflation and wages. Oil prices abroad

Gough Whitlam in 1975: 'Well may we say *God save the Queen*, because nothing will save the Governor-General.'
Photo courtesy the National Archives of Australia

increased rapidly. At home, commodity prices and profits fell, and the balance of payments was an ongoing concern.

In July 1974, Treasurer Frank Crean, running the Treasury line, argued to Cabinet that the outlook was 'grim' and that the country faced 'an inflationary crisis'. He advocated reducing expenditure, increasing taxes, and other monetary measures. Neither Crean nor Whitlam was able to convince Cabinet. Jim Cairns replaced Crean as Treasurer in December 1974.

In late 1974, the Governor of the Reserve Bank told the Treasurer he was 'concerned and apprehensive' about the economy and feared that rising unemployment and inflation 'could become much worse and the potential damage could be very severe'.

In 1975, Cabinet was divided over economic strategy. There were the economic troglodytes who failed to understand the changing economy and were wedded to their policy ambitions; Crean, who had argued for the adoption of Treasury's deflationary approach; Cairns, who was unsure how to respond and also racked with personal struggles and marred by political scandal; Whitlam, who did not offer strong leadership in Cabinet; and Bill Hayden, who recognised the need for expenditure reductions and a mix of other measures, and who would become the third Treasurer in less than three years. In fact it is Hayden who emerges from the Cabinet records as the most clear-eyed and prescient political analyst of all the figures of the era.

The key issue was reducing expenditure. In 1973–74 expenditures had increased by 20 per cent—the largest increase in two decades. In 1974, Crean had argued to Cabinet that the proposed 32 per cent increase in expenditures for 1974–75 was 'economically irresponsible' and would lead to 'the worst of all worlds'. In February 1975 Cairns warned Cabinet that budget expenditure would now likely increase by 42 per cent. He said the deficit would be 'several times' the estimated $570 million.

But it was soon clear that Cairns was anything but clear about what to do about the economy. In early 1975, Cairns warned Cabinet that 'the economic situation is very bad', yet argued there were 'no quick solutions'. While acknowledging the need to reduce expenditure, he argued that the implementation of the government's policies must be paramount. In a rambling 20-page submission in May he argued that controlling inflation should be the primary goal, and advocated using wages policy, monetary measures and reducing the deficit. However, he urged his colleagues not to 'surrender any significant part of our major social programs and cultural advances', saying that 'it is far better to be defeated while attempting to implement Labor policies than to be defeated after surrendering them'.

In his memoirs, Whitlam said Cairns was 'undergoing an agonising reappraisal of long-held personal and economic beliefs' and espoused 'the economics of love'. Whitlam said Cairns failed to support his own submissions in Cabinet. He was sacked over the 'loans affair' mid-year. Cairns was also dogged by media speculation about his relationship with his assistant Junie Morosi, for whom he had declared 'a kind of love'.

When Hayden became Treasurer in June 1975, he was already well versed on what action needed to be taken. In mid-1974 Hayden argued to Cabinet that 'fiscal expenditures' needed to be 'pruned heavily'. The spending proposals, he said, 'seem too grand in scale for the present circumstances'. Now Treasurer, he argued the 'economic malaise' was due to 'rapid inflation', but acknowledged 'a significant contributing factor has been our attempt to push ahead a little too quickly with our social and economic goals. He said the deficit was heading to 'about' $4.8 billion, and would cause 'pervasive psychological shock' in the community. Cutting expenditure was the only way forward; the 'simple Keynesian world' many ministers were accustomed to was long gone, he said.

Further, Hayden argued to Cabinet that if drastic measures were not taken now:

> Our drive for social and economic reform through redistribution will be discredited for a decade or more. Our record as a government will be jeered at and our capacity to manage the basic affairs of the country ridiculed. If we don't courageously and responsibly handle the present economic problems successfully, we will be seen to have wasted our chance to fulfil these promises we held out and talked about so articulately for so long.

By June, $2 billion in savings had been identified. Tom Uren said in a letter to Whitlam that the cuts to his programs were 'totally unacceptable'. Hayden wanted to go further, and proposed to Cabinet that the totemic abolition of university and college fees could be reversed, the pharmaceutical benefits scheme could be restricted and the child endowment abolished. These ideas were rejected. Other cuts were found. Despite Hayden's goal of a $2.5 billion deficit for 1975–76, it was projected to be $2.8 billion. It later expanded to $3.5 billion.

Inexorably linked with the economic debates was the so-called 'loans affair'. It was this scandal that led directly to the dismissal of the government. Fraser said the 'loans affair' provided the 'reprehensible circumstances' it needed to delay passage of the supply bills, unless the government called an election for the House of Representatives.

The scandal began in 1974, when the Minister for Minerals and Energy, Rex Connor, secured approval for a US$4 billion dollar loan to fund national resource projects. Cairns had also made inquiries about substantial loan raisings. Connor's loan would be negotiated by a Pakistani money trader named Tirath Khemlani, who would source the funds from Arab investors. The decision to attempt to secure the funds was done without Loan Council approval and outside of Treasury's normal channels. Khemlani would earn a US$100 million commission if he secured the loan.

Treasury argued forcefully against the loan, saying Khemlani was 'highly suspect', and made a 'note for file' expressing 'doubts about the legality' of the loan, arguing it was perhaps a 'sting' operation or 'a confidence trick of elaborate proportions'. Concerns were also raised by the Attorney-General's Department and the Reserve Bank, but this advice was ignored. An Executive Council meeting in mid-December 1974, with Governor-General Sir John Kerr absent, authorised the loan arrangements.

However, Khemlani could not secure the funds. Connor's loan authority was revoked in January 1975. But he later won approval for a US$2 billion loan. Details soon leaked of the government's plans, and when no funds were secured, the authority was revoked on 20 May. In October, the press revealed that Connor had continued to negotiate with Khemlani after the authority was revoked. Connor was forced to resign.

Meanwhile, Cairns had also sought to

raise overseas loans and had offered Melbourne businessman George Harris a 2.5 per cent brokerage fee. Yet Cairns denied the existence of any letters confirming these arrangements. But letters did exist, and when it was realised he had misled Parliament, he was sacked from the ministry.

The Cabinet papers illuminate all of these events, particularly the associated departmental files held in the Attorney-General's Department, Treasury and the Prime Minister's Department.

The most significant event of 1975 was the dismissal of the government. The sequence of events is well known. The opposition was continuing to delay passage of the government's supply bills. Fraser called for a House of Representatives election. Whitlam phoned Kerr on the morning of 11 November and said he intended to advise a half-senate election in person later in the day. Kerr, according to new accounts, spoke to Fraser and essentially outlined his plans before telling Whitlam. At about 1pm, Kerr, armed with the supporting advice of the Chief Justice of the High Court, Sir Garfield Barwick, dismissed Whitlam and installed Fraser as 'caretaker' Prime Minister. (This advice was also supported by judges Sir Anthony Mason and Sir Ninian Stephen—although not known at the time.) Supply was secured. A no-confidence motion in Fraser was passed by the House of Representatives. Kerr dissolved both houses of Parliament on the basis of 21 other bills being rejected. The Queen was kept in the dark and later refused to intervene. At the election held on 13 December, Labor was routed; its vote fell by 6.5 per cent and 30 seats are lost.

The papers show that the strategy to 'not call an election in the House of Representatives' was endorsed by Cabinet. A special 'ad hoc' committee was also established to deal with the crisis. Cabinet authorised 'expenditure control measures' as supply was drying up and began planning for payment of salaries through private trading banks. Treasury advised that salary payments could be met up to 30 November. Whitlam said at the embargoed release of the papers that the Loan Council would have been used to authorise expenditure. In any event, the banks were wary. A front-page report in *The Australian* on 11 November said that the banks were 'preparing to reject' the proposal.

At the embargoed release of the papers Whitlam also presented a letter sent to him by the nephew of the then NSW Governor, Sir Roden Cutler. It argues that Cutler had advised Kerr against dismissing the government. Whitlam also argued that Kerr's claim—that had he discussed with Whitlam his plans, Whitlam would have contacted the Queen to have him sacked—was nonsense. Whitlam produced papers appointing and withdrawing Queensland Governor Colin Hannah's dormant commission, which enabled him to act as governor-general in Kerr's absence. They show that an appointment cannot be terminated, but can only come to an end when another is appointed, and that these steps took time. He also presented former governor-general Paul Hasluck's personal notes showing his candid discussions with Whitlam, and questioned why Kerr could not take him into his confidence.

Following the dismissal, Fraser agreed not to initiate any new policies, or hold any inquiries into the previous government, until after the forthcoming election. The Cabinet papers show that 'certain complaints' had been made to Kerr and that he referred these to Fraser for 'advice'. A request by new Treasurer Phillip Lynch for information on the previous government's expenditures was rejected by 'certain officers' in the department, and they petitioned the Governor-General for advice on the 'caretaker guidelines'. Labor members John Wheeldon and Doug McClelland wrote to the Governor-General about similar incidents. Fraser responded that his government would 'strictly and scrupulously' adhere to the guidelines.

While the latest release of Cabinet papers may provide a few new clues to the coup, that is not their primary significance. What is significant is that the warning signs for the government were there from the beginning; indeed, many of the later problems which culminated in the dismissal, perhaps, could have been avoided. This is the real tragedy of the Whitlam years.

The drive to implement far-reaching reform, almost regardless of the economic consequences, or consideration of the need for gradualism in implementing this agenda, was a central factor in the government's poor showing in opinion polls throughout much of the period. The public service and some ministers urged alternative courses of action.

The scandal of the 'loans affair' set in train the events that led to the dismissal. It is what prompted Fraser to delay supply. Better oversight of ministers and the heeding of advice not to proceed with the loan might have avoided the scandal.

Yet, the denial of the legitimacy of the government should also not be forgotten. Within months of coming to office, Opposition Leader Billy Snedden and Senate Leader Reg Withers had embarked upon a strategy to delay passage of supply in order to force the government to an election, which it achieved in 1974.

Then there are Kerr's secret negotiations with Fraser, his deception of the Prime Minister, his collusion with the Chief Justice against the Prime Minister's wishes, his ambush, and failure to let Parliament resolve what was a parliamentary deadlock.

Fraser also better understood Kerr's psyche. Fraser used his meetings and phone calls with Kerr—sanctioned by Whitlam—to apply political pressure on Kerr, saying that if he didn't intervene, the opposition would say the Governor-General had 'failed his duty'.

Perhaps the real legacy of the dismissal is that a precedent now exists for a government elected by the people to be dismissed by a governor-general elected by no one.

No period in Australia's history has had so much attention as the Whitlam Government. The scale and breadth of its achievements, led by a remarkable leader, yet spoiled by scandals and surrounded by high drama, and ultimately dismissed in controversial circumstances, have provided much fodder for journalists, commentators and scholars.

Despite the scandals, the frenetic style of government and the dismissal, this government now warrants a more detailed and considered analysis. But centre stage should be the legacy of the entire government, not least the substantial policy achievements, now with additional insight thanks to these Cabinet papers. ■

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Peter Rodgers

The greatest game

AND THE PEOPLE gathered together, grumbling among themselves.

They approached the Lord saying, 'Now don't get us wrong and we're really grateful for the way you got us out of Egypt. But quite frankly things get a bit quiet in the desert, especially at weekends.'

'What's your point?' asked the Lord.

'Well,' said the people, 'we wondered if we could invent some sort of game—.'

'I'm the inventor around here,' the Lord reminded them sharply.

'Of course, of course,' said the people. 'Sorry. Perhaps You could create a game to provide carefree family entertainment and encourage a sense of team spirit amongst the young.'

'Let me sleep on it,' said the Lord. 'I'll let you know tomorrow.'

'Does the Lord really sleep too?' asked one little boy in the crowd.

'Shhh', his mother warned.

The next morning the gong sounded and the people assembled promptly.

'OK,' said the Lord, 'I've come up with a game called Cricket. It'll be played over five days and will be called a Test.'

'There He goes again,' muttered a middle-aged man, 'always testing us. Can't He give us a break just for once? And five days, how ridiculous!'

'That's enough, dear,' soothed his wife.

'Here are the rules,' the Lord continued. 'I've had them carved into these stone tablets. Mind you study them well.'

'Yes Lord,' replied the crowd, 'thank you Lord for Cricket. We shall play it in Thy name.'

And they did. And they were content and peace and healthy sporting attitudes bound the community closely together.

But after a while, fresh grumbling could be heard.

'It's a silly game,' a few of the men said. 'It goes for so long and sometimes there's not even a winner and they call it a "draw". What a stupid word. Or occasionally, on the fourth or fifth day, it gets a bit interesting and then there's a dust storm or a flash flood and still there's no result.'

'But we asked for it in the first place,' some of the other men chided.

'We asked for something that would kill time, not drag it out endlessly.'

'Cricket is the Lord's work,' said its defenders. The others fell silent.

But not for long. For the feeling that Cricket wasn't all it might be gradually gained strength. Teams were hard to muster, very few turned up to training, and crowd attendances dropped sharply. A delegation was despatched to meet the Lord.

'What is it now?' He demanded.

'We thank You daily for all You have given us,' the delegation leader intoned. 'But,' he paused for a moment, 'the truth is that, um, Cricket in its current form is not holding the community's attention.'

'And why not?' asked the Lord tetchily.

'Well it goes for a bit too long and often it goes nowhere.'

'All right,' said the Lord, 'I'll see what I can do. Again,' he added, with heavy emphasis. 'But I really don't know how any of you will get to Heaven if you can't keep your mind on one thing even for a few days.'

'Thank you Lord,' the delegation sighed in unison, anxious to be away.

'He's in a *great* mood,' one of them whispered sarcastically.

'Quiet!' the leader snapped. 'Haven't you heard of omniscience?'

'Oops, sorry. Do you think He might have—?'

'Forget it! Just watch your tongue.'

But the Lord was as good as His word. And so One-Day Cricket came to pass.

'Hallelujah, Hallelujah,' the crowd cried out. 'God is the greatest and so is 50-Overs-a-Side Cricket.' Contentment lay across the community like a thick woollen blanket on a cold clear night.

And then, amazingly, the rumbles of discontent started all over again.

'A whole day to watch one game, what a waste!'

'I could pick half my olive harvest by the time the game's finished!'

'The crowd behaviour's just disgraceful. Why don't they ban the sale of pomegranate juice at the grounds?'

So another delegation was despatched.

'What is it with you lot?' the Lord asked in exasperation. 'Can't you keep your mind on anything for more than five minutes?'

'No,' the delegation replied sheepishly.

'Lord, might it be possible to have a word in private?' asked the youngest member of the delegation, a handsome, clean-cut man in his early 90s.

'Well, I suppose so,' said the Lord. 'What's your name?'

'Moses,' replied the man.

'OK, Moses, see that hill over there. Be at the top at midnight.'

'Thank you Lord.'

Next morning, as the people gathered around their campfires to cook breakfast, Moses appeared, a look of triumph on his tired face.

'Here at last is the answer,' he proclaimed, unfurling a chalk-white parchment. The people gathered around and read aloud in wonderment.

One-One Cricket—the rules

Each side shall consist of 12 players, one of whom shall be nominated as umpire; Each side shall bowl a maximum of one over; No bowler shall bowl more than one ball; No batsman shall face more than one ball; The position of wicketkeeper shall rotate after each ball; Whoever is wicket keeping shall assume the position of team captain; Whenever the ball is hit, no matter how near or far, the batters must run; A ball hit to the boundary scores five runs, plus any additional ones run by the batsmen while the ball is being fielded; A ball hit over the boundary on the full scores 10 runs, plus any additional ones run by the batsmen while the ball is being retrieved; Balls hit to or over the boundary must be returned without delay by spectators.

As they finished reading, the people fell to their knees. 'Oh Lord, provider of all that is good, we give thanks for One-One Cricket. Through it You have ensured that never again will our interest wane or our concentration lapse.'

I wonder about that, thought the Lord, I really wonder. But He kept His doubts to Himself. ■

Peter Rodgers writes regularly on Middle Eastern affairs. His latest book on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is *Herzl's Nightmare: One Land, Two People* (Scribe). He has also written prize-winning short fiction.

Anthony Ham

A sorry tale of human bondage

In drought-ravaged, impoverished Niger, slavery is still a way of life for many

FATIMA IS ONE OF THE lucky ones. Every day since she could walk, without exception, she has worked from before sunrise until long after sunset. She has never been allowed to eat, get married or have sex with her husband without someone else's permission. She doesn't understand the concept of money because she has never had any. Fatima is 53 years old.

Fatima lives in Niger, a landlocked West African state that was, until famine thrust it to international attention in 2005, one of the least-known countries on Earth. But even in good years, Niger stands on the brink of perpetual emergency, a sand-scoured country whose only natural resource—uranium—is a dirty word on international markets. Green is a colour you rarely see here—hardly surprising given that just three per cent of the country's land is suitable for agriculture. That three per cent, huddled into the extreme south-west of the country, will soon be engulfed by the Sahara Desert in its southward march.

Niger's human landscape is no less grim. According to the United Nations, it is the worst place in the world in which to live. The average Nigerien earns less than a dollar a day and 85 per cent of the adult population can neither read nor write. One out of every three Nigeriens is malnourished.

If Niger is, among nations, the poorest of the poor, then people like Fatima are truly the wretched of the Earth.

Until recently, Fatima was a slave, a forgotten vestige of an institution that continues to stalk Africa like a dark spectre of the continent's past. But even though Fatima spent all but the last few months of her life—more than five decades—in captivity, she is lucky. She managed to escape.

Now she must, like a child, learn what it means to live in freedom. When asked her plans for the future, her answer is simple: 'I shall try to live by watching what other people do.' And then she smiles.

Asibit, another former slave in her 50s who managed to escape and whose parents were slaves before her, already knows how to live in freedom. 'I have never known happiness until this month of freedom,' she says. 'Now I can go to bed when I want. No one insults me. Now that I am free I can do as I please.'

In Niger, a staggering eight per cent of the population—870,363 people—are slaves, according to an authoritative report by Timidria, a local anti-slavery NGO with affiliations to Anti-Slavery International (ASI).

Later verification of these figures suggested that some double counting was involved. Studies also found that the final figure included people who are slaves by birth and social status and who are officially owned by masters but who do not live under their daily supervision. Of those who suffer from the worst form of slavery, Timidria found 46,382.

Stories told by slaves to Timidria offer up a bleak vision of hell in describing the world which Fatima and Asibit left behind.

To be a slave in Niger means many things. If you are a woman, it means you will be raped and your children will be taken from you at the age of two to eliminate family bonds. You will most likely never see your child again. If you are a man, you will either be castrated or given the role of 'stud', forced to impregnate slave women to produce more slaves for the master. Thus is slavery perpetuated across generations. If you are a child, you are born a slave and you will be set to work from the moment you can walk. You may never in your life enjoy a day of freedom.

All slaves—women, men, children—who were interviewed by Timidria had been beaten. Many had been branded with hot irons like cattle. The denial of food or medical care was routine. Public undressings or other ritual forms of humiliation were cited as common punishments for real or imagined disobedience. Some slaves were tied in chains or to a stake in the sun or to the neck of an animal for days on end. Most knew someone who had been thrown down a well and left to drown.

Tagou Amagal, from Tessaoua in southern Niger, was born a slave. Her parents were slaves. Now 90 years old, she tells of a life in which she has never known freedom. 'I have suffered torture; as you can see, one of my legs is lifeless. My children are used as bedposts, made to carry the master's bed throughout the night.'

Islamana, from Gadabeji, can only watch powerless when her two daughters 'are treated like goats. The master invites men to sleep with them.'

Slavery of this kind has existed in West Africa for centuries. The arrival of European traders in Africa from the 15th century accelerated the trade in slaves, resulting in the mass transportation of an estimated 11 million slaves to European colonies in the Americas.

When the French—Niger's former colonial rulers—arrived at the beginning of the 20th century, up to three-quarters of the population in some areas of what is now Niger were slaves. The French army and administrators came with lofty ideals—slavery was abolished under French law in 1848—and they did succeed in largely ending the commercial *trade* in slaves.

They did little, however, to free those already held captive. In some cases, French officers even paid their soldiers in slaves—concubines, porters and domestic workers—from among Niger's conquered people.

Since the early colonial era, distressingly little has changed. The impoverished governments of Niger since independence in 1960 have had neither the means—Niger is a vast country of poor roads and remote desert settlements—nor the inclination to eradicate slavery. After all, traditional chiefs—Niger's most powerful slave own-

ers—continue to exercise *de facto* power throughout much of the country and even serve as the government's representatives and judges of law.

But it didn't have to be like this, and for the briefest of periods after 2002 an end to slavery in Niger seemed within reach. That was the year that Timidria began—with the full knowledge and blessing of Niger's government—to conduct 11,000 interviews nationwide in order to ascertain the full extent of slavery in Niger.

The release of Timidria's preliminary report in 2003 sparked outrage in Niger's media and prompted the government to introduce an amendment to the criminal code whereby slavery became illegal for the first time in Niger's history. Under the new law, slave owners were liable to prison terms of 30 years unless they released their slaves.

A working committee of the government-dominated parliament praised Timidria for its work, called on the media to publicise the report and demanded that government agencies and traditional chiefs actively seek to stamp out slavery.

In December 2003, dozens of slaves were freed in a public ceremony near Tahoua in central Niger. Among those experiencing freedom for the first time, there were tears of joy as Timidria distributed certificates attesting to their status freed slaves, along with money to assist them in starting a new life.

The only sour notes were sounded by government soldiers, who confiscated the equipment of journalists reporting the ceremony, and the grumbling of the local governor, who told reporters that slavery did not exist in Niger.

Then it all started to go horribly wrong. In March 2005, with journalists and local dignitaries already assembled, Niger's government abruptly cancelled a ceremony in In Ates, close to the Malian border, to free 7000 slaves—95 per cent of the local population. The government human rights commission—the co-sponsors and organisers of the event—said that the cancellation was because 'slavery does not exist in Niger'. Niger has a caste system, the commission said, which is often mistaken for slavery.

Reports began to emerge from the area where the ceremony was to have taken place that the slaves and their owners were intimidated by government soldiers and told under threat of violence neither to attend the ceremony nor to speak to the media.

Then, in early May, the head of Timidria and winner of ASI's Global Anti-Slavery Award for 2004, Ilguilas Weila, was arrested along with five other Timidria workers. Six days later, four were released, but Mr Weila and his colleague, Alassane Biga, were formally charged with spreading false information, attempted fraud and falsely eliciting money from foreign donors.

Romana Cacchioli of ASI denounced the arrests as part of 'a concerted campaign not only to discredit the reputation and work of Timidria, but also to silence efforts to end slavery in the country'.

Niger's democratically elected president, Tandja Mamadou—who was in 2004 singled out by President Bush as a shining example of good governance in Africa—remained silent on the issue. But it was an open secret among Western diplomats in Niger that those who disrupted slave-freeing ceremonies and arrested Timidria's activists were doing Mamadou's bidding. For a man who at the time was president of Ecowas (the regional grouping of West African states) and whose economy is kept afloat by foreign aid, confirmation that slavery was widespread in Niger would have been a grievous embarrassment.

In June, after six weeks in prison—and at a time when Niger was gripped by a famine which Mamadou would also deny existed—Ilguilas Weila and Alassane Biga were finally released on bail. The charges against the men are still pending.

So it is that slavery survives in Africa into the 21st century; that an entire country is held captive by hereditary chiefs whose prestige depends upon the ownership of people and by a president who is as desperate to remain in the international spotlight as his people are to survive; that women like Fatima and Asibit are forced to run for their lives, here, somewhere close to the end of the Earth. ■

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

journey:1

Isabel Huggan

Mystery of the *monastère*

Four days in a French convent were not enough to satisfy the curiosity of this writer

They say that as long as you remain curious about life, you stay young. If that's true, I've just lost a few decades and am back in my late teens—the age I was when I last saw Sister Margaret-Mary, who was then 13 and known as Meg. We probably never spoke but were familiar in the way children are in small towns, even if their lives never actually collide. So I am deeply curious about why fate has arranged that, all these years later, she is now in my life, and I in hers—and surprised beyond words to find myself, a lapsed Protestant with vaguely Buddhist tendencies, kneeling in prayer in the chapel of a Dominican convent.

I may not understand *why*, but at least I know how: it's because, in 2003, I published a memoir called *Belonging*. Among its themes was the idea of *home*, the place we are from and the place we are now—in my case, the south of France where my husband and I have settled in the foothills of the Cévennes. Back in my hometown in Canada, my old chemistry teacher, now 96 and in a seniors' residence, read *Belonging* with interest, for his daughter and I were childhood friends, and one of his regular visitors is Sister Margaret-Mary's mother. Together, they figured out that her daughter's convent is only a few hours from where I live: he had my address, and thus it was passed to Sister Margaret-Mary who wrote a brief, inquiring note two years ago.

'Do you remember me?' she asked, and there was something so wistful about the question that I replied quickly in the affirmative—after checking an old school yearbook from 1961, located with other souvenirs in the attic. Yes, there she was, in the first grade of high school when I was in the last, and I could recall her parents and her family, and even the name of her church, Saint Michael's. Her family was Catholic and, in our town with a population of 2000 where there were 13 churches and 12 of them Protestant, the congregation of Saint Michael's was an exotic minority that merited scrutiny.

Catholics were a mystery for the rest of us who were not. We heard they spoke Latin and worshipped idols, and we knew for sure they committed the unpardonable sin of playing bingo in the church basement. We smelled the incense if the windows were open when we passed and it made us giddy with excitement and curiosity.

I remembered all this as I read that first letter, and when later she invited me to visit her convent, which has an attached *hôtellerie* to accommodate guests, I might have gone immediately had not ill health intervened—two rounds of neurosurgery that kept me homebound and in Sister Margaret-Mary's prayers, for which I was, and am, grateful. Finally recovered in October last year, I decided to go to thank her for those prayers. I felt the long sweet tug of nostalgia, and also a sense of obligation: to her, to the old teacher for his kindly intervention, and to the small town that nourished us. But most of all I felt a duty to my own gods of chance and serendipity spinning their web around the planet. I may not adhere to any conventional doctrine, but I do believe this: being part of a delicate filigree of remembrance and reconnection makes growing old worth the effort.

And so, late in the northern autumn, I boarded a train that took me out of the Cévennes, passing by savagely beautiful landscape—rocky crags and cliffs, forests turning yellow and bronze, wild rivers foaming down mountainsides and through green valleys. When I arrived at my destination (an undistinguished and sombre provincial town), I asked directions to the *monastère*, hoisted my backpack and walked along in the brilliant midday sunshine, full of apprehension. I had booked a room for four days: what if I couldn't stand it? Suddenly, the high walls of square-cut stone around the convent seemed forbidding, and the heavy iron gate opening into a cobblestone courtyard seemed too ready to close. What if we had nothing to say to each other?

She met me at the door to the *hôtellerie*, wearing a dark headdress and a cream-coloured ankle-length robe caught at the waist by a belt on which hung a long wooden rosary. Her face was shining with welcome. Laughing, kissing each other on the cheek three times in the fashion of the south, we began:

'Sister ... um, Meg?'

' Isabel!'

'I'd have known you anywhere!'

'You haven't changed!'

There we were, late-middle-aged women far from home, and our delight in seeing each other was childlike in its exuberance. It was as if we were carrying with us the entire town from which we came; faces, voices, memories swirled around us as we held hands and looked into each other's eyes with wonderment. What *was* this all about?

The Sister in charge of the *hôtellerie* was summoned and immediately took me up to a plain but comfortable bedroom with a window looking over a broad river and smoothly rolling hills outside the town. As suggested on the convent's web site, I had brought my own sleeping bag and towel, quickly unpacked them and went down to the dining room for the noonday meal: green salad, mushroom omelette with potatoes, bread and cheese to follow, apple sauce for dessert, biscuits and coffee. On the table, a pitcher of water and a bottle of robust red wine. My first meal was solitary but from then on I always had company—women on retreat, visiting relatives, parish priests—and good conversation. Guests do not eat with nuns and, unless they've come to see a particular Sister, have little contact with the order. Sister Margaret-Mary and I would meet twice a day—for an hour or more in the late morning and again in the late afternoon—but the rest of the time I

would be on my own. I could walk by the river, stroll through the town, or sit in the garden to meditate or to read.

Before leaving home, I'd decided to bring a book I was finding difficult, reasoning that with fewer distractions I would focus my attention more intently. The book, *The Fabric of the Cosmos* by Brian Greene, I'd purchased after reading *His Dark Materials*, a controversial trilogy for children in which the author, Philip Pullman, uses plot devices based on quantum physics: alternate realities, parallel worlds, infinitely expanding possibilities. I'd found myself curious about the workings of Pullman's mind, and realised I had to go to the source of his ideas; hence, Greene's book, which deals with current notions about space and time—what is called *space-time*. With scant scientific background, I knew that even material written for 'the general public' would be hard going, and it was. Here were concepts I'd never encountered, and not only that, most of what Greene describes is invisible, reliant on mathematical substantiation instead of actual observation.

However, unable to refuse, I also accepted reading material in the *hôtellerie*: books and magazines tracing the lives of saints and martyrs, including *Sainte Thérèse de Lisieux*, whose ornate reliquary of bones is constantly circling the globe, bringing miraculous cures to believers from the banlieues of Paris to the Seychelles. At first I found the saintly histories so quaint and strange—miracles are not part of the Presbyterian tradition from which I come and, to me, self-induced suffering in the name of love seems peculiar—that I only skimmed them as relief from Greene's weighty concepts. Slowly, however, I saw astounding similarities between these two, seemingly polar, extremes. So much is unseen. So much must be taken on faith or in the belief that numbers do not lie. The world *is* full of mystery we seek to explain, and so much that happens *is* unexplainable. Discoveries in science can suddenly invalidate ideas we've held with conviction: no, the Earth is not the centre of the universe. One must keep the mind open to all possibilities.

Why was I there? Curiosity, no doubt, not so much about Sister Margaret-Mary (not until she'd spent several years working in France did she realise her *vocation*), as about the general state of 'being a nun', about which I knew nothing except from films and books. Some of that information was wildly attractive (Audrey Hepburn in *The Nun's Story* influenced a generation of Protestant girls to dream of being Catholic with high cheekbones) and some of it sad and shocking, such as Karen Armstrong's poignant memoir *Through the Narrow Gate*. Never, until now, had I the opportunity to talk with anyone who had chosen—or been called—to celebrate God with her life.

Her *life*.

Every waking hour spent in the presence of other women in the service of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Not to mention Mary, and the Saints. Every day spent in an unbreakable chain of prayer and worship, every day held firmly in the chains of faith.

> *"... I sat at the back of the chapel, hearing their voices rise from the hidden choir stalls ..."*

Year after year within the confines of the cloisters and the gardens, in a pattern so perfect it never needs altering because one size fits all: everything is done to the glory of God. After I've been there a while, I try this idea on to see how it feels—the simplicity and the clarity of purpose is so attractive, it slips over me as easily as silk, yet when I try to move I discover it is too tight, too constricting. But when I study my new friend's serene demeanour, I understand that for her it has been the only choice.

In the chapel, where I go five times a day when offices are sung, a life-sized Christ hangs on a slender cross behind the altar, the long muscles in his arms stretched and pulled by the nails in his hands. Such suffering—and what appears to be glorification of torture in aid of mankind—when contemplated at the same moment as the exquisitely sung music of the liturgy, confuses me, and I withdraw into a neutral, agnostic state. Nevertheless, my heart soars as light floods through the stained glass windows as *Vêpres* is being sung, and I when I go to bed at nine after *Vigiles*, I am filled with a profound sense of well-being.

The Sisters of this *Monastère* have a reputation for their fine *a cappella*, but they do not sing for others, they sing for God. Over the course of my visit (even getting up in the pitch dark for *Laudes* at 6:15am), this realisation took hold as I sat at the back of the chapel, hearing their voices rise from the hidden choir stalls—like morning mist swirling up from a river—knowing that they could not see whether others were listening. This seemed so different from the churchy singing I recalled from my Protestant girlhood, urged by the choirmaster not only to enunciate clearly but also to smile and reach out to the congregation with the holy force of song. Our hymns and anthems were cast like nets to bring sinners in, chorus after chorus. Here, the nuns weren't even trying, but they were gathering me in.

Still, questions plucked at my sleeve. How can my soul respond to this music at the same time as I continue to be critical of the Church itself: outmoded, even dangerous attitudes toward women, birth control, condoms, divorce, homosexuality? I look at my hands, folded in prayer over the bench in front of me, and am struck by my wedding ring—a band of precious gold. Everything related to the mining of gold—environmental pollution, inhumane working conditions, destruction of family—should lead to rejection of this substance and the harm it causes. Yet I look at the ring, and think 'beautiful'. Yet I hear the liturgy and think 'beautiful'.

In four days, what do I learn? Not enough to satisfy my curiosity. I know I must come back, and back again. First, Sister Margaret-Mary and I have begun a friendship neither of us could have predicted and I want to see where that will take us. Second, being in this place allows me to embrace the ambivalence I feel, posed between incredible religion and incomprehensible science. A Roman Catholic convent may not be where I belong for more than a few days, but in this setting my mind roams freely—seeking, finding, taking notes. ■

Isabel Huggan is an award-winning Canadian writer who now lives in France. Her most recent book, *Belonging*, is available through Random House Australia.

Revolutions

Full sick I am,
heart like a stamped upon grape,
head lost in the backwaters
where regret dwells like ancient pike
eager to feast.
I have lost the path.
I have sundered the light.
I have become my father
in the eyes of my son!

Full sick I am,
juices dried up,
thoughts a pack of barking dogs
fighting over my bones.
I have failed the test.
I have embraced the dark.
I hear my father's voice
as I shout at my son!

Full sick I am,
tired to the core,
shedding tears at night
while my son sleeps -
wanting to embrace him
promising to manage things better
and knowing
it is not easy to untangle knots
woven in me
years before
my son ever saw the light of day.

Danny Fahey

The Kingsbury Tales: the storeman's tale

In Kingsbury, when summer is not yet available
And spring is but another season of pollens or *hua fen*

In the lead up to
An occasion
That makes the warehouse storeman

Increasingly uncomfortable
As he prepares for
More Christmas sales and boredom
The longer I stay, he says

In this country
The stupider I grow
If you know what I mean
Money made us
Us made money

And money made money
I hated ballet dancing
But when I started
I was only 5
And made my way
To the top

Then I quit
At 20
For this is a profession
You eat youth rice in
You have to be young
In it
To make it

Or else
You become a storeman
Like me
Or a stockbroker
Like Cunxin or Tsunhsin
Keeping Faith
Is never part of the deal
The important thing is keep your kids alive

Ouyang Yu

Plea from Pakistan

It's written in their eyes: fear, anguish, uncertainty, pain and despair. Many people in Pakistan, like these captured in extraordinary images late last year by photographer **Mathias Heng**, are subsisting in a hell on earth that few in the West can imagine.

Since a devastating earthquake struck on 8 October 2005, more than 73,000 people have been reported dead and another 769,000 injured; in Pakistan alone about 2.5 million people have been left homeless, taking shelter in tents as the brutal winter continues.

Among them are Shazia, pictured on the cover of this issue, who lost her mother and sisters and is now cared for by her father. Amna (above), pleads for food aid from an NGO after her parents were killed. Abdia (centre), lost her home and five of her children, and now lives in a tent with her son.

Soon after the earthquake struck, aid agencies began making their way into affected areas to help the survivors; one such group is pictured (right) handing out food aid.

But those organisations have been fighting a difficult battle against severe weather, and the people of Pakistan still desperately need the world's help. Donations are being gratefully received by many aid agencies including World Vision (www.worldvision.org.au), Plan (www.plan.org.au) and Caritas Australia (www.caritas.org.au). ■

Gillian Bouras

Tracking twins

Autumn in Cambridge, 1999, with a pale sun shining after a frost, and patterned light falling through the chestnut and lime trees. The academic year is three weeks old, and students are predictably dashing about in gowns and on bikes, or punting slowly along the Cam. In Chesterton Lane, a friend and I eventually find a certain house, Gothic Revival *Castlebrae*, now a part of Clare College. A bored receptionist shows me the plaque I have come so far to see:

> This house was originally the home of DR AGNES SMITH LEWIS (1843-1926) and
>
> DR MARGARET DUNLOP GIBSON (1843–1920)
>
> inseparable twins, tireless travellers, distinguished Arabic & Syriac scholars. Lampada Tradam

Lampada Tradam. Let me hand on the torch. Later I go alone to Westminster College, an institution originally established in London for the training of Presbyterian ministers, but one that owes its current Cambridge incarnation to these twins, born Agnes and Margaret Smith, for they gave the college its land, and also founded several scholarships. A trimmed and decorated late Victorian red brick edifice, the building is a mere hundred years old.

I enter. Raised an Australian Presbyterian, I feel the past settle weightily on me the minute I cross the threshold, and automatically expect to see stretches of blue fleur-de-lis carpet along the corridors, and multiple copies of the old Scottish Psalter and Church Hymnary ranged on the various shelves. Even the old-books-and-wood-and-dust-and-midday-dinner smell seems familiar. But this is the purposeful present, and so I am led straight to the dining hall, where ruby light filters through stained-glass windows bearing improving mottoes, and where I view the portraits of Agnes and Margaret. By an unknown artist, alas. The pictures sit above High Table, and my guide turns discreetly away as I kick off my shoes and climb on a chair in order to take several colour snapshots.

Neither Agnes nor Margaret ever attended university, but they were painted in full academic dress, as holders of several honorary degrees. The portraits face each other, and the women are wearing identical red-buttoned black robes and red hoods; both hold books, and their grey hair is swept back under mortarboards. A fluted column is a heavily symbolic part of each picture, for the twins were formidable classical scholars and travelled extensively in the Ancient World.

1843. This was the year of the Great Disruption of the Church of Scotland, and the resultant emergence of the Free Church, and also the year that ancient Nineveh was discovered. It was then that solicitor John Smith, of Ayrshire, Scotland, lost his dearly loved wife, mother of the three-week-old Agnes and Margaret. Smith lived on for more than 20 years, but his grief was so protracted and austere that he forbade his wife's name to be mentioned again, and it never was. Smith made his daughters the centre of his life, and successfully educated them out of the local marriage market by ensuring that they learned Latin, French and German from a very early age. He also bribed them with travel, taking them to the Continent several times before they were 14.

In 1866, when the young women were only 23, Smith died, leaving them the then huge sum of a quarter of a million pounds, at a time when a doctor with a thriving practice could expect to make about £1000 a year. The twins had no relatives; their greatest attachment was to a young teacher called Grace Blyth, whom they had met at their Kensington finishing school. Eventually they moved to London to be near her.

In London Agnes and Margaret, as Scots, overeducated, unmarried and merely middle-class, with no domestic or maternal model, and devout in their Presbyterian faith, were very much on the margins of life. It is difficult to comprehend today what it once meant to be a practising Nonconformist. In 1673 Charles II had been forced to consent to the passing of the Test Act, which prevented both Catholics and Nonconformists from holding state or municipal office; the Act was repealed only in 1828, a mere 15 years before the twins were born, and the social consequences of the Test Act can be said to linger on. 'Never admit to being Presbyterian when in England,' a friend once warned me. 'In class terms, it's the equivalent of saying you haven't got a garden.'

As a Nonconformist you have to earn your place in the world. No automatic rituals (confession, penance, absolution) can rescue you; in matters of conscience you confront your Maker directly, and you are responsible for your actions and their consequences; you have a Puritan horror of idleness; you acknowledge the overriding importance of always doing your duty. You also know your place. Thus Agnes, in signing her name in the Astronomer Royal's Visitors' Book, added: 'We are servants.' She and her sister were strict sabbatarians as well. But Nonconformity aside, theirs is the familiar story of Victorian women, for Agnes wanted to study medicine and Margaret science, futile aims for the females of the time. They set themselves to study ancient and modern Greek instead, and filled in the rest of their time with writing, sketching and painting.

Both sisters eventually married, choosing Cambridge clergymen of an academic turn, but remained childless. Margaret was already widowed when Agnes married; they went on each other's honeymoons and always lived together. Their biographer, A. Whigham Price, contends that neither the Reverend James Gibson nor the Reverend Samuel Lewis could 'hope to compete successfully with twin-sister', so that there was 'nothing for it but to die quietly and become a beautiful memory; a condition which both achieved with a minimum of fuss'. In Victorian society widowhood could mean both status and liberation, and as widows the twins had wedding rings, the married style, wealth, respectability and the freedom to follow

their interests, chief among which were travelling and the learning of languages: at the time of their deaths they had mastered 14 between them.

Once an incentive to learning, travel later became a distraction in time of trouble: in 1868 Agnes and Margaret, dragging a reluctant Grace along with them, journeyed to Egypt and Greece in order to recuperate from the shock of Smith's death and from the strain of 18 months' strict mourning. Nothing daunted the twins: they endured rat-infested cabins, rows with river-boat captains, tumbles from the backs of camels and the disquieting knowledge that several travellers had been killed by bandits along the track from Jerusalem to Jericho a mere week before they went that way themselves. Agnes had become gravely ill with fever in Vienna, but recovered, and went on to keep her diary assiduously: *Eastern Pilgrims* was published in 1870. Unsurprisingly, the travels were part of a mission: to prove that 'any woman of ordinary prudence (without belonging to the class called strong-minded) can find little difficulty in arranging matters for her own convenience'.

In 1883, having survived a voyage during which all the windows in the ship's saloon were broken, several stewards injured, and the ship itself briefly headed the wrong way, the twins spent four months in Greece, an interval that produced Agnes's successful *Glimpses of Greek Life and Scenery*, illustrated by Margaret's sketches. Having checked the spots that are still favourites (Sounion took days instead of hours, and Aegina meant yet another hair-raising and stomach-churning sojourn across stormy seas) and having thoroughly investigated Athens and much of Attica, the twins undertook an extensive tour of the Peloponnese.

Although they were formidable networkers who seemed never to go anywhere without letters of introduction to people such as Dr Schliemann and assorted abbots, in Athens the twins could find no woman who had ever been to the Peloponnese, which then had very few passable roads and a reputation for being a brigand-infested wilderness. But they organised their side saddles and portable beds from England, their Keating's powder defences against bed bugs, their flannel sleepwear, a bundle of New Testament tracts translated into modern Greek, and hired a courier named Angelos, who then engaged two servants to act as cook and waiter. Five horses and four mules catered for the party and its luggage, the latter animals being cared for by three muleteers dressed in what has become part of Greek national dress, the Albanian *fustanella*.

From the balcony of my house in the Peloponnese I can see a white rectangular shape set against a mountain some ten kilometres away: the Voulcano monastery. Here the twins spent the Easter of 1883, used their London-acquired modern Greek to engage in spasmodic theological arguments with the monks, and gazed out over most of Messenia, which, they noted, was studded with villages. It still is. The Voulcano was the southernmost point of their travels. They trailed their slow way back to Athens, calling in at Corfu during the voyage to England.

Some years later, desiring a distraction from Agnes's recent bereavement, and wanting to investigate rumours of a haphazard wealth of ancient manuscripts, the sisters travelled to St Catherine's Monastery, arriving in Cairo in January 1892. During the ten days' journey across the desert, safety was not an issue, for on meeting any Bedouin or would-be brigand Agnes brandished a portrait of the late and heavily bearded Samuel Savage Lewis to great effect.

The monks of St Catherine's were generally cavalier about the niceties of the table. So it was, according to legend, that they served the breakfast butter on torn pieces of parchment or vellum. And so it was, again very probably according to legend, that Agnes realised that her butter was being served on a fascinating palimpsest. (Agnes could read Syriac, Margaret Arabic.) The topmost layer narrated the lives of female saints and dated from 778AD, but among the blurred edges of the lower layer Agnes perceived the Syriac for *Evangelion. Mathi* and *Luca*. At her excited request the monks produced matching bits and pieces, which she and Margaret laboriously steamed apart; they then took at least 350 photographs of the text.

When Agnes and Margaret arrived back in Cambridge, experts confirmed that Agnes had discovered an ancient Syriac text of the four Gospels, dated not later than the fifth century. The language used is the literary form of Aramaic, and so contains the authentic accents of Christ and his disciples. Theological and ecclesiastical circles were enthralled; the text was to the 19th century what the Dead Sea Scrolls were to the 20th.

Professors Burkitt, Rendell Harris and Bensley and the twins then set about the task of transcription with such dedication that the work was published in 1894. Similar dedication went into the translation of the whole document, 358 pages in all; Agnes spent 17 years on this work, and the sisters made four more trips to St Catherine's, visiting the monastery for the last time in 1906, when they were 63. The twins' publications run to five-and-a-half pages of titles, but in 1917 Agnes's final word on her discovery was published: *Light on the Four Gospels from the Sinai Palimpsest*.

To the end of their lives the twins continued to work and to see themselves as pioneers for women, and as servants of God. During World War I they helped Belgian refugees and studied Russian. Punctilious worshippers at St Columba's Church, they followed the lessons in Hebrew and Greek. Every morning they read the Bible; the rest of the morning and the evening were devoted to their scholarly work, which included the writing of letters to academics who shared their interests, while the afternoon was given over to their many callers.

In widowhood Agnes and Margaret shared a double bed with individual territory marked out by a tape tied down the middle. Margaret, the second-born, who always considered herself a mere adjunct to her sister, died in 1920. 'How very inconsiderate of Maggie!' remarked Agnes, for they had decided, in the natural order of things, that Agnes should be the one to die first. Separation had always been unthinkable: even after a quarrel they would still go shopping together, with Agnes, always the dominant sister, walking six feet ahead of Margaret.

Agnes survived Margaret by six years, a lengthy period marked by silence, confusion and melancholy: the unique loneliness was very hard to bear. It came to an end in Agnes's 84th year.

Of the twins their friend Aelfrida Tillyard said, 'They were like each other and like no one else.' How right she was. ■

Gillian Bouras's new book, *No Time for Dances*, a memoir of her sister, is due out soon from Penguin Australia.

Kent Rosenthal

Tension and grief in the Caribbean

Deep anguish and frustration, not a desire for violence, is the plight of Haiti's impoverished people

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COMMON STEREOTYPES of Haiti make it easy and convenient for the media to portray it as a place of senseless violence, so it almost went without notice when a recent confrontation between UN stabilisation mission forces and residents of Ouanaminthe, near the northern border with the Dominican Republic, was depicted as 'violence as usual'.

But who's being violent to whom? On 10 January, 24 Haitians died of asphyxiation in the back of an enclosed van as they were being transported illegally from Haiti to the Dominican Republic, and another died later in hospital. They were victims of human traffickers, a network of military and civilians in both countries, with participants ranging from border checkpoint guards up to the high levels of government and industry hungry for cheap Haitian labour.

But the death of these 25 illegal Haitian immigrants was not the end to the tragedy. The dead needed to be brought home and buried, and authorities on both sides of the border bungled the effort. Authorities had allegedly been planning to cross the border with the bodies in the quiet of the night to bury them secretly. Maybe it would have been better that way than carting them in a truck emblazoned with a Dominican flag, escorted by UN tanks and jeeps, and then forcibly preventing the crowd of mourners from witnessing the burial. (photo 1)

First reports on the incident stated that 'protesters in Ouaniminthe refused to allow the bodies to be repatriated', giving the impression that the protests and violence started the moment the truck escorted by UN mission forces entered Haitian territory.

The reality is otherwise. As the photos show, and anyone at the event on 12 January can attest, residents formed a peaceful procession in front of and behind the truck to accompany it to the cemetery with the intention of witnessing the burial. (photo 2)

As I stood in front of the UN tank that was fending off anyone attempting to enter the cemetery, one frustrated and distraught man turned to me and asked, 'How do they know I don't have a son among the dead in that truck?' Authorities had identified only one of the deceased.

Another man pointed to the heavily armed UN soldiers to make sure I was aware what was happening and that the event was somehow recorded. 'Look what they (UN forces) are doing! They don't care about Haiti. Take a photo of this.' (photo 3)

In hindsight it seemed liked a dangerous situation where it was advisable not to be, but when I looked at the faces of the people in the crowd, it was not a desire to be violent that I saw, but a deep anguish and frustration.

As I moved closer to the truck to take a photo (photo 4), beyond the invisible barrier between the UN troops and the crowd, the tension and sense of grief and injustice became overwhelming and some residents started throwing stones. There was gunfire, but it still hasn't been determined whether it was UN forces or a civilian who initiated fire. I, along with other bystanders, including three members of the Haitian embassy, fled for cover in a small wood-and-tin house in front of the cemetery. (photo 5)

In the confusion that followed, one youth was killed. An investigation is under way to determine whether it was a UN soldier or a Haitian police officer who fired the fatal shot. Several civilians were injured and protests continued throughout the day. The UN Spanish contingent's military base was attacked, its windows smashed. Ouanaminthe's main streets were aflame with burning tyres.

The lighter-skinned Haitian embassy official and I waited it out in the house near the cemetery for fear we could be mistaken for Dominicans or Spanish (UN). Jesuit Refugee Service workers tried to collect us but protesters blocked

all access. During a lull in the protests we emerged to find that the UN had taken the bodies to a cemetery on the outskirts of the Dominican border town of Dajabón to be buried in a mass grave.

The Dominican Republic's irrational and unjust migration policy continues to provoke more and more tragedies such as this one. Sixty members of the military on border surveillance duty were arrested after the event, but they are merely scapegoats in a larger web of economic and political interest.

From 1989 to the present, 80 Haitian citizens have died and 98 have been wounded in six tragedies related to the illegal human trafficking.

The interests and benefits to be gained by the traffic of Haitian workers for the Dominican agro, industrial and construction companies are such that these people are brought in at any cost and in any condition.

The media also need to be blamed for their complicity in prolonging stereotypes and injustice in Haiti. As the biased media reaction to the attempted burial in the Ouanaminthe cemetery shows, uninformed journalists often cross the fine line between objective reporting and opinion to dabble in complete falsity and sensationalism. It's more convenient to make a quick call to a mobile phone from the comfort of an air-conditioned office and ask a photographer at the scene to email a graphic. Despite the advantages of new technology, this form of cyberjournalism is perpetuating stereotypes through its lack of contact with reality.

We talk about violence and terrorism when we are really referring to poverty caused by injustice, corruption and indifference. Look at the grief on the face of the man at the UN military barrier at the Ouanaminthe cemetery. He might remind you of someone you know. ■

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Kent Rosenthal SJ is currently working with Jesuit Refugee Service in Ouanaminthe, Haiti.

POSTSCRIPT: Three people died in election-day incidents on 7 February, and although voting results were not known at press time, former president René Préval, a one-time Aristide ally, was favoured to win.

Photos: Kent Rosenthal

Graham Ring

The law of the land

In land-ownership disputes in Australia, the deck remains stacked against holders of native title

It's August 1966 and Vincent Lingiari has had enough. The Gurindji stockmen working on Lord Vesty's Wave Hill cattle station to the north-west of Tennant Creek are getting paid a pittance. Lingiari leads his people in a walk-off and sets up camp on traditional land at nearby Wattie Creek. What begins as a 'pay and conditions' stoush quickly becomes a struggle for land rights. Eight years later, the fight has been won as Prime Minister Gough Whitlam arrives at Wave Hill to present Lingiari with a title deed. The 'handful of sand' photo, featuring these two great leaders, is to become an icon in the battle for indigenous land justice.

In the heady days of the early 1970s a new and exciting vision held sway. Amid the blossoming of Australian culture and identity there were calls for a better deal for Aboriginal Australia. But high school students still studied Blackstone's dictum, and learnt that land 'desert and uncultivated' could be claimed simply by occupancy, because no legal code or land tenure existed. Any moral qualms about the dispossession of the Aboriginal people had to be subjugated. Our whole system of property law depended on it. So 20 years slipped by and indigenous Australia languished. However, the notion that our first peoples were entitled to something more had taken root and would continue to grow.

In the early hours of 22 December 1993 the Senate erupted in applause. Technically senators are not supposed to clap. Protocol demands that they should instead strike the table in front of them with the flat of their hand and chant 'hear, hear' in a robust and affirming manner. But this was special. After more than a year of tortuous negotiation with indigenous leaders, pastoralists, miners, state governments and myriad other interested parties, the Native Title Act would become law. Don Watson describes the scenes of jubilation in the galleries as 'probably unprecedented in the parliament's history'. People wept. Lowitja O'Donoghue said the Act was 'the greatest proof yet of the probability of reconciliation'.

The preamble to the Act is almost poetic. It speaks in part of 'ensuring that Aboriginal people receive the full recognition and status within the Australian nation to which history, their prior rights and interests, and their rich and diverse culture, fully entitle them to aspire'.

The contribution Eddie Mabo made to this renewed momentum for land justice cannot be overstated. Edward 'Koiki' Mabo was born and raised on the island of Meriam Mer in the Torres Strait. Mabo tired of being paid £17 a month for working on the trochus luggers at a time when railway workers on the mainland were receiving £25 a fortnight. So he moved to Townsville and drove the eponymous native title claim that would overturn the doctrine of *terra nullius*. The High Court decision of June 1992 underscored the fundamental truth that this country was peopled by communities with complex systems of traditional law and custom thousands of years before the Europeans arrived. Tragically, Eddie Mabo died before the judgment was handed down.

Six months after the Mabo decision, Prime Minister Paul Keating flagged his intentions on a hot day in Sydney's Redfern Park: 'It was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion.' So it was that Keating and his Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Rob Tickner, were midwives at the difficult birth of the Native Title Act 1993, which gave legislative expression to the Mabo decision.

Eddie Mabo's mob on Meriam Mer were islanders who cultivated fruit trees, and designated borders between their properties. These habits were no doubt comfortingly familiar to the middle-class, middle-aged whitefellas on the High Court bench who decided that native title had survived.

By contrast, the Wik people of the Cape York Peninsula lived a traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle. They had hunted, fished, practised ceremony and visited their sacred sites since time immemorial. In whitefella terms, their land was desperately marginal, sustaining cattle at the miserable rate of one beast for every 25 hectares. The Queensland government had leased the land to pastoralists since the mid-1940s without causing anyone undue concern.

In 1996 the High Court Wik decision allowed the possibility that hunter-gather tribes on the Australian mainland could enjoy native title in co-existence with pastoral leases. All hell broke loose as pastoralists and state premiers were consumed by fear and loathing.

Wild talk abounded as malice and mischief became the currency of the debate. Western Australian Premier Charles Court suggested that Mabo-type claims might be made on suburban backyards. National Party leader Tim Fischer leapt into the fray with both feet. Speaking at a party conference in Wagga Wagga, NSW, he suggested that the Keating government's position on Mabo could lead to the 'breaking up of Australia'. He added that the dispossession of Aboriginal people had been inevitable and was not something to be ashamed of.

In this toxic climate, John Singleton created his 'Twister' advertisement for the National Farmers Federation. The little white kid and the little black kid played the party game until they become so entangled that they toppled over. Then the voice-over warned 'The Wik decision—it's not a game', in a tone heavy

with the certain knowledge of imminent and grave danger.

John Winston Howard is not a man given to visionary gestures of rapprochement with the first peoples of this country. In April 1997, the populist Prime Minister unveiled a Ten Point Plan to minimise the damage he feared Wik would cause. He also left open the possibility that the Racial Discrimination Act could be bent to protect property rights if that became necessary.

But amidst all the histrionics, one thing was never in doubt. If any inconsistency arose between the rights of native title holders and the rights of other licence holders, then the rights of the latter would always prevail. This principle is expressly stated in the legislation.

In December 1998, Mr Justice Olney in the Federal Court determined that the Yorta Yorta native title claim had been 'washed away by the tide of history'. The judge placed great significance on the accounts of squatter Edward Curr, which were written 40 years after events took place, preferring them to the oral evidence offered by contemporary Yorta Yorta people. A subsequent appeal to the High Court was unsuccessful, leaving the Yorta Yorta nation devastated.

In December 2005, Justice Ron Merkel of the Federal Court travelled to Horseshoe Bend in Victoria's Wimmera region to formalise the first determination that native title has survived in southern Australia. Most Wotjobaluk and Wergaia people will appreciate the formal recognition of traditional ownership afforded by the consent determination, and the three small but culturally significant properties transferred in freehold by the Victorian government. But in practical terms they've been given precious little. Ten years after the claim was first lodged, native title was determined to exist on a narrow strip of crown land either side of the Wimmera River. In making the agreement, the claimants forfeit forever the right to make any native title claim on the remaining 98 per cent of the initial claim area.

Even on the precious two per cent, the Wotjobaluk and Wergaia will not own the land, nor have any exclusive rights over it. However, the upside to this unspectacular agreement is that the wider Victorian community may well see that they have nothing to fear from native title. With the 'take your backyard away' bogeyman thus vanquished, the preconditions are created for the speedy and generous resolution of future claims.

Uncle Jack Kennedy, a senior Wotjobaluk elder, deposited an affidavit with the court. He said, 'I'm looking forward to getting some of my country back before I die so I can die knowing I have done what the elders expected of me. If the Wotjobaluk continue to follow (the creator spirit) Bunjil, then things will go on as the old people would want.' In a tragic echo of Mabo, Kennedy died only months before the consent determination was finalised. His profound contribution was acknowledged by a chair left symbolically empty at the 'on country' court hearing.

In making his orders, Justice Merkel said that, in this case, the 'tide of history' had not washed away any real acknowledgment of traditional laws or any real observance of traditional customs by the applicants. He added that 'the present case is a living example of the principle now recognised in native title jurisprudence that traditional laws and customs are not fixed and unchanging. Rather, they evolve over time in response to new or changing social and economic exigencies ...'

Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and Gurindji elder Vincent Lingiari at the historic Wattie Creek hand back of the Gurindji's traditional lands in 1975. Photo courtesy the National Archives of Australia.

It would seem that in matters native title, the only certainty is continuing uncertainty.

Justice Callinan observed in the High Court's 2002 Mirriuwung-Gajerrong decision that native title is so 'complicated, shifting and abstruse that it continues to require the intervention of this court to resolve even the most basic issues'. In the same judgment, Justice McHugh said that 'the deck is stacked against native title holders, whose fragile rights must give way to the superior rights of the landholder whenever the two classes of rights conflict'.

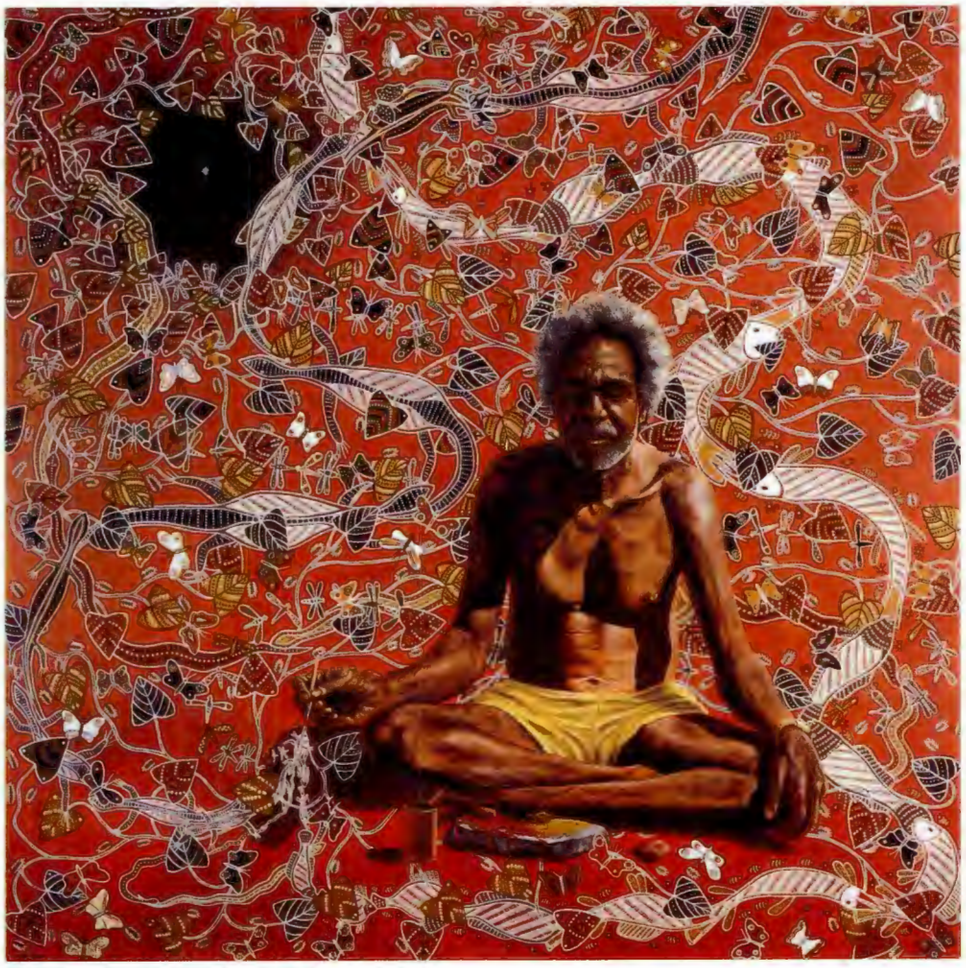
Meanwhile the battle for land justice continues.

Graham Ring is a Melbourne-based writer who specialises in issues of indigenous justice.

Donna Leslie

Coming home to the land

Artist Lin Onus had a way of stimulating empathy by giving people something to connect with—not merely on an intellectual level but at the level of the heart



Portrait of Jack Wunuwun, 1988

A DECADE HAS PASSED since the tragic, premature death of artist Lin Onus (1948-1996). Time has revealed the depth and breadth of his work, which was so inspired by the power of the land and of Aboriginal tradition, together with an acute awareness of the need to bridge the cultural gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Indeed, a retrospective of Onus's work presented by the Queensland Art Gallery in 2000–2001, and a display at Melbourne Museum, *In Honour of Lin Onus*, (1 June 2002–1 June 2007), gives recognition to his wonderful artistic legacy. Onus was an artist who had that special ability to touch the lives of many Australians and to do so in creative and unexpected ways. The very fact that he was an Aboriginal artist makes his life and work all the more interesting.

A study of the art of Lin Onus reveals an interesting certainty: he often takes us on a journey into the histories and cultures of Aboriginal Australians, using themes and recollections that provide an opportunity for gaining a deepening insight into outcomes of colonisation processes and contemporary realities. It also, importantly, takes us on a journey into the *land* as a powerful place of healing and restoration.

Onus returned to the theme of Barmah (his father's country) in the final period of his life, and this homecoming seems to tell us that he was looking at the land as a place where he could symbolically take refuge, a site where he could find spiritual sustenance and meaning. In the large painting on linen, *Barmah Forest*, 1994 (now in the collection of the Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra), Onus introduces the viewer to the jigsaw pieces that were a recurring symbol in his art, speaking of his need to rediscover lost pieces of his Aboriginal heritage. He seems to ask the viewer to engage with the work in a way that demands effort. We see how he communicates a sense of the living energy and the lifeblood of the land, yet it is also a land where something is missing. If you look closely, you'll see that Onus has painted jigsaw pieces that don't quite fit. In an unpublished chronology of Lin Onus's life (1998/99), Onus's widow Jo and his son Tiriki explain that changes to the land in the form of 'farms, tourists, carp, and cows' gave Onus a sense of the impossibility of attempting to 'retrieve all the riches that were once present' in his father's country, prior to colonisation. The jigsaw pieces that do not match seem to be a reminder of the impossibility of returning to a land *unchanged* by colonisation processes. Although Onus imparts a strong message of cultural loss and Aboriginal dispossession, he also, however, conveys a message of the eternity of land and of the ongoing

cultural relationship that exists between Aboriginal peoples and the Earth. The land is related to as a country not only where we may all return, but a place of cultural richness, depth and comfort.

In early works of his father's country, however, Onus conveyed his sadness over the way the land had been divided. He invited the viewer to take part in an empathic appreciation of Aboriginal connection with land, and in the shifting emotions relating to its inaccessibility. The theme of land division becomes apparent in paintings such as *Twice upon a time*, 1992, where Onus depicted one single piece of barbed wire to symbolise the fencing-off of land and its inaccessibility, over the image of a landscape containing a campsite without animal or human life. It seems as if he was attempting to paint the colonial, enforced removal of Aboriginal peoples from their traditional country, contrasted by the framing of carved, ceremonial trees that are a poignant reminder of the prior occupation of Aboriginal peoples on the land and of an ancient heritage. In other paintings, such as the small gouache on illustration board, *Mutjing (Father's country)*, 1992-93 (now in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery), Onus made reference to the designs found on traditional tree carvings in South-Eastern Australia, by overlaying a hilly land with the deep regular grooves of the axe. Then he illuminated everything with a single bright star.

> *Onus wanted to remind people of the tradition beneath the surface ...*

ONUS WANTED to remind people of the tradition beneath the surface of everything. He had a way of stimulating empathy by giving people something to connect with—not merely on an intellectual level but, importantly, at the level of the heart. He wanted people to feel with him and to understand the Aboriginal experience and Aboriginal cultural life, through engagement with works that dealt at times with subjects consciously intended as a learning experience. Sometimes these subjects, such as the theme of dispossession, are challenging and difficult, but he wanted this sharing to be one where people could have the opportunity to relate truly to the message he was trying to convey. Jo and Tiriki Onus report that Onus came to believe that he could reach a far wider audience with art used as a political and social tool than with the alternative of 'talking to groups of people about the plight of his people'. He was convinced that art could transcend the limitations imposed by other media. Art promised also to reach a global audience.

It is interesting to note that while Onus's work might be understood for its political and social significance, it is equally important that it be understood for its spiritual value. Its spiritual strengths rest in its ability to communicate Aboriginal relationship to the land. While land may be understood as a place of healing, it may also be read as a site of reconciliation.

Although Onus explored a range of imagery relating to dispossession, he described himself primarily as a landscape artist until 1986, when his life's direction was influenced deeply by his encounter with the late Yulungu elder and artist from Garmedi outstation in Central Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, Jack Wunuwun, who adopted Onus as his own son. Wunuwun was able to offer Onus a kind of cultural sanctuary by welcoming him into the Yulungu kinship system. This relationship provided Onus with the opportunity to learn Aboriginal traditional knowledge, which enhanced his own Yorta Yorta experience of the world. Through Wunuwun, Onus was given creation stories that he was permitted to paint, and an Aboriginal language he could also access. It seemed to Onus that his experience of tradition was 'like a missing piece' of a puzzle had been found and had 'clicked into position' for him culturally. In her book *Aboriginal Voices* (1990), author Liz Thompson quotes Onus affirming his belief that 'traditional art will remain the foundation on which everything is built ...' Indeed, it is Onus's cultural reconnection with tradition that ultimately gave him the opportunity to find some of the missing pieces he was searching for. These pieces seem to hold the key towards healing some of the many losses that have been experienced by Aboriginal peoples in so many areas of Eastern Australia, where the tremendous onslaught of British invasion was first experienced from 1788 onwards.

In 1987 Onus was so inspired by his adopted father that he painted *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun*, 1988 (now in the Holmes à Court Collection, Heytesbury), seated before an ochre palette; it is a compassionate, beautiful tribute and expression of respect. The elder is depicted with a gentle, relaxed expression, surrounded by imagery belonging to his country. In the top left corner, the design is broken by a contrasting night sky, into which Onus has painted a single star, representing the Morning Star, because Wunuwun was custodian of the traditional story associated with it, and was famous for painting the *Morning Star* series. It was the elder's empathy with Onus's sense of cultural deprivation which led to a relationship that would from this time onward sustain him.

In Lin Onus's retrospective catalogue, *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus* (2000), curator Margo Neale reports that from 1986–1996, Onus made 16 'spiritual pilgrimages' to Garmedi. He began to title his works using the language of his adoptive family, and his work developed into a combination of images of land depicted both in Western style and Aboriginal symbol and story. In paintings such as *Arafura Swamp*, 1990, Onus depicts the interplay between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal visual languages. Here, photo-realistic images of water lilies are interspersed with rectangular fragments reminiscent of Onus's idiosyncratic jigsaw.

Onus's depiction of land has been interpreted by art historian Sylvia Kleinert as not only a 'means of retrieving and rewriting history', but also vitally important because he responded to the land as a 'cultural archive'. Indeed, it is the source and the centre from which we can spiritually regenerate. In Onus's works, the land may be read as a gateway into reconciliation. Land is a healing medium because it is a place that remains inside the heart. Although it mattered to Onus that detailed knowledge of his Yorta Yorta language and ceremony had been lost to him, his work expresses a seeking to come home and a desire to reunite with the land as an integrative place of personal, spiritual empowerment. ■

Donna Leslie is an indigenous Australian, belonging to the Kamileroi people of NSW, and a Research Fellow in the School of Art History, Cinema, Classics and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne.

behind bars:1

Sian Prior

Redemption in East Timor

With the encouragement of an Australian nun, inmates at Becora Prison are finding ways out of the darkness of their crimes into the light of new hope

We're sitting in the gardens of the Xanana Gusmao Reading Room in Dili, East Timor, and it's about 33 steaming degrees in the shade. Even Dili's ubiquitous crowing roosters sound weary of the heat. But Sister Michelle Reid is looking cool and relaxed in a pair of bright pink cotton pants. The colour of the pants exactly matches her shoulder bag, made by one of the convicted criminals she has been working with over the past four years in Dili's notorious Becora Prison.

I find myself wondering about the man who has carefully sewn together the pink purse for his Australian teacher. Was he a member of the pro-Indonesian militia mobs who tortured and massacred thousands of East Timorese after the 1999 vote for independence? Or is he a convicted rapist, in this country where violence against women constitutes about 40 per cent of all criminal offences?

It's quite possible that Michelle Reid doesn't know what crime this man has committed. Since the first day she began visiting the prison to run workshops for the inmates, she has been far more interested in redemption than in sin.

'I never made any inquiries about why they were there,' she tells me. 'I wanted to be able to meet the men as individuals, not to meet their crimes, so that a relationship could be established between us first. My idea was not to change them but to create a safe place within the prison where they could come and change themselves.'

I first met Michelle Reid by chance in a Dili café in June 2004, and it was some time into our conversation before she mentioned that she was a Catholic nun. At that first meeting, she had described to me how she sometimes had to trick the local taxi drivers into taking her to the jail, so fearsome was its reputation in the East Timorese capital.

When I interviewed her on my return visit in 2005, she laughed at the memory. 'Yes, I used to have to say, "Just a little bit further up this street, not far now." But I've never felt fearful for my own safety in the jail. People are amazed when they see a prisoner and a guard holding hands when they're talking, but that's quite normal. There are a lot of Timorese cultural attributes that are beneficial for a calm environment in the jail.'

Michelle Reid is a Good Samaritan Sister of the Order of St Benedict. She originally travelled from Sydney to East Timor in April 2000 to find out how her congregation might be able to help the newly independent but traumatised Timorese people. Michelle describes the destruction she found in Dili as 'overwhelming', but with the approval of her Australian-based order, she began conducting English classes in burnt-out buildings.

'Sometimes I had 80 people in a class, everything from 50-year-old Falintil resistance fighters who'd come down from the mountains to 15-year-old kids. English was the main language of the UN personnel, so the Timorese saw it as a road into future employment.'

In 2001, with the country still under UN control, the Director of Prisons invited Sister Michelle to organise classes for the convicted prisoners in Becora. She began teaching English and art, but soon realised that the men had practical skills they could share with each other. There was a tailor who volunteered to teach sewing, and a carpenter who showed his fellow inmates how to make furniture. With a grant from the British Embassy, they renovated one of the prison buildings, which became their workshop centre.

'The prisoners had a competition to name it, and they came up with From Darkness to Light, because it depicted their journey from the darkness of their crime into some form of new hope.'

Gradually a relationship of trust

Sister Michelle Reid, left, and the rebuilt Ava Maria church in Suai, below. Photos by Sian Prior

developed between the men and 'Madre Michelle', as they called her, and they began to volunteer their stories. Many had been involved in the major massacres of September 1999 in villages such as Los Palos in the east, and Suai in the south-west, where more than 100 people (including three Catholic priests) were murdered by pro-Indonesian militia in the Ava Maria church. One former militia member recounted how he had cut off a man's ear and forced him to eat it. He had hoped that this would humiliate the victim enough to satisfy his commander, and that the mutilated man would then be released.

'But then the militia commander said, "Now you must shoot him," and so he did. Many of them were under threat, or their families were, so they've committed a crime under duress. But I never heard any of them say, "I'm innocent." They accept their guilt, they know what they did, and why they're there.'

Another prisoner had been convicted of murdering his brother. The man had lost several brothers and sisters, three of his children and his father, as a result of the violence and repression in East Timor in the late 1990s. When his mother died and he became distraught with grief, the man's surviving brother told the local villagers that he was crazy and shouldn't be allowed into their mother's house. A fight ensued, and his brother was killed.

'He suffered serious depression in jail,' says Sr Michelle. 'His family weren't able to come and visit because of the cost and the distance involved. But eventually he was able to talk about what had happened, and he joined our art classes and found that he has a real talent. He is due for release in six months' time, and he wants to join the Arte Moris art school in Dili when he gets out.'

Sr Michelle's role in the prison grew to be much more than just a workshop facilitator. The men were worried about family members left behind in the villages, and whether they were suffering any retaliation as a result of their crimes.

'We took photos of the men to send home to their families, and we worked with the Red Cross in getting travel funding for families who hadn't been to visit the prison for two years. Our program enables the prisoners to earn some money from selling the things they make in the workshops, which they give to their families to pay for supplies or children's school fees.'

Not even a prison break out could shake Sr Michelle's faith in her protégés. In August 2002, while she was on a return visit to Australia, nearly 200 prisoners escaped from Becora Prison, including some of Michelle's workshop participants. Some of them marched on Parliament, demanding improvements in prison conditions, and most voluntarily returned to Becora. One returned escapee was most anxious about having to tell Madre Michelle that someone had taken his library book while he was gone. 'It's simple—if they don't return a book, they don't get another one. But it showed me how high his motivation was in wanting to read, and to belong to the group.'

When I interviewed Sr Michelle in July 2005, she was preparing to leave East Timor. After four years at Becora Prison, she was handing over the workshop program to be continued under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). She was candid about the challenges facing the Catholic Church in this nation where poverty and unemployment are endemic, fewer Timorese are entering the priesthood than in the past, and many other denominational groups are coming into the country and 'threatening their numbers game'.

With an average birth rate of eight children for every Timorese woman, and a small but growing AIDS problem, Sr Michelle says birth control is a 'big issue'. She compares the Catholic Church in East Timor to Australia in the 1950s, and believes that recent demands from the Timorese bishops for the government to make prostitution illegal were 'not positive for women in that industry, who are the victims'.

Michelle Reid was preparing to return to Australia with very mixed feelings. The prisoners have become her extended family, changing her life as much as she has helped them to change their own lives.

'I remember two years ago, one of our Sisters asked me when I was coming home, and I said, "Not until I've learnt the lessons I'm supposed to learn." The Timorese have completely changed my world view. We seem to spend our lives trying to be more efficient in order to save time in order to work more. The Timorese have a great gift of just sitting and being with each other, and they're not consumed with the pursuit of material things.'

As we say our farewells at the library gate, Sr Michelle slings her pink bag over her shoulder and offers one final thought: 'Working in the Becora Prison has changed how I operate with people, too. I'm more aware of not telling people how to do something, but rather trying to create an environment where something good happens. I probably thought I had too many answers, but now I've learnt to keep my mouth closed and see what emerges.' ■

Sister Michelle Reid returned to Australia in December 2005. **Sian Prior** is a Melbourne-based freelance journalist.

Simon Caterson

True fakes

We all know about the supposedly true books that turn out to be fakes, but perhaps even more remarkable is the way fiction can somehow become fact

In 1841, a crowd gathered at the New York docks anxious for news of a young girl in England who was terminally ill. 'Is little Nell dead?' the passengers who had just arrived from England were asked as they disembarked. The concern was real, but the child was not. She was a character in Charles Dickens's novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which at the time was being published serially in monthly instalments.

Few deaths in fiction have provoked such an outpouring of emotion among readers—understandable in an age when the infant mortality rate was much higher in the West than it is now—though subsequent critics of the novel poured scorn on what they viewed as cheap sentimentality.

Aldous Huxley cited Little Nell as a prime example of 'vulgarity in literature', with the death scene of the child being a crude appeal to bathos rather than furthering a serious artistic purpose. Oscar Wilde is said to have commented: 'One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing.'

Absurd or not, the effect achieved by Dickens is not unique nor entirely unknown in our time. We all know about the supposedly true books that turn out to be fakes—the Norma Khouri hoax last year is just the most recent example—but perhaps even more remarkable is the way fiction can somehow become fact.

The difference between true fakes and false ones was illustrated within the space of one week in January this year with the controversies surrounding J. T. LeRoy and James Frey. Frey is a real person accused of fabricating the details of his autobiography and would thus be considered a straightforward hoaxer, or true fake. On the other hand, LeRoy, supposedly a former street kid who wrote fiction heavily based on his personal experience with drugs and prostitution, is himself a fiction. The experience depicted in LeRoy's books may be real for some people but the figure of the author was invented by a middle-aged couple and impersonated in public by the sister of one of its creators.

The news that the film rights to Gregory Roberts's *Shantaram* have been snapped up by Hollywood star Johnny Depp after huge sales here and overseas is proof of the success of what could be called the reverse hoax. *Shantaram* is a novel, but it is no secret that the story is based very heavily on the colourful life of the author as a notorious criminal and fugitive, and indeed this is a vital part of its mass appeal.

As a highly successful home-grown true fake, *Shantaram* joins *The Bride Stripped Bare*, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, *Schindler's List* and, going back a bit, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Internationally, *The Da Vinci Code* has won countless converts to its version of history even though the book is clearly labelled a novel and carries the standard disclaimer as to imaginary characters and situations, etc. Despite all this, the argument over authenticity continues to swirl around *The Da Vinci Code*. On his web site, Dan Brown maintains that the book is a work of fiction, but also thinks the scholarly debate over the religious implications of the book is 'wonderful'.

Brown's alternative account of two millennia of ecclesiastical history is an object lesson in the power of fiction to capture readers' imaginations, and to that extent *The Da Vinci Code* follows a well-established pattern in the construction of the modern thriller. It is not just the conspiracy plot that is characteristic here, but the effort to make the story seem plausible, at least in the heat of the actual reading of the text.

It is not just thrillers, or for that matter science fiction, that can alter our perception of reality. The classic Australian example is *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, a historical novel that purports to recount the events leading up to the disappearance of a group of schoolgirls near Mount Macedon, Victoria, in 1900.

Picnic at Hanging Rock has sold millions of copies since publication in 1967. It is commonplace to assume that the story has some basis in fact, but it seems there is none. Writers who've combed the archives looking for traces of a real-life event have had no luck in finding one, yet tourists and literary pilgrims flock to the area convinced that the book speaks true. One literary detective, Yvonne Rousseau, claimed that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is an elaborate code, beginning with the revelation that the names of the four lost girls all began with anagrams of the same four letters.

Author Joan Lindsay encouraged speculation in her carefully worded 'disclaimer':

> Whether *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is fact or fiction, my readers must decide for themselves. As the fateful picnic took place in the year nineteen hundred, and all the characters who appear in the book are long since dead, it hardly seems important.

It seems that the author herself did want to believe in the story. In a recent ABC interview, actress Ann-Louise Lambert, who played Miranda in Peter Weir's film adaptation, recalled wandering through the bush near the set in full costume and suddenly encountering Joan Lindsay herself. 'And she came up to me and just threw her arms around me immediately. And she said directly into my ear, "Oh, Miranda. It's been so long." And she was very emotional. And it felt very ... like a very powerful, very true thing, you know, that she was feeling. She was remembering somebody or something that was true.'

Another Australian author who adeptly straddles the line between fact and fiction is Peter Carey. In *Jack Maggs* and *My Life as a Fake*, Carey breathes 'life' into fictional characters, while in

True History of the Kelly Gang he fictionalises the biography of a real person.

Ned Kelly's sexuality is a matter of conjecture, yet Carey invents a daughter to whom Kelly has written letters supposedly preserved by the State Library of Victoria, the actual depository for the Jerilderie Letter, armour and other important Kelly artefacts. Carey's Ned is a recognisably modern heterosexual family man, a sort of SNAG precursor, and not quite the psychological enigma that history has left us with.

Carey's Booker Prize for *True History* repeated the success of Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List*, a novel that similarly made no secret of its basis in fact, but was still accepted by the judging panel as having qualified for a prestigious and lucrative fiction prize.

Such was Keneally's success that one English critic was moved to lament that 'there will now never be a simple factual account of Oskar Schindler', a backhanded compliment to the novelist's ability to pick up a story and make it his own. Meanwhile, the story behind the story—Keneally's 1980 encounter with Holocaust survivor Leopold Pfefferberg in the latter's Beverley Hills luggage store—has a life of its own in publishing legend.

The entertainment industry as a whole makes constant siren-like appeals to our credulity. 'Based on a true story' is a common tag line in movies and the assertion of authenticity is considered a strong selling point. The publicity for the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* went a step further than most, stating without qualification that the movie was 'A true story'. No feature film by definition can be true in the same way that a documentary might claim to be, no matter how faithful the film-makers are to the events depicted. It cannot *be* the events and characters themselves, but rather a representation of them in cinematic form, with all the effects, music, acting and the other tricks of the trade.

A reverse hoax could easily be arranged. Merely making the author's identity a secret, for instance, can stimulate the reader's imagination. Nikki Gemmell's *The Bride Stripped Bare* is fiction, but the circumstances in which it came into existence fuelled speculation as to the quotient of truth in the story.

Gemmell herself claimed to want to remain anonymous in order to write more candidly about the secret sex life of a married woman, as she is. Her subsequent denial that the book is an autobiography begs the question as to why she sought anonymity in the first place. Certainly she was not reticent about discussing how shy she felt when writing the book.

By dissolving the usual distinction between fact and fiction, have authors and publishers discovered a powerful new marketing tool for their books, or is it a case of going back to the future, as so often happens in cultural history? Are we that much more sophisticated than the readers who wept over Little Nell?

Cynics might wonder whether the real fiction here is the book itself or the hype that surrounds it. What we read in a novel may be just a made-up story, but we should never underestimate the power that writers have to seduce us.

Once we consent to our disbelief being suspended, we may be no longer in complete control of our imaginations, much less our emotions. Perhaps this is especially true of the novel that claims not to deceive. ■

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Vintage 2005

The Best Australian Essays 2005, edited by Robert Dessaix. Black Inc, 2005. ISBN 1 863 95118 0, RRP $24.95
The Best Australian Poems 2005, edited by Les Murray. Black Inc, 2005. ISBN 1 863 95102 4, RRP $24.95
The Best Australian Stories 2005, edited by Frank Moorhouse. Black Inc, 2005. ISBN 1 863 95110 5, RRP $24.95

DUBBING SOMETHING the best is problematic—it's eye-catching but there are always naysayers and lobbyists for the left-out and, with a competing 'best' in *The Best Australian Poetry 2005*, published by UQP, it might be time to find a better collective title for these essentially valuable annual collections.

Frank Moorhouse, who has edited *The Best Australian Stories 2005*, comments pre-emptively that most readers would intelligently construe the term 'best' as an aspiration. No, I think not. It's a judgment, but squeamishness about that is Australian or unAustralian, depending on your point of view.

This is the second year that separate editors have handled each of the collections following the bitter split between former editor Peter Craven and publisher Morry Schwartz. Robert Dessaix has grouped the essays into four sections: 'I Remember When ...', 'Creative Acts', 'Meditations' and 'The Way We Live Now' and written a short introduction to each. Moorhouse has opted for a memorandum from the editor and Les Murray, in *The Best Australian Poems 2005*, for a preface, and both are a little defensive, getting in first this time around in the light of some criticism of their choices in the previous year's editions.

The essays tend to be ruminative and gentle, rather than polemic. Dessaix clearly prefers persuasion, and though in general I agree, the passion that leaps from the page in Robert Hughes's discussion of the sculpture of Richard Serra did leave me feeling wistful that I hadn't been swept off my feet more often.

Dessaix has allowed the definition of essay some latitude, including what might be regarded as reportage (Anna Krien's 'Trouble on the Night Shift', which first appeared in *The Monthly*, for example) and what might be called informed commentary (Robert Manne's energetic summation of the culpability of Murdoch newspapers in promoting the war on Iraq, perhaps, or Kate Jennings's cheerfully written but very depressing account of the US Republican Convention). The result is an eclectic mix of erudite discussion, acute observation and some moments of beauty.

There are 28 contributors and 24 of these essays have already appeared, or will appear, elsewhere, drawn from literary and cultural magazines, and newspapers; one was delivered as a seminar paper.

Some essays could have leapt sections—Robyn Davidson's about belonging and representation of the landscape could have worked as well in 'Creative Acts' and Martin Thomas's 'Looking for Mr Mathews', about the difficult search for the subject of his biography, would have done well there too, with its frustrated hope and spore-filled papers.

Kerryn Goldsworthy's essay on Graham Kennedy is fresh and invigorating; Janine Burke in 'Divine Bodies: Love, Lust and Longing in Freud's Collection' informs with lightly worn scholarship. Helen Garner, in her discussion of dancers, 'In the Wings', makes each graceful movement apparent, evinces the wonder and the sheer effort of weightlessness.

Creed O'Hanlon's 'Northing' is a compelling piece of writing about travel and roots and trying to make sense. Sometimes what is not written is what makes an essay more poignant, as in Brenda Walker's 'The Long Fall into Steel' in which she leads us to the contemplation of mortality and love.

Suzy Baldwin's unease with Australia, its landscape and its place in her consciousness is an interesting contrast to Mark Tredinnick's poetic placing of himself within his land as he contemplates the tragedy that unfolded with the tsunami on Boxing Day 2004.

The blurb on the back of *The Best Australian Poems 2005* says editor Les Murray is Australia's greatest poet. He says, in his preface, that he agrees with those who believe there is a boom in poetry-writing in Australia, 'perhaps even a small golden age emerging'.

About half the poetry chosen came in submissions, the other half from Murray's reading of poetry-publishing journals and from collections. There is one poem per poet, arranged alphabetically (by poet). Two poems are published posthumously—one by Bruce Beaver, who died in 2004, and the other by Mary Gilmore, whose poem came to light recently after being misfiled in 'someone else's manuscript box at the Mitchell Library'.

Murray says it seems true that most poets live in Victoria but he presents a good cross-section with nearly 120 poets writing about politics, domesticity, relationships, and culture.

Our recently realised fears of swimming with sea monsters surface in quite different ways in Peter Kocan's

'The Deep' and Judith Beveridge's 'The Shark'. There is lovely humour in Clive James's joyous celebration 'Anniversary Serenade'. Bruce Dawe's sickening 'The Blue Dress', John Foulcher's carefully observed 'The Woman Alone', Katherine Gallagher's poignant juxtaposition of lost love and terror in 'On the Road from Kathmandhu', Robert Gray's careful, formal placement of words in 'Among the Mountains of Guang-xi Province, in Southern China', Anthony Lawrence's searing 'Live Sheep Trade', Margaret Harvey's nostalgic, acute 'These Fibro Houses' and Peter Goldsworthy's generous, warm 'Dog Day' exhibit some of the diversity of this collection. Bronwyn Lea turns what could have been a narcissistic study into beauty with piercing image and mythology made concrete in her poem 'Bronwyn Lea'.

Murray includes his own 'The Mare on the Road', a quixotic moment of awful decision that well bears rereading.

I became a bit wearied, in the collected stories, by the banal nastiness of so many characters. Conflict was reduced so often to small meanness, trashy misjudgments and petty betrayals as men and women did damage to each other. Some stories shone above this, of course, illuminated by excellent writing, or a moment of transcendence.

Janette Turner Hospital's 'Blind Date' had me feeling every beat of young Lachlan's longing for his father; Gillian Mears writes with sensitivity and artful ambivalence so that her characters' faults or frailties are forgiven; and Patrick Cullen's three linked stories (he is the only writer to score more than one story, but the three, I think, are necessary) carefully eviscerate the unspoken things of relationships.

There were moments or vignettes in other stories that were interesting or lovely, but I can't say I felt transported, or even very grateful, to have read several.

Moorhouse has opted for the same alphabetical arrangement as in the poetry collection and this strikes me as too random for stories. One might as well sort them alphabetically by story or place them randomly if one doesn't care for the subtle rubbing up of one against another. ■

Jennifer Moran is a Brisbane-based writer of fact and fiction. She was formerly literary editor at *The Canberra Times* and books editor at *The West Australian*.

Peter Pierce

Drawing from the text

The Diaries of Donald Friend, Volume Three, ed Heth
National Library of Australia, 2005. ISBN 0 642 2760 RRP

With the publication of the sumptuously produced third volume of *The Diaries of Donald Friend*, the grandly conceived concept of the National Library of Australia is three-quarters of the way to completion. This is not just the portrait of the artist in his own words, but through his drawings as well. Together they are proof that Friend was not only one of the most eloquent and acrid of commentators on the social and artistic worlds in which he uneasily lived, but also among Australia's leading 20th-century artists.

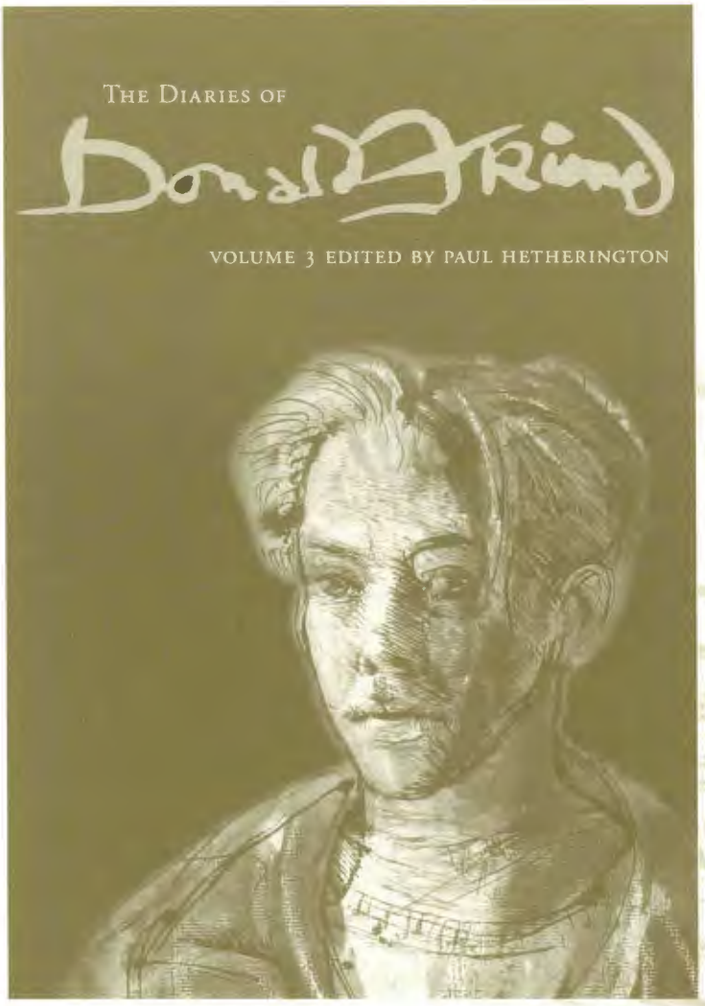
Astutely edited by Paul Hetherington, the diaries cover 17 years of Friend's life (1949-66) on three continents. There are two trips to Italy, a five-and-a-half-year sojourn in Ceylon, intermittent visits to the artists' retreat at Hill End that he did so much to popularise, and an attempt to settle in Paddington in the 1960s. In this period there were diverse friendships, for example, and to stay with alliteration awhile, with James Fairfax, Ian Fairweather and Peter Finch. As Friend moved from his mid-30s to beyond his 50th birthday, one aspect of his life remained lamentably constant. Hetherington comments that 'almost inevitably, it seemed, his love became too claustrophobic an experience for his lovers'. Friend's problem—which Hetherington might have identified as also the dramatic and emotional core of Shakespeare's sonnets, was that of 'the ageing man who is attracted to but cannot control, or finally possess, the youthful boy'.

Volume Three presents a succession of such boys. Some are anonymous, such as 'a strange dangerous tough little sailor from Aberdeen'. Others, such as Attilio (sketched 'Sulking'), he of the 'Neapolitan guttersnipe soul', would become long-term fixtures in Friend's life. The warnings of well-wishers were never heeded. One by one the youths treated Friend as the 'rich fool' that he despised in himself. Usually they began as his models. Drawings converted them into cash which Friend returned with interest. He was clear-eyed about his entrancement and entrapment, depicting himself as 'a middle-aged pederast who's going to seed', but unable to change. The last lover to whom we are introduced, the loathsome thief Stewart Holman, is memorably described by Friend as being like winning 'some appallingly demanding and infuriatingly inconvenient thing in a raffle, such as a desert, or an angry crocodile'.

While periodically he lacerates himself as the creature of 'long, unintelligent and unhappy obsession', so Friend is unsparing of others. Hetherington remarks that even the diaries' gossip is 'valuable as cultural history'. This understates their pungency and the ways in which they illuminate the foibles of so many notables, in particular their vain self-projections. Sometimes Friend generalises, describing men at a party as 'homosexual in the Melbourne manner, which is a mixture of raddled effeminacy and discretion'; deriding censorious English neighbours who object to 'coloured people arriving' at his flat as possessed of 'manners devoid of curiosity, minds devoid of judgment'. Another, who hates the idea of homosexuals near her property on the Isle of Capri, is 'Gracie Fields, that vaudeville monster from the Midlands'. Closer to home, Frank Clune is 'that gross monster', while Friend's mother is 'a useless old effigy who would be better dead'.

Friend combined a taste for rough trade with an intense snobbery. In Ceylon he fusses that 'I will have to buy a car ... I must also get a servant'. His family had been rich (although much was lost in a probate case) and he is clearly better off than most of those around him. Still he was obsessed with getting and spending: 'All I want is love, sex, money,' he disarmingly confides. The diaries provide fascinating information about the economy of the art world—prices paid, commissions taken, the relationship of the artist with critics, dealers, other painters. And Friend is sensible of the larger economy: how his shares are faring, what the Korean War will do to the market, how to juggle the payment of income tax in both Australia and Ceylon. For all that, he seems to acquire money cannily, only to give it away cavalierly—to lovers, family, friends and other unworthy causes. He earns like an artisan; disburses like an aristocrat.

Besides the material side of Friend's vocation, the diaries give insights into his aesthetics. A London show forces him to reappraise his distaste for Abstract Expressionism. Like all artists he has an eye on the competition. The 'rotund' Fred Williams finds favour, as does Fairweather, with whom he struck up an intermittent but admiring acquaintance. Bob Dickerson, on the other hand, is 'a weird, ex-pugilist dauber'; Albert Tucker 'that bombastic bearded fake of a painter'. Of the promoters of Albert Namatjira Friend angrily exclaims that 'it's a sad sight to see a simple mission black taught the trick of painting in a dreadful silly way, made famous, and then dragged around the city ... by a rabble of publicity hunters and politicians'. If Robert Hughes paints



'quite appallingly', Friend revelled in his company, respected his critical acumen and was delighted when Hughes wrote the monograph *Donald Friend*. Nolan's work he found uneven. Drysdale he valued highest, though not without reservations. Drysdale was his oldest friend among fellow painters, although the friendship is waning as this selection of the diaries comes to an end. By then, Tim Drysdale, 'that little swine', whom Friend minded in Ceylon, has committed suicide, as had Drysdale's first wife.

In his introduction to the *Diaries*, Hetherington notes how another strand in Friend's life had been seeking paradises—in the Torres Strait islands, in Nigeria, latterly in Ceylon. Each of these turned out to be 'an illusory, post-lapsarian Eden'. Perhaps in a remote region of his own country, rather than in his restless travelling and attempts to settle overseas, Friend came closest to contentment. This was Far North Queensland, where he had lived and travelled in the 1930s and 1940s and to which he happily returned from June to September 1954, for some of the time in company with another longtime painter friend, Margaret Olley. Staying with his Islander adoptive family, the Sailors, Friend rejoiced in 'the tales and scandals of the coloured world of Cairns'. In Port Douglas he decided that 'the exuberance of nature and the accidental effects of decay provide the picturesqueness' of the locals' environment. And he concedes, if hardly in the language of the tourist brochure, that 'there is a distinct fascination about the mildewed, damp, fungus-rotted appearance of the place and its people'.

Friend illustrated his diaries. Often we are surprised and delighted by a line drawing, or coloured depiction of people, and of built, sometimes jerry-built landscapes. No Australian artist has drawn with more brilliance than Friend; has achieved more substantial effects with what misleadingly appears to be languid attention. The drawings in the diaries are an integral part of them. They are never regular, or dutiful. They seem to emerge naturally from the text. Perhaps they are better regarded not so much as illustrations of what Friend had written, but as a re-viewing, reimagining of that material. Certainly they are an enhancement of writing that sparkles with malice, sours with self-contempt, honestly confronts the problems of the artist's craft. By putting Friend's diaries in the public domain, the National Library of Australia, and Paul Hetherington, have enriched the national culture towards which Friend was so ambivalent, in which he strove for fame, but felt himself forever on the margins. ■

Peter Pierce is Professor of Australian Literature at James Cook University, Cairns.

Jacqueline Healy

Like warriors of old

Papunya: A Place Made After the Story, Geoffrey Bardon and James Bardon. The Miegunyah Press, 2004. ISBN 0 522 85110 X, RRP $120

The Western Desert Movement had its beginnings in the use of rubbish materials on which to paint; the human agents, the painters were people rejected from a society in its esteem for its values and they were very much aware that the white authorities considered them rubbish too.—Geoffrey Bardon

Geoffrey Bardon's *Papunya: A Place Made After the Story* captures a pivotal moment in the history of Australian Aboriginal art: the beginnings of the Western Desert painting movement. This movement altered the course of Australian contemporary art and changed the way Australia and the rest of the world viewed Aboriginal art and culture. James Bardon in his eulogy for his brother Geoffrey in May 2003 described this book as 'a vast and benign planet approaching us even as I speak, so as to change the lives of all Australians forever'.

Geoffrey Bardon was a young and naïve schoolteacher who came to Papunya in 1971. Papunya was a government ration station in which indigenous people from Pintupi, Walpiri, Anmatjira Aranda and Loritja language groups had been coerced to live together. He was shocked by the despondency of the Aboriginal people and the hostility and vindictiveness of white authorities.

Bardon encouraged the children to create images based on their own culture rather than Western-style drawing, and earned the nickname Mr Patterns. His activities inspired the trust and interest of senior men, which led to a remarkable outpouring of their cultural knowledge through painting. These men were employed at Papunya to do menial tasks such as chopping wood and sweeping yards. Some had previously worked in the pastoral industry; others, such as the Pintupi, had made contact with white society only in 1960. Many of these men spoke no English. On masonite and building scraps they began to paint designs derived from ceremonial practices that revealed knowledge of their law and country.

Some 25 artists began working with Bardon, and this publication is a tribute to their achievements. Paul Carter in his introductory essay considers the publication of the documentation of these early paintings of the Papunya Tula movement as equivalent to recovering the frescoes painted by Giorgione and Titian that once graced the Grand Canal. There is no question of the cultural significance of these paintings. They were not art for art's sake, in a Western sense, but a resolute assertion of Aboriginality.

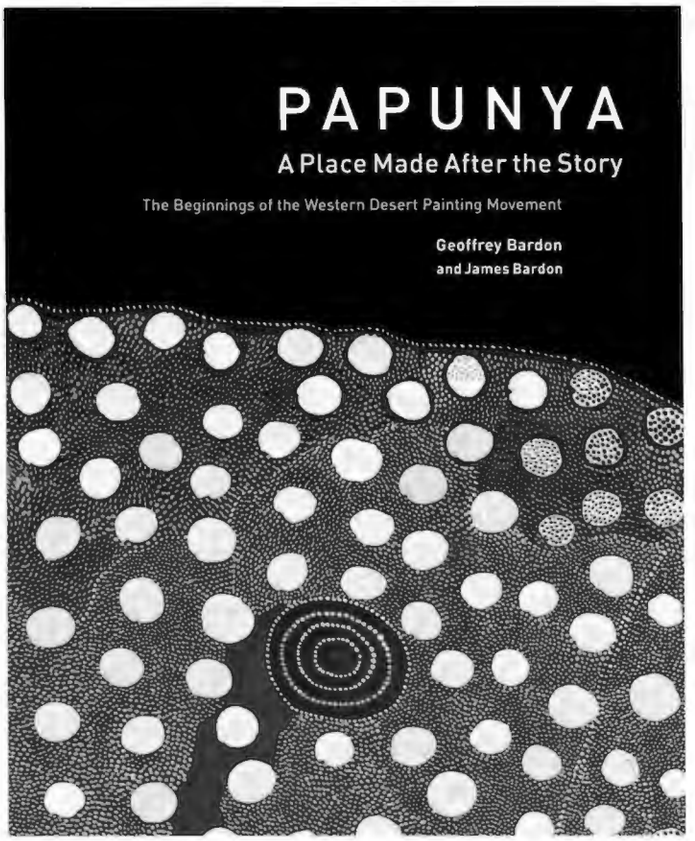
Geoffrey Bardon has two previous publications on his time at Papunya: *Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert* (1979) and *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert* (1991). His latest book is distinguished by its detailed documentation of these formative years of the art movement. It includes Bardon's field notes, annotations and analysis of the early works produced, and his commentary. It is an extraordinarily intimate account, full of the emotional energy and spiritual empathy of Bardon and the desperation and determination of these artists to express their culture.

The book shares Geoffrey Bardon's personal archives of images of more than 500 paintings, drawings and photographs. Many of these have not been published before. The book has numerous remarkable photographs of the artists, their families and the community. There are previously unseen photographs of the painting of the murals of the Honey Ant Dreaming on the wall of the school at Papunya that reveal groups of senior men working collaboratively. This was the first major public display by the senior men for the children in the school and a great affirmation of Aboriginal cultural identity. It was a turning point in the lives of these senior men and artists.

Bardon's personal reflections reveal that these early works were created in a harsh and desolate place. The Welfare Branch of the Federal Department of the Interior in the early 1970s considered that Aboriginal people and their culture were dying. The white administration showed little respect and often contempt for the people in the settlement. Bardon recalls senseless acts such as white people feeding kangaroo to their dogs when Aboriginal people were starving for *kuka* (meat). These memoirs are poignant reminders of assimilation policies.

During 18 months in the community Bardon formed a special relationship with the artists. He provided them with paints in traditional earth colours of red and yellow ochre. He systematically documented the production of the art works. This is particularly important because there was initially a lack of interest by public galleries and major collectors in the 1970s in these early works. Consequently the whereabouts of many of these works is unknown.

The recording of the stories of these



paintings by Bardon was a complicated process due to language barriers and restrictions on the content of the work. The artists had to resolve issues concerning the depiction of ceremonial objects and rituals. Bardon worked through an interpreter in many instances and recorded only the aspects of the stories that the artists were willing to share. For example, Bardon commented: 'The representation of the Wallaby and Kangaroo Dreamings are significant because of their treatment of "dangerous" material and the way the men deflected the gravity of the subject matter by joke telling and ribaldry.' Bardon's commentary provides insights into the debates surrounding the sharing of this cultural material.

Significantly Bardon grouped the paintings of the same dreaming together. There are images depicting Water, Fire, Spirit, Myth, Medicine, Ritual Dance, and My Country (Homeland Dreaming). The senior men also painted women's, children's and Bush Tucker stories. Under these categories each painting is accompanied by an explanation of its style and meaning. There is a colour image of most works as well as diagrams that indicate the meaning of the elemental forms of circle, dot and circle. In the section on the Water Dreaming there are eight versions of images of the water dreaming by Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra reproduced from Bardon's field notes. In all there are 115 illustrated versions of the Water Dreaming. The cataloguing of the paintings emphasises the cultural significance and the collective ownership of these stories.

Initially the art market was not a catalyst for painting. The first group of paintings was taken to Alice Springs in September 1971. An intriguing aspect of this account are the details of the formation of the company Papunya Tula which was established to support and sell the artists' work. Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri was spokesperson for the men and it was at the artists' request that an Aboriginal organisation separate from the white administration of Papunya was established. Geoffrey Bardon ensured their wishes were followed.

Papunya Tula in Pintupi means Honey Ant Meeting Place, the name given to the company formed to support and market the art from the community. This was to be the inspiration for the establishment of many Aboriginal art centres that exist today throughout remote area Australia.

For anyone interested in Australian Aboriginal art, *Papunya: A Place Made After the Story* is essential reading because it brings to life the period when this art movement was born. But the book has wider application because it shares with us the resilience of Aboriginal culture. The sobering part of Geoffrey Bardon's account is that this culture flowering occurred despite government policy. It took the courage of a young art teacher and the tenacity of senior men to empower a community that had lost hope. In the words of Bardon: 'The rising of the painters' spirits in 1972 was to make the painters new men, like warriors of old, and in many ways they were quite fearless about the stories they painted in the great painting room.' This is the legacy of Papunya Tula. ■

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Philip Harvey

Riding out the Romantic Storm

Dance of the Nomad: A Study of the Selected Notebooks of A. D. Hope, A[illegible] Mc[illegible] [illegible]in[illegible] 200[illegible] 74[illegible] R[illegible]

THIS FIRST GLIMPSE into the private writings of one of Australia's great poets reveals a man by turns arrogant and self-questioning, gnostic and dogmatic, original and predictable, voracious and selective. The Notebooks are arranged successfully by subject, emphasising the rush of his passions and the bite of his prejudices.

One life role that A. D. Hope played was that of Augustan gentleman. Whether pose or position, this role as guardian of the classic values 'in these last years of the Romantic Storm' tests his readers. It was a pose in so far as he used it to belittle worthy opponents with smart-arse comments and to keep himself above the fray. But it was a position in that it defined his poetics, special philosophy and world view, with consequences sometimes spectacular, sometimes painful.

That an 18th-century man can live in the 20th century is a superfluous question. Hope enjoys making fun of modern educational models and 'objective tests' for ability in English. He quotes the remark, 'We were given a simple exam which consisted of crossing out stupid answers in order to leave the least stupid one.' Hope saw these now familiar forms of inane examination at first hand when they were being devised at Princeton in 1958, and comments:

> The deviser ... has to exclude from his mind all other possible ways of looking at the problem than the one he chooses. He has to eliminate imagination, and suppress his more subtle habits of manipulating and recognising the innate ambiguity of language. He has to ignore the difference that "context" makes to a question or a statement and to do this is forced to choose only run-of-the-mill contexts implying his own culture and epoch. In other words, he has to impose dullness on himself in order to frame his tests. (Book XIX, 1977)

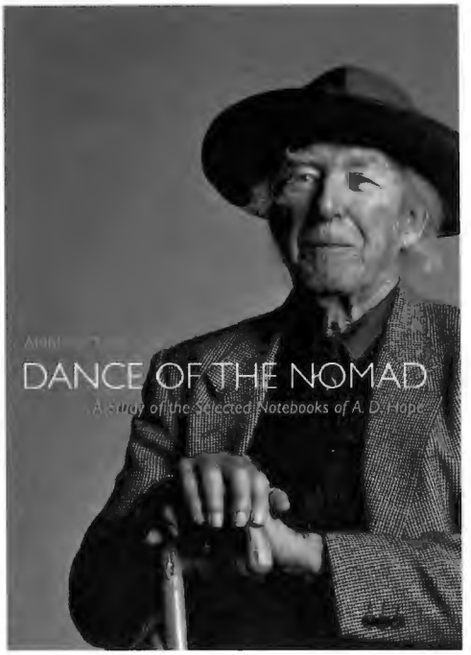
Here Hope displays the very 18th-century value of the primacy of intelligence and imagination as the solution to problems. The enemies are just precisely stupidity and dullness. But Hope is more 20th century in his scepticism, even rejection of, *systems*. He is by turns naughty and gracious about religion, that lost cause of the Enlightenment, while science, the darling that could do no wrong, is a system that he mocks at every turn. Indeed, 'context' and courage to stand by your own ideas animate Hope's writing. Like Blake, Hope would never be bound to another's system. True pleasure abounds where Hope expostulates on what he is not. He is not, for example, a Freudian, and has a unique theory for the interpretation of dreams involving a bunch of 'back-room boys' he calls 'the dream team' who forever upset the apple cart of his mind and send things rolling in all directions.

Negative capability is a term used prolifically to mean something other than what Keats meant, and Hope ingeniously applies it as a test for any area of inquiry. In commenting on lines of Yeats ('I'm looking for the face I had / Before the world was made') he says, 'It is much the same for a poet as for the woman or the actor ... a means of looking into a mirror to find something other than oneself, which is to become oneself for the time of creation.' (Book IX, 1966)

In 1969 he can write, 'A great deal of the time of my generation has gone into endless discussion of the "true nature" of poetry, the superiority of one technique to another ... the obsession with "originality" and novelty to a point where it seemed obvious to many that a new method was necessarily a better method.' Then concludes, 'A degree of negative capability in the writer which allows him to enter into all theories and all techniques, to test and taste with no irritable concern with right or wrong, with mine or thine, might be what is badly needed.'

Of poetry there is much 'endless discussion'. To read Hope is to re-enter Australian English departments of half a century ago, where arguments raged about genius versus talent, and Leavisites had a picnic serving storms in teacups. This was a world antithetical to poets, though Hope makes a strong brew himself. His stance illustrates the rifts in Australian poetry that began mid-century. He opposes all free verse, or 'elaborate verbalisations'. His own astounding command of the classic forms, in particular the couplet, comes from a lifetime devoted to the improvement of his abilities. Every poem is a literary object of good length and virtuosity, according to Hope, dependent for meaning on the heartfelt groundwork of each poem. Other poets are engaged in 'a sort of talking to oneself', or else are 'the eccentrics, the cranks, the beatniks, the pure expression boys ... who have given up and let themselves run loose, but always with a public in view—a kind of exhibitionism: come and watch my pure ego perform!' (Book XII, 1971)

Modern poetry is ephemeral and occasional. There are ways of responding to Hope's line. Defence of formal prosody produced Hope's works: a gift to the reader. Meanwhile, if this defence had remained the stifling dominant paradigm in Australian poetry and editorial we would not have the peacock flourishing of styles, attitudes, and voices that now enjoy such sway. In 1968 he groans, 'I have more and more often the feeling that I am practising an obsolete art like flint-knapping or water divining. Still it is the only thing I can do and all I really want to do.' The private lament of many of the 'pure expression boys' too, no doubt.



To what extent Hope was at variance with his age is still hard to say; some are happy to accept that he was actually typical of his age. One thing is certain, as Vincent Buckley once put it, 'Other poets ... expressed admiration of his power; his forms intrigued them ... they created an utterance, they enforced their central concerns with lateral perceptions.' The Notebook poems are terrific examples of this, and one of the book's true pleasures. Take his revealing five-page attack on 'my enemy Eliot', which reminds us that anger and contempt are better sources for the satirist than magnanimity and admiration.

On the bare cornice of Hell's seventh crater
We met a shade who said his name was Tom,
After that saint men call the Dubitator.

And so Dante and his guide Virgil question the forlorn figure of Hope's imagination, finally reacting to one of Eliot's hard sayings:

The poetry does not matter! The thing was said,
I thought my master caught his breath in token
Of anger or impatience, but instead

He gazed at our poor shade when he had spoken
In wonder and in pity; then began:
'Was this then verse I heard, so lame, so broken

'That none could tell its measure or make it scan?
Words obey him alone who leads them dancing,
Not him who works to your drill-sergeant plan.'

'You cannot hope to call forth their entrancing
Hid music, nor breathe life into their clay
Until the word of metre sets them glancing,

'Gleaming with light on their celestial way.
Your melancholy half-prose was a venture
Doomed from the start: What more is there to say?'

Ann McCulloch's editorialising is not intrusive. She champions Hope and lets him do the talking, though ironically her critical remarks employ the very language of theory (post-colonial, feminist, queer) that her subject would have blasted in a satire of perfect pentameters. Also, a final proofread would've helped. Hope finds himself a last defender of 'ivilizations' and talks physics with 'Sir John Ecclesix'. Amongst the poets, Dante writes in 'terja rima' and Eliot is spelt 'Eliott', which is not any Elliott that Eliot would have recognised. ■

Philip Harvey is the poetry editor of *Eureka Street*.

Michele Gierck

On down the line

The Line: A Man's Experience of the Burma Railway; A Son's Quest to Understand, Arch and Martin Flanagan.
One Day Hill, 2005. ISBN 0 975 77081 0, RRP $22.95

Arch Flanagan, a retired school teacher living in Tasmania, was in his 70s before he began to write about his World War II experiences on the Thai-Burma Railway. His story is published in *The Line*, a collaborative project with his son, writer and journalist Martin Flanagan.

Arch believes in writing succinctly, allowing the spaces, the things he does not say, to illuminate that which he commits to the page. His voice is unmistakably old Australian, marked by two world wars and a strong sense of humanity.

The Line is made up of four pieces Arch wrote. Throughout the book Martin provides commentary, offering insights into who his father was before and after the war, and reflections on his own visit to the Thai-Burma railway with Weary Dunlop—who Martin never heard of until 1985—and a group of old diggers. That tour brought the line vividly to life for Martin. It was a son's attempt to understand the defining experience of his father's life.

We also get a sense of what it was like growing up in a family where his father's war experiences, although never explicitly talked about, permeated the household and the lives of each of his six children.

In the introduction, Jo Flanagan, one of Arch's daughters, writes: 'My brother is right. We are children of the line.' She recalls other 'children of the line' she's met whose fathers were prisoners-of-war but died either during the war or in the decade after. Jo writes:

> I've sat in my parents' kitchen on the occasions when they (children of the line) have visited, listening to Dad tell them whatever he could recall of their father—a song sung at campsite, a joke, a glimpse of the face—words to try to fill their lifetime of longing. And even those of us who grew up with our fathers will probably spend our lives trying to understand the nature of this experience.

The story begins in Cleveland, Tasmania, at the start of World War I, when Arch Flanagan was born.

'If the onset of war heralded my birth, its aftermath marked my first remembered years,' writes Arch. It would also mark his adult life. He's not keen to talk too much about himself before the war, but Martin's commentary fills in the gaps.

The second chapter is Arch's account of his war years. We travel with the young soldier—one who for several days after enlistment wonders if he's done the right thing—from the Suez Canal, Palestine and Beirut, to Java, the prison camps of the Thai-Burma Railway and the Japanese mines; through bouts of malaria and cholera, appalling living conditions, a mounting death toll and waves of inhuman treatment by Japanese prison guards.

When Arch says, in his unassuming voice, that something was tough, you sense it was so back-breaking, so soul-destroying, that many would not survive the experience.

Of Weary Dunlop he writes:

> Colonel Dunlop kept devotedly to his rounds. His leg bandaged for ulcers, his face etched with responsibility and sleeplessness, his cap as ever defiantly askew, he was our symbol of hope. 'If Weary goes, we're all done.'

While in a subsequent chapter Arch writes a 'Tribute to Weary', his description of the war years pays as much attention to unknown soldiers—like Mark Crisp and Ian Wynne who volunteered to assist in the cholera camps, or Les Grimwade who stopped to help anyone barely able to make the journey back from the day working on the line—as it does to Dunlop.

In the book, Arch's war years are followed by Martin's reflections. Standing on the Hintok cutting, the son realises he still cannot imagine what it was like for his father in these prisoner-of-war camps. And that makes it even more important for Martin, when writing about that trip and the characters he encounters there, to get the shades and shadows just right. He sets about searching for fundamental truth. It is an onerous undertaking, one that permeates his writing in *The Line*.

Over time, Martin gets to know three key characters from the line: Weary Dunlop, Blue Butterworth (Dunlop's close mate) and Tom Uren. Uren becomes like a second father to him. The last part of the *The Line* includes stories of these three men, and how Arch influenced his son's life and his writing.

We find too that other children of the line did not hear their fathers speak of the war years, not until they were in their 70s, if at all. Such was the case with Harry Stevens.

Stevens believed that if you weren't there on the line during the war, you could never really understand. And perhaps that's why his daughter only found out her father had been a prisoner-of-war when Stevens was in his senior years. Even then, she had to ask.

The Line is not just about the prisoner-of-war camps. It is also about how we carry our stories, as individuals and as a culture; the shades, the colour and the integrity with which we hand them down through generations; what is spoken and what resonates in the silence.

This is what makes it such a unique book that will appeal across genders and generations. The authors have already received a stream of correspondence from readers whose parents were on the line. ■

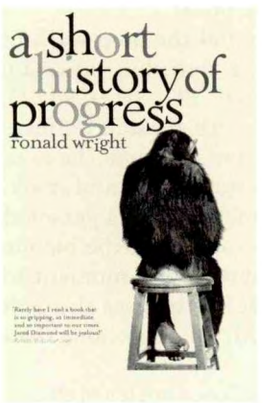
Michele M. Gierck is a freelance writer and author of *700 Days in El Salvador*, to be published by Coretext in May.

Denis Tracey

A disaster waiting to happen

A Short History of Progress, Ronald Wright. Text, 2005, ISBN 1 920 88 579 X, RRP $24

For at least 40 years experts have warned that if we don't urgently change our ways the Earth will be irreparably ruined.



Other experts have replied that global temperature and sea levels have been fluctuating for millions of years and that we can depend on human ingenuity and continued economic progress to save us.

The Economist recently described this nicely: 'Some environmentalists ... are so convinced of the righteousness of their cause that they will cry "wolf" at any event that might plausibly be thought to support their view of the world.' This, *The Economist* continued, makes it hard for responsible scientists to know when they should begin shouting.

It's a lot harder for non-scientists. A couple of centuries ago most reasonably educated people could understand science. The whiskery members of the Royal Society to whom Charles Darwin presented his ideas knew more about the classics than biology, but they were perfectly able to understand the theory of evolution.

However, over the next hundred or so years, science grew more complicated, and by the time Einstein was making his big announcements, the classicists had been left far behind. While I was writing this review I asked several people, all well educated (though not in science) and intellectually curious, to explain the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics and quarks. Few could do so. People like me don't understand scientists' language. How can we hope to understand their theories?

Indeed, it seems to me that our opinions are probably informed mainly by our political and ethical predispositions.

Ronald Wright's *A Short History of Progress* is yet another warning. In just 122 pages (plus extensive notes) it covers much the same ground that others (notably Jared Diamond) have explored. But it does so in such an engaging and uncomplicated way that the lay reader has little difficulty keeping up.

Wright's message is simple enough. Time and again civilisations have accomplished their decline and destruction by squandering their natural resources. Sometimes they acted thoughtlessly, but in some instances it is hard not to conclude that the folly was wilful.

Easter Island is a desolate landscape, but once it was fertile and well-wooded. It supported a large population (10,000 people in just 166 square km) with a rich social structure. At some point the islanders developed an obsession with Malcolm Fraser statues. Disaster followed. Trees were chopped down to make rollers to transport the statues and rats ate the seeds and saplings. Eventually there were no trees left and, in consequence, no canoes, no houses and no fires. When the first Europeans arrived in 1722 the Easter Islanders were thought to be the most miserable people in the Pacific.

Their downfall was entirely their own work. No one knows why they did it:

> The people who felled the last tree could *see* that it was the last, could know with complete certainty that there would never be another. And they felled it anyway.

Bill Bryson, whose *A Short History of Nearly Everything* covers similar territory to this book, tells a similarly poignant story of the poor dopey dodos of Madagascar:

> Indeed, dodos were so spectacularly short on insight, it is reported, that if you wished to find all the dodos in a vicinity you had only to catch one and set it to squawking, and all the others would waddle along to see what was up.

The rise of human civilisation over the last 10,000 years has coincided with an unusually temperate period in the earth's climate. Wright quotes Richard Alley:

> (H)umans have built a civilisation adapted to the climate we have. Increasingly humanity is using everything this climate provides ... (and) the climate of the last few thousand years is about as good as it gets.

Climate change, he concludes, is clearly not in our interest and yet there is plenty of evidence that that is what is now happening. In January 2006 the Bureau of Meteorology reported that 2005 was easily Australia's hottest year since records were kept. Meanwhile the world's population is increasing by about 10 million a year. Those who assure us that we have nothing to worry about have an increasingly difficult task.

I reckon we ought to be alarmed. Nature will be as indifferent to our extinction as it was to the dodo's. Even a partial cull of *Homo sapiens* would probably be good for the planet and in the long run would have little effect on our global civilisation.

During my adult life we have been visited by a number of phenomena that might have achieved such an outcome: the atomic cold war; the Ebola virus; rogue asteroids; the Y2K scare; SARS; bird flu and, of course, HIV-AIDS. So far none of these has lived up to its potential, but I don't think we can attribute this to human ingenuity. Sooner or later, one of them will deliver. ■

Denis Tracey teaches philanthropy and social investment at Swinburne University. He would prefer that the world didn't end until Melbourne wins another AFL Premiership.

Brian Doyle

Going to jail

YOU ENTER THROUGH a door in the back where a big sign says ALL PRISONERS MUST BE SHACKLED. Prisoners who have never been to the jail generally go to the front door and press the bell and are told by the crackling intercom to go around the back, which they do. To get to the back door you walk through the car park, where there are cop cars and tow trucks. At the back door you wait with the other prisoners.

New prisoners are admitted at seven in the evening.

There are seven men waiting by the door tonight. Five are white and two are brown. The youngest might be 20 years old and the oldest might be 60. Four men have plastic grocery bags with their personal effects and one man has a brown paper bag with his personal effects and another man cradles his personal effects in his arms and the youngest man has no personal effects that I can see.

One man waits by the door for a moment and then strolls over to a car across the street. There is a woman in the car, in the driver's seat, and he says something to her but she doesn't look at him or speak to him. The man opens the back door of the car and snaps his fingers and a dog jumps out and nuzzles his hand and the dog and the man walk off around the block, the man lighting a cigarette as he goes.

One of the men by the back door of the jail is standing with a woman and two small boys. The man and the woman and the boys all have short blonde hair. The woman is talking quietly to the man. The boys are maybe six and four years old and they are running around and knocking each other down and bickering and laughing and whining. The younger boy tries to spit on his brother but he misses. The woman says something terse and firm to the boys and for a half-second they settle down but soon they are crashing around again.

The blonde man watches them but he doesn't say anything.

The man with the personal effects cradled in his arms is surrounded by a knot of friends who are not going to jail this evening. The friends are all joking and laughing and the man going to jail banters a little too but then he falls silent.

After a while a police officer shows up with a roster of the prisoners who are to be admitted this evening. He reads off the names one by one and as he reads your name you line up by the door. When he has read the names of six of the men he prepares to open the door, but the seventh man, the man who looks like he might be 20, says to him, 'My name is Moreno.'

> *'... I walk up the street thinking of caged people and why we cage people ...'*

'I beg your pardon?' says the policeman.

'Moreno.'

'Sir, I don't have you on the admitting list.'

'I must be here seven o'clock.'

'Moreno?'

'Moreno. I have a letter.'

'May I see the letter?'

'I don't have the letter now. Moreno. Seven o'clock.'

The policeman talks to the intercom for a moment and then he turns back to the young man and says, 'Well, we don't have you on the admitting list for tonight, sir, but come on in and we will square this away, OK?'

'OK,' says Moreno.

'You have any personal effects, Mr. Moreno?'

'No sir.'

'OK then. Come on in.'

The door opens and the men walk in single file under the sign that says ALL PRISONERS MUST BE SHACKLED. Three of the men with personal effects in plastic bags go first, and then the man who had been walking the dog and smoking, and then the man with his personal effects in his arms, and then the blonde man, who kneels down for a moment to hug the two boys before he goes through the door. Last is Mr Moreno, and then the policeman.

The door closes with a sigh and a hiss.

As soon as the door clicks the blonde woman walks away fast and the boys run ahead of her, the older boy chasing the younger one. The friends who had been joking and laughing drift away slowly, and the woman in the car drives away fast, the dog peering at me from the back seat.

I walk up the street thinking of caged people and why we cage people and about the people who love the people who get caged every hour of every day in America, and then I walk past a slew of young oak trees all flittering and glowing in the late summer light, you know how in August the sunlight bends and everything seems lit up from the inside like you're in a movie?

Brian Doyle (bdoyle@up.edu) is the editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland, USA, and the author most recently of *The Wet Engine*, about 'the mangle & muddle & music of hearts'. His book *The Grail*, about a year in the life of an Oregon vineyard, will be published this year by One Day Hill Publishers in Victoria.

The Penelopiad, Margaret Atwood. Text Publishing, 2005. ISBN 1 920 88595 1, RRP $22

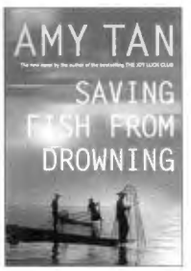
My brain often hurts just thinking *Margaret Atwood*: it's one of those distinctly heavy names, with words like *Booker*, *Feminist* and *Literature* dancing around behind it. No surprises, then, when Atwood—along with Achebe, Byatt, Winterson and Tartt, just to name a few—was asked to contribute to a new *Myths* series, in which Atwood rewrites Homer's *Odyssey* as her own *Penelopiad*.

What was surprising, however, was my initial disappointment: the first person prose from beyond the grave felt awkward and childish; and irritatingly, I could feel Atwood's presence behind every word. Could see her, pen poised, thinking, *How can I construct this as a feminist text?*

Having said that, this story is difficult to resist: it has drama, rage, jealousy; not to mention adultery, violence and a good old-fashioned giant Cyclops. A fantastic, melodramatic yarn; much like an episode of *Neighbours*, but with less Toadfish and more Trojans.

And how brilliant that a story, first told an unfathomable number of years ago, still finds its way onto our *Da Vinci Code*-infested shelves. Read it for Atwood's breathless feeling for the macabre, and her aggressive reweaving of myth, threading new colour and light through the old and faded.

—Brooke Davis



Saving Fish from Drowning, Amy Tan. HarperCollins, 2005. ISBN 0 007 21989 X, RRP $29.95

Narrated from beyond the grave by an eccentric San Franciscan socialite, *Saving Fish from Drowning* tells the story of 11 American tourists who disappear into the Burmese jungle. Bibi Chen was to lead the tour until she is found dead in her shop window in the novel's opening pages. Before they leave, the group toast Bibi and ask that she travel with them in spirit, not expecting her to do just that. As their spirit guide, Bibi is an omniscient witness to the events that follow, and to each character's individual thoughts and misunderstandings.

Amy Tan found inspiration for the story at the American Society for Psychical Research, where she learned of a medium who claims to have channelled Bibi's account of the doomed travellers. As a writer, Tan was unable to visit Burma—renamed Myanmar by the military junta in 1990—while researching the book, so she relied on second-hand sources to create a picture of the country. The title is borrowed from a story about a man who claimed that by taking fish out of the sea, he was saving them from drowning. It's a fable about the dangers of oversimplification and arrogance such as that of governments and outsiders who offer alternative suffering disguised as salvation to people like the Burmese. The novel is allegorical, vividly imagined, compassionate and engaging.

—Cassy Polimeni

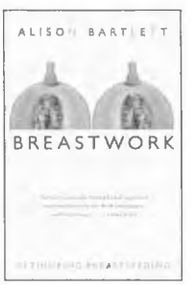
No Place Like Home, edited By Sonja Dechiam, Jenni Deveraus, Heather Millar and Eva Sallis. Wakefield Press, 2005. ISBN 1 862 54686 X, RRP $19.95

'I can't believe that just over a body of water is the difference between heaven and hell,' writes Irene Guo, aged 12, in 'Linda's Story'. Many of the short narratives in *No Place Like Home* are stories of escape from hellish situations, whether from regimes such as the Taliban in Afghanistan or communist China, or from war in Iraq or Sudan. With the current debate over Australia's decisions to detain asylum seekers, this powerful collection makes the reader proud to be Australian, but also brings home the fact that simply arriving in Australia is not the end of the hardship for many refugees.

Written with the simplicity and honesty of children and young adults, these are stories of hope and joy at the possibility of a better life in Australia, but also a reminder that Australia does not necessarily welcome all refugees with open arms, at times treating refugees little better than did the regimes they risked their lives to escape. Najeeba Wazefadost brings home just how inhumane our detention policy can be in 'Surrealistic Nightmare': 'We came to get freedom. We were locked in detention centres, treated like criminals for no reason. The detention centres are really punishment centres for non-existent crimes. They should be closed down.'

There are stories of racism and hatred, hope and love, war and its aftermath. It is essential reading for contemporary Australians regardless of how we came to be Australians.

—Merrin Hughes



Breastwork: Rethinking Breastfeeding, Alison Bartlett. University of New South Wales Press, 2005. ISBN 0 868 40969 3, RRP $39.95

Breastfeeding is presently caught between sentimental representations and clinical circumscriptions from scientific discourses, leaving scant room for the acknowledgement of actualities—particularly for women in contemporary society. Alison Bartlett creates a generous intellectual and relaxed space for critical and sensitive exploration into a diverse range of cultural themes drawn from postmodern and feminist perspectives—without the theoretical jargon.

Passé modernist perspectives on breastfeeding are shown to be holding us back from becoming a more civil society. Revealed at another level are lucid and illuminating connections with complex social issues such as race relations. Given that current representations of breastfeeding are fraught, Bartlett contends with the subject beautifully. Her overall assertion—that even hegemonic narratives such as medical science can never be conclusive in reality—is vitally convincing. *Breastwork* is a journey deep into our cultural and social landscape, a welcome and refreshing read for new mothers.

—Kate Chester

Lonesome cowboy blues

Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal, left, in *Brokeback Mountain*. Jake Gyllenhaal, right, in *Jarhead*, and Eric Bana, with Ami Weinberg and Geoffrey Rush, in *Munich*.

Brokeback Mountain, dir. Ang Lee. One of the first things that struck me while watching Ang Lee's latest film was a sense of being hemmed in, or trapped both visually and emotionally, that seemed far removed from the wide-open vistas one usually associates with a western. That is, until I realised that, for all its cowboys and mountain ranges and rodeos, the film is visually, thematically and narratively a full-blown melodrama, not a western. At its core, cinematic melodrama turns on the tension between desire and convention, between what we want, and what society says we should, or *must*, do. One of its hallmarks is often a sense of overwhelming claustrophobia, a reflection of the sense of being hemmed in, trapped, entombed in a life that has no space for paths other than the ones society decrees acceptable. Whether the issue at stake is class, race, or (in this case) sexuality, the tears melodrama evokes are tears of bitterness and grief at the ways in which the dead hand of 'normality' misshapes and distorts the life of the heart.

These are precisely the tears Lee is asking from you (and most probably will get) in return for his story of two cowboys (Ennis Del Mar, played by Heath Ledger, and Jack Twist, played by Jake Gyllenhaal—both excellent performances, in quite different ways) who fall deeply, physically, and inescapably in love while working together as young men on Brokeback Mountain, and then must struggle through marriages, children, and all the myriad requirements of a social normality, all the while desperately trying, and failing, to find a space for a relationship that has no place within *any* of that. One of the things that gives the film its richness, however, is that it does not set up a simplistic 'society bad, freedom good' dichotomy. As well as the prejudice, contempt and brutality that Ennis and Jack hide from, we also see the pain that the contradictions in their lives causes in the lives of those around them. This is especially true of Ennis's wife, played beautifully by Michelle Williams, and Jack's mother (Roberta Maxwell) who appears only at the very end of the film but offers a deeply moving portrayal of the torment caused by the combination of her love for Jack and the impossibility of saying out loud the truth she knows of who and what he is.

Ultimately, it is a film about silence, or rather being silenced, and the damage this silence does to all those who fail to hear or speak what both has to be, and can never be said. Ennis is so trapped by the impossibility of being who he is and not being who he is that his voice barely reaches past his lips; far from being stoic or laconic, his silence is a howl of pain that escapes only twice. It is a fine and beautiful film, often deeply moving, attentive to the unspoken tides that shape and misshape its characters' lives, both measured and affecting. It is not, however, in any sense radical, or a 'breakthrough' film, as some have suggested (mainly with reference to its portrayal of two men in love with each other). Indeed, probably the saddest thing about this sad movie is that such reactions suggest that the social constraints that cause its characters to suffer so have not changed all that much at all.

—Allan James Thomas

Just going through the motions

Jarhead, dir. Sam Mendes. *Jarhead* is the latest movie from director Sam Mendes (*American Beauty*, *Road to Perdition*), based on the acclaimed autobiographical book of the same name from former soldier Anthony Swofford. Those familiar with the lingo of the United States Marine Corps—many of us are, given the glut of American war films in your local video store—will recognise the term. The average trooper or grunt: the jarhead.

The heads of men in the Marines look like jars, thanks to their distinctive haircuts and the fact that the concept of jarhead (as explained in one of the many dry voice-overs) is analogous to the ideal of the common soldier—an empty vessel, to be trained in combat and aggression, conditioned through repetitive instruction

into repressing individual thought (this rarely seems to work) and submission to their superior officers.

Anthony 'Swoff' Swofford (played by Jake Gyllenhaal, *Brokeback Mountain, Donnie Darko*) is one such jarhead—a fresh recruit into the gung-ho world of the US Marine Corps. His tale is the story of the average soldier on the modern battlefield. He joins an elite squad of snipers and spotters whose main role is 'target acquisition'—to wit, the marking out of targets for jets to drop bombs on to.

Just before the first Gulf War, Swofford is stationed with his unit in Saudi Arabia, where camp life is hard and the personalities of his unit and the character of his staff sergeant (a convincing performance from Jamie Foxx) come into play. The boredom and frustration of waiting to be thrown into war is portrayed well, and the psychological deterioration of a group of people waiting to die or kill becomes apparent—though one is drawn to believe that what the jarheads really want is respect, purpose, identity, and a decent salary.

Sniper Swofford has a classic relationship with the Marines: he hates the bureaucracy, despises the food and conditions, but comes to lust for conflict and kills. Jake Gyllenhaal's performance is excellent—his relationship with his spotter Troy (Peter Sarsgaard) has some poignant moments.

When they finally get moving to Kuwait, to fight Iraq's 'hardcore' Republican Guard, the men are hungry for action. What they find is more tedium, with the monotony of marching and making camp occasionally disturbed by the sound of distant gunfire or gruesome scenes on the road. The story arc is punctuated by the surreal, dream-like experiences of Swofford, which also mark significant moments in his mental disintegration.

This is a war film where the soldiers never get to battle. They go through the motions, ducking for cover and sneaking up on enemies, but it's the bombs dropped from overhead that actually do the damage. The real conflict in *Jarhead* is the mêlée in the minds of each soldier, as they struggle to stay alive and balance their psychological stability. *Jarhead* is a film of much ambiguity, and offers some food for thought.

—Gil Maclean

Violence and retaliation

Munich, dir. Steven Spielberg. *Munich* is a serious and flawed epic, the latest release from director Steven Spielberg. Drawing on the considerable talents of Tony Kushner and Eric Roth (and the book *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team*, by George Jonas), *Munich* is about the Israeli retaliation for the brutal murders of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Summer Olympics by Black September, a Palestinian terrorist/paramilitary group.

Australian star Eric Bana (best known for his roles in *Troy, Black Hawk Down* and *Chopper*) plays Avner, assigned to lead a team of Mossad assassins, with the mission of eliminating the remaining members of Black September. His handler, Ephraim, is played in a convincing and amusing style by Geoffrey Rush, and there are some excellent moments between the two. Bana has done incredibly well with this difficult role—his character is patriotic and determined, and the gradual psychological deterioration of Avner feels genuine, to a point.

On one hand, *Munich* seems to be making a case for murder as an acceptable tool so long as it serves political expediency, and this point is written down on a piece of paper, tied to a brick, and thrown through the audience's front window. In contrast, however, the toll of living the covert, dangerous and lonely life of the assassin has Avner becoming increasingly paranoid and unable to function normally, and this aspect of the film borders on being just another overstated brick through the window—and just when you think the director might've known that the material was getting out of hand, it's overdone some more.

There is much that is good in *Munich*—the dialogue is of a high standard, as are the production values. Visually the film is almost flawless, and the tragedy of the Munich Massacre—for both sides of the conflict, and all who suffer from its violence—has now been given the big-budget Spielberg treatment, which could very well leave a *Munich* audience feeling that the movie needed a good script edit before being released.

—Gil Maclean

watching brief

Eight-legged freak-out

You can't really call yourself a genuine arachnophobe unless you have tried, when a spider ran across the dashboard, to jump out of a moving car that you were driving at the time.

This happened to my sister many years ago but she was not the spider-fearing driver in question. Is it better to be walked on by a spider or killed in a driverless car? Luckily Lucille survived to ask this question pointedly of her friend.

'She was quite unrepentant,' Lu said to me later. 'In fact I had to drive back the rest of the way, and she wouldn't even get back in the car until we'd gone over every nook and cranny with a torch. In the end I pretended to find it and stamp on it so she would get back in.'

Some years later I was driving kids home from kinder in peak-hour traffic in Punt Road, South Yarra.

'Aargh, Mummy! Waah!' howled my four-year-old.

I couldn't pull over in the traffic, and it was pouring rain. I shouted back to him, 'What's the matter, love?'

'BIG SPIDER!'

I shifted my eyes from the road just ahead. Two thick hairy legs were poking from behind the sun visor just above the steering wheel.

Funny how you don't just jump out of a moving car when there are three kids in it. Funny how your eyes kind of uncouple and work independently, one on the road, one on the big grey legs behind the sun visor, all the way home.

Pretending a nonchalance to calm the kids makes you feel quite proud of yourself, so when we got home and the kids bolted into the house I swaggered in after them and said to my beloved, 'Oh, darling, by the way, there's a huntsman the size of a chihuahua in the car. Could you get rid of it?'

'Sure. In a minute.'

He promptly forgot, as husbands will. An hour later I heard a thumping noise and some swearing from the direction of the front garden and went out to see. He had got blithely into the car to go to the shop and been greeted by our hitchhiker, which was now a rather big splodge on the nature strip.

(Sometimes a wife can refrain from saying 'I told you so' and sometimes she can't. We're only human, after all.)

This is all really by way of a warning in case you're thinking of watching episode three of David Attenborough's new series *Life in the Undergrowth*. (ABC, Sundays at 7.30pm)

It's entitled 'The Silk Spinners', and there's enough arachnoid action to raise goosebumps on anyone who hasn't been desensitised by searing encounters such as my family's. I loved it, but if you tend to go 'Eek!' at many-legged critters you might want to read a book instead.

What a legend Attenborough is. His exposition of the natural world is full of wonder and affection. He makes you feel as though you're really there with him, especially when he pokes gingerly at the triplines of a Malaysian trapdoor spider's lair. The result was satisfying: the spider pounced (virtually said 'Boo!') and Attenborough jumped, just as we all did, watching him do it. He teaches us to respect the invertebrates who, he gently reminds us, will surely inherit the Earth after we've made it uninhabitable for anyone but them. Invertebrates, to make a shocking pun, are the backbone of the Earth's ecosystems. We think of plagues of insects, but they are living in balance with nature, not us. Since we have learned to fight the balance that nature used to be able to force on us we have begun to overpopulate and plague the Earth ourselves.

Seeing Attenborough with horseshoe crabs in the moonlit eastern shores of the United States, talking easily about thousands of millions of years of evolution, there is an unspoken irony. There, in the birthplace of the oxymoronic term 'intelligent design', he celebrates both rationality and joy.

Extraordinary dramas and crimes passionels unfold as he shows us cannibal spider brides, or the female-fatale who visits the harvestman spider, seduces him and tries to eat one of the eggs he is guarding.

Other programs in the series look at dragonflies, mayflies, caterpillars, milli- and centipedes, gigantic fierce beetles and super-organised totalitarian ant or termite societies conducting wars and building cities.

The camera work is fantastic, all micro and detailed and full of wonder.

What else is worth watching? You may well, in March, wish to take out a cable subscription for the Commonwealth Games, but I prefer the Roy and H. G. version, if there is to be one. Sometimes the gymnastics or weightlifting are interesting, but saints preserve me from the mind-numbingness of hockey or volleyball. Why is it that tennis is interesting while basketball is boring? Some sports, like curling, hammer-throwing, pole-vaulting and diving are at least curious and diverting. I will accept no alternative views here. If you watch hockey, basketball, netball or volleyball it must be that you have a close relative on the team, and you're enduring it out of love.

'Arabella's got the ball again, Mum,' your child will say.

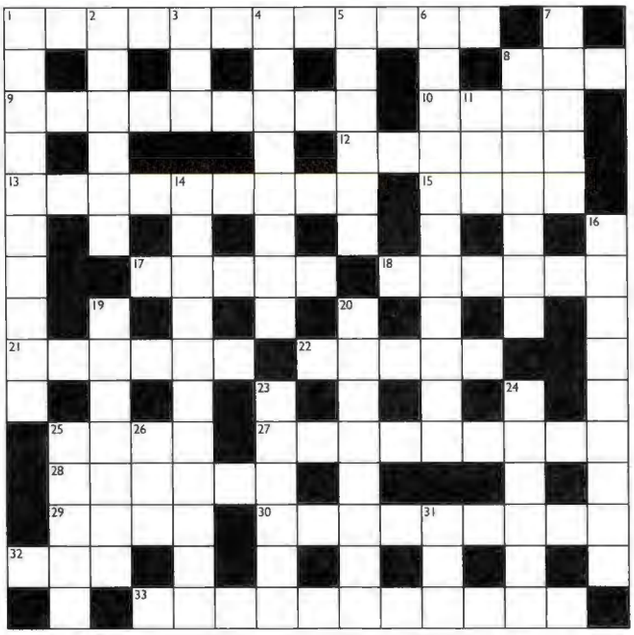
'Hmm?' you say, looking up from your book. 'Oh, good. Really good. Keep watching and tell me all about it darling. I'm, er, busy with, er ... ah. Goodness me, is that the time? I must varnish the dog's toenails.'

Juliette Hughes is a freelance writer.

puzzled

Devised by
Joan Nowotny IBVM

Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 139, Mar–Apr 2006



ACROSS

1 & 17. Are they played in the usual capital? (12,5)
8 & 30. Month begins this year with fire residue lent for the day! (3,9)
9. Alien, perhaps, will land inside the outer circle. (9)
10. At first men arrive roughly south of the planet. (4)
12. Hope to see a tower built on the church. (6)
13. With mighty labour, can only possibly reach Lune? (9)
15. Former British Prime Minister in paradise? (4)
17. See 1-across. (5)
18. With the sun and part of Venus visible, can one possibly go hungry? (6)
21. Sailor returns in time, but still makes mistakes. (6)
22. Fret about the youngsters! (5)
25. Military wing concerned about being seen at a great distance. (4)
27. One more problem is too much! Take a final drink using this! (4,5)
28. Fuss after girl returns from the comic opera. (6)
29. Let out secrets, possibly with idle chatter. (4)
30. See 8-across.
32. Some special elixir to drink? (3)
33. Absolutely extinct, though there seems to be plenty of activity at the end (4,2,1,4)

DOWN

1. Hang out dirty linen with this? Only when clean. (7,3)
2. Like ripe cheese? True to a degree! (6)
3. Eggs on players in the Oval. (3)
4. Filled with wonder—and a broad vision. (4-4)
5. Utter a primarily rude tirade. (6)
6. Did Shakespeare's play have a stormy reception? (11)
7. Being north of town in Germany. (5)
8. Contained in bizarre arsenal, there are weapons for which payment is still owing. (7)
11. Help anyone in distress, first of all. (3)
14. Bella, a tuner, somehow judged the instrument to be an old one that could not be changed. (11)
16. Nevertheless, the shortest routes are sometimes the best. (9)
19. For the dossier, just write a short biography. (7)
20. See, drip unfortunately takes the chair. (8)
23. Was the worm lit up with satisfaction? (6)
24. Like some banks, the writings were classified. (6)
25. The physician likes to have a drink around, when on a stroll. (5)
26. Abbreviation tells you who's who when pseudonyms are used. (3)
31. Full stop! (3)

Solution to Crossword no. 138, Jan–Feb 2006

Your contact details

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

.....

CITY/TOWN/SUBURB..... STATE ..... POSTCODE.....

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EMAIL ADDRESS.....

Send to Reply Paid 553, Richmond VIC 3121

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