

# EUREKA STREET

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## THE BIG DRY

**Margaret Simons** on the state of the country

New Australian poetry: **Kevin Hart**, **Jack Hibberd**, **Les Murray**,  
**Dorothy Porter**, **Peter Porter**, **Peter Rose** and **Peter Steele**

Serious travel: **Chris McGillion** watches the fading of Cuba's  
revolution, **Peter Pierce** follows Robert Louis Stevenson  
into New Caledonia and **Shane Maloney** finds  
evidence of miracles in the Wild West

Inside Pentridge:  
Craig Minogue

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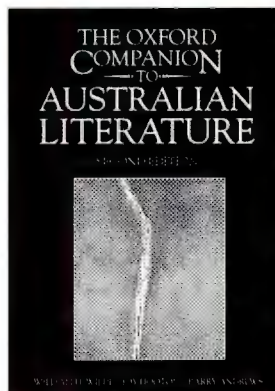
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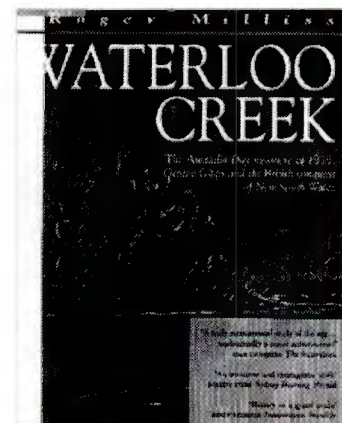
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# Work in progress

**I**N ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL IN SYDNEY there are arches which terminate in blocks of uncarved stone. Other bases are fully worked with whatever fantasy or satire the stonemason chose, and you could spend a happy day headhunting bishops or bookies among them. But the blank stone is more intriguing.

In *A Place In The City*, his fine new evocation of the teeming life of Sydney's cathedral church and its symbolic place in Australian and Catholic culture, Edmund Campion gives that blank stone a double significance. It is a poignant reminder of the imperatives of daily business: even in a nineteenth century cathedral time could overtake good intentions the way lava overtook the kitchen dishes of Pompeii. St Mary's had to be opened, the tardy sculptors were paid off and they never came back. But what they left, as Campion observes, was potential, something to go on with—uninscribed stone, ready for a new sculptor's hand.

There is a lot to be said for historians, particularly at this moment in the life of the church. In *A Place In The City* Campion's anecdotal grip on Australian and Catholic history is a broad, inclusive one, and his cathedral is hospitable even if Cardinal Gilroy, with whom Campion lived for six years, kept a table that offered only stodge and austerity.

The great and the despised pass through Campion's place. He eulogises some, others he digs out of flowerbeds or gutters, others he names as knaves, but still gives them their day. Some, like Julian Tenison Woods, he visits in their graves, as familiar as a friend sharing a meal or a trust. The orthodox and the downright heretical have their place. This is a history that makes its theological point indirectly but nonetheless firmly.

It is also a work that recovers, with a symbolic economy, so much of the richness and idiosyncrasy of Australian and Catholic life. The focus is always double: the church is *in* the world, not set against it, and the traffic is two way. The saints are more likely to be someone's uncle, sister, father or warrant officer than remote figures of adulation. And the power brokers, the men and woman who have shaped the politics, theology and institutional structures we now live with in Australia, are given as the flawed and fallible people they were. Yet the effect is not one of diminishment. Humanised, they are incorporated and even lovable.

It is a rare skill to be able to open out a city, a culture, to a foreigner or a visitor, to make a gift of experience. Campion is one of those writers who has the gift. And as he unpeels his city and his church to readers, he also resurrects the ancient grace of pilgrimage. In an age of avid tourism it is refreshing and exciting to conceive of Australian history and Australian Catholicism as sites for the spirit to visit. ■

—Morag Fraser

# A Ireland: maybe this time

AFTER AN ANNOUNCEMENT that peace has broken out, the world is accustomed to reacting with almost as much cynicism as relief. This is especially the case when the conflict concerned is that in the north of Ireland, which, depending on one's historical perspective and political allegiance, has lasted either 25 years, 70 years, or two, three, four or eight centuries. Even in an age that has seen the Berlin Wall come down, Nelson Mandela elected president of South Africa and the State of Israel negotiating with the PLO, it seems too difficult to accept that the two communities in the north might make a lasting peace with each other, with Britain and with the rest of Ireland.

For a start, only one of those communities seems to have embraced the prospect of peace with any enthusiasm. Nationalists, whether supporters of Sinn Fein or the Social Democratic and Labor Party, greeted the IRA's announcement of an indefinite ceasefire from 1 September with dancing in the streets. But unionists have remained sullen and suspicious, and one does not have to be a supporter of partition and the Orange ascendancy in the north to see their point.

How has the president of Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams, been able to persuade the IRA council that anything is to be gained from a unilateral ceasefire? Throughout the past 25 years of what it euphemistically calls 'armed struggle', the IRA failed to change Britain's determination that the six counties should remain part of the United Kingdom until the majority of their population decides otherwise. Only if Sinn Fein/IRA has now been given reason to believe that British resolve is wavering, unionists argue, is there any reason for it to start negotiating.

Whether or not John Major's government has privately encouraged Adams, the SDLP leader, John Hume, and the Irish Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, in such a belief, in fact successive British governments have tacitly accepted that the so-called province of Northern Ireland is not a fully integrated part of the

United Kingdom. If that tacit acceptance has now been translated into a decision to seek a resolution of the conflict on an all-Ireland basis, then northern Protestants only have more to lose by excluding themselves from the process. They, or their organised voice in the unionist parties, may continue to assert their peculiar brand of 'Irish-Britishness', but the real political question is whether anyone in Westminster still wants to collude in the fiction. Republican myths have come in for a healthy dose of scepticism from revisionist Irish historians, and some of the 'loyalist' myths are overdue for similar treatment.

It is not clear what sort of constitutional framework could give both communities an assurance of continued identity, though Albert Reynolds has signalled a readiness to start by amending those sections of the republic's constitution which claim sovereignty over the north. But if northern Protestants are really to be assured that they have a secure future in any new Irish order, then perhaps the biggest gesture must come from the Catholic bishops.

One consequence of partition has been an intensification of the Catholic character of the south: the republic's constitution may no longer give the Catholic Church a special status, but Dublin's legislation (or lack thereof) on matters such as divorce, contraception and abortion still fuels fears among Protestants about Rome's sway over a united Ireland.

The bishops can strengthen the steps towards peace that politicians, however falteringly, have already taken, by giving a clear indication that they would accept a relationship between church and state which is the same as that existing in other western pluralist democracies. In other words, that they would not automatically expect the law on matters such as divorce to conform to Catholic teaching, and that they understand that those who are not Catholics have rights in such matters which must be respected. ■

—Ray Cassin

# T Focusing on the main game

THE RECENT MONTHS OF CONTROVERSY over the Vatican statements reasserting the restriction of ordination to men highlights tensions about the mode of authority within the church.

Many in the Catholic community fear that the collegial and communal vision promised by Vatican II has been downgraded in practice, if not in theory. The ensuing disillusion leads to withdrawal for many. But it can also deepen inner conviction for those who believe that the spiritual riches of the tradition are

too precious to be rejected along with the present packaging.

One danger of such times is that our attention turns inward. Church structures absorb energy, instead of freeing people to take a more active role in society.

Christianity is first and foremost a belief in the divine breaking into, and being discovered in, our world. The Christian heritage presents us with the challenge to keep this awareness alive, to live out its

implications, to cherish and nurture our world and its people. Our tradition values the common good as a key element in a just society. We are committed to a 'tough' notion of community, which cares for the weakest and respects difference.

These insights and the practical engagement they entail are sorely needed now, at a time when passivity is exploited so that laws can be changed, services reduced, and people withdraw into familiar relationships rather than reaching out to newcomers.

Many people understand that an ethos of competition and individualism has led to a spiritual vacuum, and they are seeking more communal values. At such a time, a patriarchal style of authority hampers the ability of the Christian tradition to make a significant contribution. People outside the Catholic Church look with confusion at the principles of social justice enunciated by the church, and compare these with a practice in which real respect for difference is ignored. Insights that Catholics might have about community sound like window-dressing for totalitarian control. This is in the nature of scandal, because the need for a well-developed rationale for community has never been stronger.

All of us, not just our leaders, need to address the key question of how we maintain community while respecting difference. Critical for the Christian are power and participation. The use of power must always stand under Jesus' example of 'power going out from' rather than 'power over'. Unless we can change styles of power which have more in keeping with past eras than with gospel concerns, we will be unable to participate in the present 'open moment'. Our ensuing culture will be all the more fragmented and alienated because of that.

The fact that all this has been sparked off by church documents which in different ways resist the feminine presence in practice and in language is not coincidental. Feminist theologians from many countries explore and develop the importance of both connectedness and respect for difference. They explore in practice alternative modes of organisation which empower rather than control. A church which excludes their contribution will be unable to negotiate the conversion needed if we are to contribute to the common good of our times. ■

**Christine Burke IBVM** is doing a doctorate in politics and religion. She works for Fair Share.

COMMENT: 3

MORAG FRASER

## Rumbles in PNG

**T**HERE IS NOT MUCH FIRM GROUND to be found in PNG at the moment. The volcanic activity in Rabaul in September repeated the pattern of political events in August. When *Eureka Street* last went to press, the Wingti Government had a coalition majority of 73/32 and seemed set to stay in power until the 1997 elections and beyond. But some constitutional negotiations and the persuasions of Opposition philosopher, Bernard Narakobi, led to a rapid re-alignment of forces, and Sir Julius Chan presented himself as an alternative leader. A number of factors, not least corruption and a near-bankrupt economy, led to a reversal of support: 70/32 for Chan.

Chan has since reversed Wingti's thrust and given up on a military solution in Bougainville. But he has not yet revealed his solution to the problem—if, indeed, he has one. It would be against all his previous stands to offer an act of self-determination to the province, particularly as now the other Islands provinces are threatening secession on 6 January 1995 if their 'statehood' is not granted by 7 December. (Chan himself comes from New Ireland and has substantial business assets in Rabaul.)

Many pro-secessionist sympathisers do not realise that the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) is only one faction among Bougainvilleans. Other groups are dismayed that Chan may seem to recognise rebel commander, Sam Kauona, as representing

the aspirations of the province as a whole. They believe the BRA cannot be forced to give up its arms and could return Bougainville to the terrorism of 1990, when it held sway before the return of the PNGDF. The PNGDF is needed as a garrison until there is reconciliation among Bougainvilleans and a restoration of their own government. This could be achieved through a pan-Bougainville conference of local leaders, sponsored by Port Moresby, as the still-legitimate authority.

The present chaotic state of PNG's finances, caused in part by Chan himself, has brought him to Canberra to seek budget aid, and has given Australia an opportunity to persuade PNG to pursue wiser domestic policies. Another area that calls for intervention is the logging industry. Sustainably developed, in conjunction with mining, it could be a great boon to PNG financial independence.

But while Port Moresby allows Malaysian companies to rip out its timber at lowest prices, Australia's \$300 million aid is in effect a subsidy to them. The Wingti government was making some progress here, thanks to Forests Minister Neville. Chan's new minister, well known to have connections with the Malaysian firm, Ribunan Hijau, offers no reassurance. Nor does Chan's policy of landowner control. He could be reminded that there is a path to self-sufficiency. ■

—Morag Fraser

## M Old brigades meet new renegades

MEXICO'S 21 AUGUST ELECTION has been judged 'free and fair'—to use the currently fashionable jargon—by most observers. In what sense it was also meaningful is another matter. The ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) Ernesto Zedillo scraped home with 50.03 per cent of the vote. The only authentic opposition candidate, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), polled a mere 17 per cent. Cardenas, along with the mysterious Commandante Marcos of the Zapatista guerrillas, has claimed massive fraud.

But that was never likely. If the PRI had thought fraud necessary to cling to power, it would not have agreed to overhaul the electoral system or to accept an unprecedented level of impartial electoral oversight. The efforts of foreign election monitors were well-intentioned but misplaced: the crucial period for Mexico was not the days leading up to the election; it will be the months following the vote.

By 21 August many Mexicans had been convinced that their country was on the verge of a violent breakdown of order. The Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in January contributed to that perception. So did the assassination of the PRI's initial presidential candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, in Tijuana in March, skirmishes between rival drug traffickers, and the kidnapping for ransom of several prominent local businessmen.

The election outcome reflected anxiety at these developments but provides no relief for it. Electoral democracy is a contest for the control of government: in Mexico the real crisis lies at the level of state and society.

A decade of free-market reforms has strained the old alliance of interests between workers, peasants, the bureaucracy and the military on which the PRI's uninterrupted 65-year rule has been based. It has introduced new actors (Mexican finance capital, trans-

national corporations, foreign banks) and new pressures into the country's policy-planning debates.

As a result, the PRI is deeply faction-ridden. It is split between young Technoturks who want to dismantle an interventionist state and party traditionalists who fear for their power and prestige.

If the PRI is to continue its historic function of interest aggregator, policy maker and régime legitimator, Zedillo must quickly forge a new consensus within the party. But the strong, and well-founded, suspicion that PRI hard-liners were implicated in Colosio's assassination suggests how difficult—and dangerous—that may be.

Those opposed to the PRI and its economic and social policies have their own problems. Cardenas has been unable to regroup the alliance of social forces that supported him in 1988. (This is clear not only from his poor showing on 21 August but also from the generally unenthusiastic response to the protest rallies he called after the election.) Cardenas has shifted from left-of-centre

to the centre in the past 12 months. The example of the Zapatistas is pulling some of his old allies in the opposite direction.

WHAT HAPPENS IN MEXICO in the next few months is of interest not only to Mexicans. The US has an obvious economic and strategic interest in the country. But the rest of Latin America will be watching closely as well, to see what becomes of this experiment in free-market reforms and free-trade association with the industrialised economies of North America.

Mexico experienced the first social revolution of the 20th century. It may yet experience the last. ■

Chris McGillion writes for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He was in Mexico for the August elections.



*'What happens in Mexico in the next few months is of interest not only to Mexicans. The rest of Latin America will be watching to see what becomes of this experiment in free market reforms and free trade association with the industrialised economies of North America.'*

—Chris McGillion

*'Let them eat fries!' Voters in a Veracruz café.*

Engraving by Siobhan Jackson

## Bad Boy bubble

From Peter Malone MSC, Pacific Region president of OCIC (Organisation Catholique Internationale du Cinema et Audiovisuels).

The vehemence of Michael McGirr's review of *Bad Boy Bubby* (Flash in the Pan, September 1994) surprised me. 'Indescribably vile' was more of a condemnation than a critique. Vile things are portrayed in the film, certainly, but that is different from their being presented vilely. (I read the review after watching the re-released *Fellini Satyricon* and this distinction suggested itself: Fellini portrays decadence and depravity but not in a depraved way.)

I was part of an OCIC jury at the Venice Film Festival in 1993, where, after discussing the confronting aspects of *Bubby* for three hours, we awarded the film our Bronze Plaque. Northern European members of the jury saw it as a fable of the human condition, a *De profundis* film about rising 'from the depths' to some possibility of human redemption.

I realise that not everybody will see the film in this way, but I find it a valid approach that opens up the film for more critical and thematic interpretation.

And, to advise 'beware' of a director's statement concocted by publicists needs the balance of 'beware' of a reviewer's panning concocted with journalistic flair.

Peter Malone  
Kew, VIC

## On the contrary I

From Rae Langton, lecturer in philosophy, Monash University.

Raimond Gaita's reply (Letters, September 1994) to comments I made during an interview with Stephen Tudor (August 1994) begins with a shocking story about the Nazi torture of a rabbi. According to Gaita, 'Rae Langton ... says that it may be mere "prejudice" to say that what the Nazi did was evil if one is not prepared to say why'. He goes on to complain that the tone of Peter Singer and myself is like that of complacent politicians who 'succumb to the suspicion that they are born to rule'. Gaita seems to find in my remarks a defence of the Nazi and a plea for the philosopher king.

This is bewildering. I said that moral philosophy could have implica-

*Eureka Street* welcomes letters from its readers. Short letters are more likely to be published, and all letters may be edited. Letters must be signed, and should include a contact phone number and the writer's name and address.



tions for a world beyond the ivory tower. I said that a philosopher could, without arrogance, do applied philosophy: not because philosophers are especially important to the world at large, but because the world at large can be important to philosophers. Human beings are fallible creatures, and it goes without saying that philosophers are fallible creatures. Questions in applied ethics are not easy. I, for one, don't know the answers, and I said so when asked in the interview. Something like wisdom is needed here, as Gaita and I agree: but that is hardly to advocate the rule of the philosopher king.

Gaita says we should simply rest with our judgment that something is evil. But if human beings are fallible, then our judgments about what is evil are likely to be fallible as well. People have, now and at different times through history, judged many things to be evil: love between homosexuals; abortion; the political activity of women. These judgments are, I think, mistaken. And surely Gaita will agree that some judgments about what is evil have been mistaken. If so, we are as fallible in this aspect of life as we are in others. And if so, a blind faith in judgments about what is evil can be a tool of prejudice. Needless to say, I do not think it may be mere 'prejudice' to say that what the Nazi did was evil. But then I do not think it is 'irrelevant', as Gaita does, that 'no respectable argument could compel anyone to approve the evil done to the rabbi'. How could it be 'irrelevant' to a moral philosopher, or to anyone, that the voices of reason and conscience here agree?

Rae Langton  
Clayton, VIC

## On the contrary II

From Professor Peter Singer, Centre for Human Bioethics, Monash University.

It is astonishing to read, in Raimond Gaita's response to the interviews *Eureka Street* did with myself and Rae Langton, that he now maintains that academic philosophers 'tend to doubt very little of any consequence' (Letters, September 1994).

This is astonishing for two reasons. First, it is plainly false. To limit ourselves just to five examples from applied ethics, for instance, in recent years philosophers have doubted the following widely held views:

- That all human lives are of equal value;
- That we are entitled to rear and kill animals for food when we could nourish ourselves adequately without doing so;
- That there is a significant moral distinction between allowing a patient to die by withholding treatment and giving that patient a lethal injection;
- That one can live an ethical life without giving a substantial proportion of one's disposable income to help those in danger of starvation or malnutrition in less affluent nations; and
- That targeting population centres for retaliatory attack is a legitimate form of nuclear deterrence.

These are hardly matters that could be describe as being of little consequence.

But the second reason why it is astonishing to see Gaita say this is in his interview with Stephen Tudor, when he says that I and other philosophers:

'... have succeeded in making it a world in which philosophers have led the way in urging a relaxation of the conditions under which we find it permissible to kill people; in which, for example, most philosophy students seriously wonder whether it is permissible to kill young babies for much the same reasons as it is permissible to have an abortion. This dismays and frightens me.' (June-July 1994).

Gaita can't have it both ways. If philosophers' doubt is not of any consequence, why does it dismay and frighten him?

This kind of inconsistent thinking is all too typical of Gaita's thinking. And that, perhaps, is why he complains, in his letter, that 'Peter Singer and Rae Langton misunderstand al-



most every major point I made.' When people make contradictory claims, they do become difficult to understand.

**Peter Singer**  
Clayton, VIC

## Out of order I

*From Ross Saunders*

The debate over the ordination of women will not go away until the church hierarchies realise that this is merely a symptom of a deep and ongoing malaise in those churches that have an imposed ordained hierarchy.

Catholicism, like Orthodoxy and Anglicanism, divides those baptised into the Body of Christ into two: the ordained and the unordained.

The unordained take no part whatsoever in the process of ordaining the unordained. They may be given some grudging power to select, from among those already ordained, those they wish to have as their pastors or bishops. But they have no say whatsoever in who amongst them may be ordained, nor do they participate in the actual process of ordination.

Clerical orders are conceived of as a direct gift from above, mediated through the already ordained. This is clear from the various encyclicals and official promulgations emanating from popes and councils.

All the rhetoric about magisterium and communion—all the models being dredged up by the ordained to pacify the unordained—does not hide the fact that the church of Christ has been divided into two separate bodies that are held together only by the domination and self-serving authority of the ordained.

The New Testament model of the church as the Body of Christ with Christ the sole head has, since the second century AD, been abandoned. And the various Protestant reformations did nothing to change that.

Only when the ordained include the unordained in the exercise of the process of ordination and authority will the church ever succeed in coming anywhere near the model that Christ envisaged and which Peter and Paul practised.

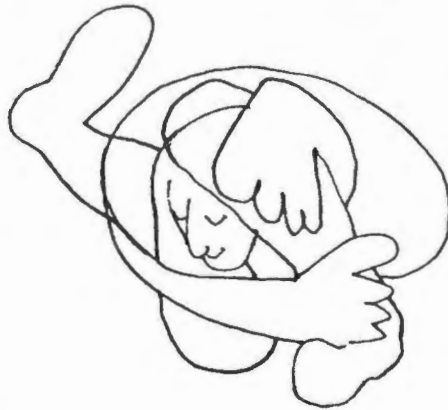
So long as the unordained have to submit to an imposed hierarchical system of authority and ministry that completely eliminates them from sharing in the gifts of ministry given to the whole Body, then so long will Christ be divided asunder into two and

the visible church continually disempowered.

The evidence is there for us all to see: Holy Spirit is abandoning the hierarchical structures of the ordained and calling the unordained to exercise ministry according to the New Testament model, which clearly included women and married men. But can we imagine the ordained giving up the right to veto the decisions of the unordained?

Surely, the next reform of those churches that maintain an imposed hierarchical, authoritative ministry must involve the sharing of power with the whole church—and that will be a sight to behold, given that power does corrupt and absolute power makes sure that no one else gets it!

**Ross Saunders**  
Newtown, NSW



Personal Skills

## Out of order II

*From Marlene McGrath, Pastoral Associate, St Timothy's, Forest Hill, VIC*

In his letter 'Michael's Message' (Letters, September '94) Brian Lang has the audacity to display in public inaccurate details of Michael's and my life based on a world and church view that went out with buttoned-up boots.

You see, Brian, St Timothy's community never needed saving by me—or anyone else for that matter! The Lord has done it, and continues to carry out his redeeming mission in all our lives, and the only thing we have to do is to recognise it is happening.

It has been my privilege to be earthed in St Timothy's faith community, sharing their 'joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties', walking with the people as together we learn what commitment and compassion and mission is

all about. No saving is done by me.

Baptism is the core sacrament. It is the springboard from which all life and mission flows—for those in the ordained ministry as well! You refer to ordination in terms of power—how sad.

Brian, thanks for the image of Judith—may some of her strength and humour move all our hearts during these times!

**Marlene McGrath**  
Vermont, VIC

## TALKING POINTS

*Nobody*, a play about adolescent experience in the modern city, is being performed during Melbourne's Fringe Festival from 4-22 October, in Commerce Way, off Flinders Lane between Elizabeth and Queen Streets in the city. For bookings, phone Nicola (Open Family) on (03) 696 3393.

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## Dark clouds

From *Laura Doherty*

Thank you, *Eureka Street*, for your recent articles by Philip Kennedy, Alan Gill and Ray Cassin on authority, the right to express diverse opinion in the church, and concern over the censorship of the Catholic press. As a woman whose identity and vocation is sincerely marked by Catholicism, I am increasingly aware of dark clouds gathering to try to stifle life in the church.

That is not to say that the Spirit is not alive in the church. At a recent 'Tomorrow's Church' parish meeting, I certainly found that people were very keen to see local pastoral needs met, and were sincerely struggling with the reality of fewer priests. Also, at a gathering of 'Women and the Australian Church', it was evident that many women are feeling desperate, given their love of the church, their sense of vocation and their frustration at what they see as an increasing intransigence on the part of the church locally and the Pope.

In inner Melbourne, I see manifestations of the church in solidarity with people in the margins of society. In Australia the church has a tremendous opportunity to do and to be seen doing what Jesus did, but this will be limited if its leadership continues along the siege-mentality path to irrelevancy.

I have always seen myself as being pretty moderate. As a Year 12 history student many years ago my hero was Erasmus, who tried to reform the church from within rather than take the path Luther chose.

It isn't easy to remain in a church which says that in order to take up the Holy Spirit's call to ordained ministry, one needs to have a certain anatomy. (And it claims this is biblical! Does one also have to be Jewish, a fisherman or an Aramaic speaker?) It isn't easy to remain in the church whose press, at least in Australia, won't allow for a range of opinion to be expressed.

How are Catholic people to know what theologians are thinking, or to see beyond the immediate issue of women's ordination to the even deeper ones the church faces: authority, obedience to whom and to what, how to communicate with people and draw forth their gifts, how to care for peo-

ple now and in the future? No wonder Philip Kennedy went public! I am sure that staying in the church can be as painful as leaving it.

The best way to avoid a museum-piece church is to make every effort to prove, in a word and deed, the church's relevancy today. Thank you to *Eureka Street* and its contributors for trying to push it in that direction.

**Laura Doherty**  
Geelong West, Vic

## The path to peace

From *Philip Mendes*

Your correspondent Andrew Vincent (*Eureka Street*, September 1994) argues that the Middle Eastern peace process is not simply a record of triumphal progress as reported in much of the Western media. But neither are developments on the peace front as overwhelmingly negative and depressing as suggested in Vincent's article.

The reality of 46 years of hate and violence determined that progress towards Israeli-Palestinian peace was always going to be slow and gradual. This was why the Declaration of Principles was based on steps and transitions towards peace, rather than sudden and complete Israeli withdrawal.

Yet, it is inevitable that Israel will eventually withdraw from the rest of the West Bank, as it has in Gaza and Jericho. It is also inevitable that a fully independent Palestinian state will be established in these areas. This has been acknowledged in recent months not only by Israeli doves, but also by the secretary-general of the ruling Israeli Labour Party, Nissim Zvili. And, as recent polls indicate, more and more Israelis are coming to recognise that only reconciliation with the Palestinians will resolve the historical grievance that is at the heart of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Andrew Vincent suggests that the complete withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho has brought little real improvement to the lives of Palestinians, but this is not the view of many Palestinians.

In an article in the latest edition of the prominent American Jewish left magazine, *Tikkun*, Wendy Orange documents the joy that Palestinians experienced at the departure of the hated Israeli troops. According to the prominent Palestinian journalist Mohammad Dawwas, the Gaza with-

drawal has provided the Palestinians with a freedom—from curfews, soldiers and prisons—that they have not experienced for 27 years (*Tikkun*, July/August 1994)

Of course, this does not change the fact that the rest of the West Bank remains under Israeli occupation. Nor does it ignore the need for Israeli forces to be redeployed outside populated areas throughout the West Bank as soon as possible so that all Palestinians can enjoy the benefits of peace. At the time of writing, only the education system has been formally transferred to Palestinian control. The other 37 services, including population registration, land-ownership registration, the granting of building permits and the control of water sources, remain under the control of the Israeli civil administration.

It is also true that a significant minority of Palestinians oppose the Declaration of Principles, but there is a clear difference between those on the secular left, who believe Arafat has given up too much, and those religious fundamentalists in Hamas who oppose Israel's right to exist. The Hamas movement opposes Israel not because of any territorial claims, but rather because it believes in an alleged Jewish plot to control the world via the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (*Journal of Palestine Studies*, Summer 1993).

Those who are justifiably concerned with internal Palestinian democracy and the state of civil and human rights under Arafat's rule need to distinguish carefully between legitimate political opposition and those who simply seek to drown the peace process in Israeli and Palestinian blood. At the end of the day, Arafat's efforts to suppress Hamas militants who kill Jews are essential not only to maintain favor with Israel, but also to protect the aspirations of the Palestinians. For there can be no peace with those who seek to liquidate the other side.

As for Arafat's call for a *jihad*, or holy war, to liberate Jerusalem, such rhetoric only plays into the hands of extremists on both sides. For obviously any holy war is not compatible with peace. And only peace will grant the Palestinians what they want—an end to the Israeli occupation and national independence.

**Philip Mendes**  
North Caulfield, VIC

# Learning the things that matter most

**T**HE LATEST FAD in analysing the relative woes of the Labor and Liberal parties is to compare the way in which Labor nurtures its young—by instilling iron into their souls—with the clubby Liberal atmosphere, in which people who have shown talent in some non-political sphere are thrust into senior politics on the basis of declaring in an interview that they are determined to excel at politics too. The newest Labor backbencher, say the wise heads, has spent 10 or 20 years in Young Labor or the union movement, learning all about the game of counting heads, cutting throats and stabbing others in the back. Keating's backbench, with a dozen former state secretaries, union organisers and miscellaneous apparatchiks, has more experience in hard politics than the entire Liberal front bench. Many of the essential skills are instinctive, and Labor has a culture that selects those who have the guts to acquire power and wield it effectively. The Liberal amateurs, by contrast, often get near the top before it is apparent that they lack such instincts.

There is something in this analysis, as Alexander Downer's continuing debacles show. The man himself, though born and bred to politics, killed any momentum from his *Things that Matter* statement with a few offensive jokes. He continues to fall on his face, and worse, seems unable to get up. Andrew Peacock, a party elder statesman with great political nous but no killer instinct, abandons the most prestigious Liberal seat in the country and the party actually becomes desperate to find a replacement. A senior party ideologue says he's too interested in making money to be interested in the job, and another possible contender, the Victorian Premier, lets it be known that he would only accept nomination as part of a deal that delivered him the leadership as well.

Meanwhile, Labor is going through one of its most inept periods of government: a former deputy premier joins his former boss in jail; the ALP's accident-in-waiting, Laurie Brereton, conspicuously mismanages the Australian National Line affair; the left is in disarray over strategy for the party conference; and economic management is in need of tuning only four months after the budget. Yet no-one in the Opposition is able, or even trying, to score a hit.

What Labor has that the Liberals do not is not experience in disembowelling, or a capacity to count heads, but an understanding of the fundamentals of politics—that, in the first instance, it is about making choices that will leave some people disappointed; second, that it is about the building of coalitions, permanent or temporary, in support of particular policies; and third, that it is about framing arguments in such a way that your opponents will find it much harder to state their case persuasively.

In short, what the Labor school teaches is power, how to get it and how to use it. Labor politicians learn

that politics is a hard slog, that reason does not always carry the day, that symbols and appeals to sentiment are as significant as cold logic, and that, if chance must be taken into account, then the better politicians make their own breaks. The Liberals, by contrast, still want power to come easily. They spend too much time daydreaming about what they might do if they win government, and not enough time working to attain it. Even party officials tend to operate more as social club committee members than as functionaries who can dispense or withhold favours. These failings are aggravated by the party structure, which makes both the organisational wing and grass-roots members irrelevant on a day-to-day basis. In particular, the Liberals lack mechanisms for shifting direction—except, of course, the ultimate one of assassinating the leader.

*Things that Matter* ought to have served a useful purpose for Alexander Downer. More than a decade of wandering in the wilderness under an array of leaders has left even the parliamentary party, let alone ordinary branch members, confused about what the party stands for. Almost every crisis of direction—over sexual-privacy laws, say, or Aboriginal affairs, has had the capacity to tear the party apart. Most voters were never going to read a manifesto, and the principles for which the party stands should be able to be summarised in a page or two. What was needed were clear indications of the way the party would turn when, for example, developmental concerns clashed with environmental or Aboriginal ones, or states rights with the rights of individuals. Instead, Downer produced a document that in more than 100 pages did not even pretend to set priorities or weigh different ideals. Even as a pragmatic document produced by a committee, it is easily outshone by ALP conference documentation.

In part this was because Downer wants to keep his options open on issues such as the republic, states' rights, economic intervention and social questions. All things being equal, he wants to move into the centre, but he also wants to avoid fights with party hardliners, inside or outside Parliament. The document is thus deliberately anodyne, to give him maximum room to manoeuvre according to circumstance and opportunity.

That's marketing, however, not real politics. Even Labor's Third XI could roll that over. The Liberals have got to stop trying to get there in one go and start building an organisation that will move step by step. If the party is not capable of winning government, it is not fit to govern. ■

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

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## D No place to call home

**D**URING THE PAST FEW YEARS, Asian, or in particular Vietnamese, youths have been blamed for the increase of criminal activities in the Cabramatta area. When John Newman MP, a local crime fighter, was killed on 5 September, Asian gangs were widely held to be responsible.

There is rarely a Vietnamese over the age of 30 being held in Parramatta and Parklea prisons in Sydney's west. According to a recent federal government report cited by AAP: 'The Vietnamese youth gangs active in Sydney around Cabramatta and Fairfield are the children of the immigrants who arrived during the exodus from Vietnam during the 1970s.' The report points out that 'Gang members range in age from their mid-teens to early 20's and often live together, away from their families in group homes.' It is correct.

They are young and were once students in Australia. They arrived in Australia somewhere between the ages of one and nine. Their parents were refugees. For various reasons, a number of them left school before reaching senior level.

Their language skills are poor. They left school while their knowledge of English was still at primary level. Furthermore, with their education disrupted, they lack the ability to reflect. They do not have vision and it is difficult for them to express themselves. Within the walls of Parramatta and Parklea prisons, there are only a handful of them who can write in Vietnamese. Any attempt to communicate seriously with them, in English or Vietnamese, ends painfully.

The majority of Asian inmates at Parklea and Parramatta gaols were unemployed at the time of their arrest. The rest were low-paid labourers. Without basic qualifications it is not easy for them to find work. The lengthy recession during the past decade hasn't helped either.

Cabramatta is a place where they can come and go, and feel welcomed. A growing number of Asian children leave home because they find it an unbearable place to live with conflicting cultures and values.

Cabramatta offers acceptance, company and fun. It is obvious that while in prison they are always on the lookout for friends. You can see the joy in their faces when they meet.

Traditional parental discipline has been undermined. Vietnamese parents learnt that in Australia they should not touch their children, as it might be considered child abuse. Whether they were misinformed or whether they misunderstood is hard to know.

What is true is that parental authority cannot reach the children now. Likewise, the law-enforcement agencies cannot reach them. In dealing with Asian crimes, authorities in Australia often meet with a wall of silence. Ironically they have become highly protected people; they are the 'untouchables' and their numbers are growing very fast.

However, they *are* products of our society. They were brought up in Australia; they are all Australians. They are not as ugly as they are painted by the media. Young Asians are accused of supplying pure heroin. In fact some of them *are* in Parklea and Parramatta for crimes of violence. Most of those charged with heroin-related crimes are only serving six, nine or 12 months, a sentence indicative of a minor offence.

A number of young Asians are tattooed with designs purported to show gang membership. That may be so, but many also wear these tattoos unaware of their significance. They are not necessarily from organised gangs. When allegations are made, young Asians are given a false macho image. This attracts the curiosity of other Asians. The macho phenomenon is also shown in their satisfaction in building up their bodies while in custody.

But isn't it too easy to accept the goodies and reject the baddies? When things go wrong, shouldn't we reflect on the situation rather than looking for the obvious scapegoats? ■

**Nguyen Viet Huy SJ** is chaplain at Loyola College, Mt Drutt, NSW, and a prison chaplain in Parramatta diocese.

## The view from the Cairo bus

**D**ELEGATES TO SEPTEMBER'S International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) had no trouble getting to the out-of town conference centre. Luxury buses left the city every ten minutes before 9am, and returned the delegates to their hotels when the meetings ended in the evening. An Australian in Cairo explained that the buses had priority through Cairo's chaotic peak hour traffic: 'On the first morning we caught the 7am bus and there were nine people on it. It was embarrassing; everyone else was in completely rattletrap buses, bursting at the seams.'

In the wake of Cairo, the rarely-heard voices of the many people with direct experience of population control programs are asking whether the big guns at the ICPD are as isolated from the on-the-ground reality of these program, as they were from the Cairo traffic.

Like the Rio Earth Summit before it, the Cairo Population Conference involved a series of delicate negotiations between states with vastly conflicting interests and beliefs. Delegates were reminded of the urgency of their mission by the giant population clock in the main hall, which registered more than one birth per second.

After nine days of diplomatic barn-dancing, more than 150 countries, and the Vatican, supported a 20-year plan to reduce the world's population. The plan proposes increased access to contraception to effect that reduction, as well as better health education for women world wide.

What does this mean for the people most affected by the policies, that is, the women in so-called developing countries? This was a question raised by non-government representatives running an NGO forum in tandem with the UN conference. They have plenty of history to work

with, after all population control programs have been run in some developing countries for over forty years.

Bangladesh has had an official population control program since 1965. Bangladeshi spokesperson, Farida Akhter, says the programs began by using contraceptives such as the pill and condoms, but says now that 'Condoms are only balloons, they are now used for making cycle tyres'. The programs now favour longer-term methods, such as IUDs and the five-year contraceptive Norplant. These methods may be more effective in reducing the number of babies born, but, says Akhter, they take control of fertility out of women's hands.

She adds that women often have no choice in the contraceptive method they receive, as they are made part of target groups for specific types and brands of contraceptive methods. Many women returning to clinics to have their IUD removed have been told that the de-

vices are now safe for two, three or four times the original life span.

Akhter is also concerned that Bangladesh's high maternal mortality rate (six deaths for every thousand births) is also being seen as a population rather than a health-care issue. "In order to save these six women they are giving all the 1000 contraceptives. It's like cutting off your head if you have a headache"

And poor nations have little option but to accept population control programs. Funding from the World Bank, and International Monetary Fund is now tied to commitment to these programs.

Many people from the now more than 90 countries that run population programs say that they are being run without proper health-care programs to back them up.

In 1991 the World Bank invested

\$105 million in population control programs in Indonesia. Indonesia has been one of the highest users of the long-acting contraceptive Norplant, with over 850,000 Indonesian woman receiving the drug between 1987 and 1990. (Norplant consists of six small rods that are implanted under the skin. The rods slowly release a contraceptive hormone for five years, after which time it must be removed.)

Because there are so many Norplant users, the private US 'population council' conducted an investigative study. It found that women suffering from what are termed 'partially heavy' side-effects were being refused removal. Also, the drug was not being removed from many women after the five-year expiry date because insufficient records had been kept in order to track users down.

India also has a substantial population-control program, with women being offered a fee if they opt for sterilisation, which unlike vasectomy for men, is virtually irreversible. In addition, India will next year introduce laws that prohibit poor families from having more than four children.

It is clear in Indonesia, and in many other developing countries, that despite the rhetoric, population control does not always lead to better reproductive health for women. ■

**Catriona Jackson** is a freelance journalist.



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*As farmers in eastern Australia endure the worst drought in living memory, Margaret Simons reviews the state of the country.*

**L**AST WEEK, IN THE FOYER OF MY SUBURBAN BANK, I saw a scarecrow reclining against two hay bales. This figure, with its calico face and broomstick arms, was meant to be a farmer. He was promoting the bank's support for the Farm Hand scheme, under which money and goods are collected for distribution to those worst affected by the drought.

On the road outside, there were people rattling cans for 'country cousins', and on the wharves in Melbourne the unemployed volunteered to help load a train with feed. A farmer friend of mine, watching the television news coverage, commented that the bales seemed to be of poor quality, and falling apart. In any case, the entire train would only provide feed for a couple of days.

These are the images of the drought communicated to our city-obsessed nation. They are images of patronage and romance. They are also uneasy images, alienated images, broadcast and consumed in ignorance. Ours is a country with a soft and hard mix of dependence on the bush. Our mythology and our economy rest on it, but most of us can take a Sunday afternoon drive through the country and look for the drought and not find it. We don't know how crops ought to look at this time of year, or even what the

farmers by the highway normally grow. The bush is something to be driven through. 'There's nothing there,' we say as we look at the road map of the route we must follow to get from city to city.

My trip to the bank was last week. Now it is Saturday, and I am driving to a farm with the poetic, but one hopes not prophetic, name of Twilight, 15 kilometres from Forbes in central western New South Wales. This is a mixed farming area. There are sheep and beef cattle, lucerne (which is the grown-up version of the alfalfa sprout) for stock feed, wheat that goes to make bread, barley that goes to make beer, and canola, a yellow-flowering oil-seed crop that used to be called 'rape' until the oil became trendy and the word too controversial.

Forbes is on the edge of calamity, but has not yet tipped over. In April there were sketchy rains. Farmers took a risk and planted about half of their crops. Now the plants are just hanging on. The wheat is at knee height. It should be higher. The canola is in flower, but there are bare patches in the middle of the paddocks. When the pasture is exhausted, the farmers here take stock out to 'vacuum clean' the feed from the side of the road to keep them going another few days. They call the road 'the long paddock'. Vacuum

*Driving the drought south:  
sheep from Finley, NSW,  
at Gathercole Abattoir  
in Carrum, VIC.  
Photo: Bill Thomas.*

cleaning is an appropriate term. You can see where they have been. The ground looks like a short-pile carpet: clean as a whistle.

Just outside Forbes, near the graveyard where the bushranger Ben Hall is buried, there is a farmer out with his cattle. He stands there, by the side of the road, with his dog and stick, caught as the car flashes by with his mouth open, then left behind.

Outside the gate at Twilight, I find the farmer who runs the property also by the side of the road. He calls the sheep he is watching his 'streetwise ladies'—five-year-old ewes who have seen it all. Now they are vacuuming their way up the long paddock, bums bare from recent crutching to cut away the dags. The weather map, the farmer says, shows an approaching cold front. Such formations usually bring rain.

We change into daggy but dag-free clothes and go and have a look around the 119th annual Forbes Agricultural Show. There are prizes for everything here: bales of hay (judged on quality), sample jars of wheat (judged on smell, appearance, weight per bushel, trueness to type and freedom from mouse droppings), and for damper. Boys and girls compete in separate classes for the damper prize, and the girls' damper looks best.

There are prizes for the bulls with giant testicles and backs the size of kitchen tables, and prizes for poultry. I compare the first and second-prize roosters. Is it the blue ribbon that makes the first rooster look so perfect, such an archetype of roosterdom, or am I just reading that in? Everybody loves a winner.

The shearing competition is being conducted in the beer tent, and judges in green blazers watch for quality as well as speed. Here the streetwise ladies are turned on their heads, legs asplay, sometimes spurting blood under the blade (for which the shearers lose points). The wool drops on the ground like banana peel. The contest over, the loser departs, sweat stains growing like emerging continents under his armpits. He says nothing, not even to the little boy running by his side, but his gait—all dirty jeans, broad leather belt and purposeful stride tell you how proud it is possible to be in the face of defeat.

Listen to the conversation in the beer tent. They don't talk much, but what they do say is all about the weather map and previous dry years, just like this, when rain has come at about this time. What will tomorrow bring?

**S**UNDAY. NOT A DAY OF REST but another day on the long paddock. The sky to the west is screened with sheets of high altitude cirrus that look like rice paper but in fact are made up of millions of high-up ice crystals. The front is coming. A change. Hope.

A farmer says to me: 'If it rained now, we wouldn't even call it a drought. We wouldn't even whinge. We'd just have had a dry winter.'

Monday comes. I wake to hear sheets of corrugated iron on some nearby shed flapping, but the qual-

ity of light on the walls tells me even before I look out that there is no rain. The front is here, but it has brought only a hot and thirsty wind. I can see the struggling wheat and canola withering in front of my eyes. A few days more of this, and that will be the end of any hope for the year's crops. By the end of the day, when the farmers bring the ladies in for their evening drink, the sky is once again an unobstructed blue.

I tell one of the farmers at Twilight that the meteorologists I have spoken to are predicting that the El Nino effect will begin to break down in November or December. Relief—and useful rain—will come then. He looks thoughtful. If he could rely on that, they would go into debt, buy stockfeed and hang onto the cattle and sheep that represent next year's income. As it is, they will face the crunch in the next two or three weeks and give up on the crop, letting the stock in to eat it off the paddock before it dies.

Driving against the wind, we head north of Forbes, to see what I am told will be some 'real drought'. The spring rain that Twilight got was very localised. Fifteen kilometres away, and you can see the difference. Here the wheat is not even at ankle height. It just dusts the paddocks with green. Roadside trees are competing for survival. They are surrounded by a 30 metre circle of bare earth, their roots going into the crop, sucking the water out from under. The canola looks almost comic, like a piece of yellow knitting with big, unravelled holes. The barley is trying to form heads although the plants are barely above ground level.

'I've got to survive,' says a farmer, trying to explain to me what it is that I am seeing. He is speaking from the point of view of a barley plant. 'There isn't enough water, so I've got to reproduce now, before I die. Throw out a seed. Throw out a head. Now. Before it's too late.'

On, into Trundle, which is officially known as the New South Wales town with the widest main street. There are old photos of bullock drays lined up six across.

The depopulation of rural areas is not a result of this drought alone. Farming is a model of increased efficiency and reformed labour markets. Mechanisation has meant that 'agricultural labourer' is the fastest declining job category in the country. Trundle was probably a sad town even last year, when it had rained. Now, they are giving out food parcels to families around here. It is not only this drought that has brought things so low. There were good years before,

*There are very few marginal seats in farming Australia, and the real problem, one suspects, is that there aren't any political parties who are actually interested in the inland. Basically sensible policies like those initiated by Kerin have been slow to come, then fail in the execution and the fine print, largely because nobody is watching and nobody in power is listening.*

but the prices for wheat and wool were so depressed that not even the comparatively fortunate farmers could build up cash reserves. One no-income year, and things are desperate.

It takes two minutes to walk across the main street from the sagging verandah of the big old Trundle pub—all rooms closed now, except for the front bar—to the post office, where there is a community noticeboard advertising the Trundle Debutante Ball. There are six debts to be presented, but it doesn't say to whom. There is also a poster about courses in therapeutic massage, reflexology and Reiki I & II—'Learn to help yourself in troubled times.'

Also at the post office is a schedule of rainfall in the district since 1888. The driest year was 1902, with 796 points. So far this year, there have been just 508 points. Trundle may be heading for a personal worst. In the hardware shop, which is up for sale, a farmer is overheard to say he is about to put his remaining sheep into the canola crop to eat it off. 'Hopeless,' his words drift out. 'Bloody hopeless.' Yet everyone knows that Trundle is not the worst off.

In Queensland, it has been like this for four years. There is no dusting of green, no unravelling crops, nothing to hold the soil down at all.

It just blows away and nobody talks about hope at all.

LATER, TALKING TO the local Rural Financial Counsellor, Mary Ewing, I hear that under the strict criteria of the Rural Adjustment Scheme as applied by the New South Wales government, Trundle farmers do not qualify for assistance. To do so, they would have had to have been drought-declared for the past three months, and drought-declared for at least six out of 12 months in at least two of the preceding three financial years. Trundle fails the second condition.

Even more insulting: these guidelines were not published. Ms Ewing learned about them when she rang up and asked.

In a recent article in *The Australian*, former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser argued for a more interventionist approach by government to drought. He said the skills of our farmers were a national asset, which should be protected from erosion or replacement by big multinational land-owning corporations. He compared the situation of the farming industry to that of steel. The government, in spite of its free-market-oriented ideology, had been prepared, early in its term, to hand out almost \$1 billion to help revamp steel mills when BHP claimed the industry was in jeopardy. Fraser speculated that the double standard might be because farmers are conservative voters. 'Is the government deliberately using the drought to destroy a strong group of independent-minded Australians who normally would not be government supporters?' he asked.

What are the skills that Fraser says we should be acting to preserve? They are skills that are invisible

to most of us. On the drive back from Trundle, I ask: 'Okay, just suppose that front had brought rain. What do you do? Is it too late to sow the rest of the crop?'

The farmer considers. 'It depends. If you had the right soil available and the right wheat, a late-bearing wheat, you might take the risk.'

'What's the right soil?'

'Well, in this area there's a black soil and a red soil. The red soil is lighter textured. You need less rain to grow a crop. If you had that, and the seed in hand, you might take a gamble.'

'Why would it be a gamble if it rained? Wouldn't that make everything all right?'

'Well, you'd need more rain in three weeks or so, or the crop'd just die. Then every two weeks until it began to ripen. Then no more or the heads begin to sprout before you can harvest.'

'And October and November are dry months normally?'

'Yep. Then you usually get rain at the other end, in autumn. Just when you don't want it.'

'So you probably wouldn't make it.'

'Yep.'

'A big gamble.'

'Yep. There's a lot of variables.'

He goes on to point out particular paddocks—some where the crop is doing better than others. This, he says, is because of the quality of the fallow in the preceding year. Water was stored up in the subsoil. He points out the paddocks of a farmer who habitually overstocks, in good times and in bad. The paddocks have that vacuum-cleaned look. The farmer is looking for stock agistment on other people's farms. There is none to be had.

'He just flogs his land. Just flogs it,' he says.

Daunted by the way he reads the landscape, I ask: 'How do you learn all these things?'

'Experience. Reading. The Department of Agriculture. My father.' There is a pause. 'Trouble is, 'can't use it to do anything else.'

Paranoia in the bush leads some to believe that Fraser is right about a campaign to rid the country of farmers, but the recent history of drought policy does not show active hostility, so much as neglect. As in most things in life, the cock-up theory seems more likely than the conspiracy.

There were big changes in the Rural Adjustment Scheme (RAS), which is the main vehicle of government aid, two years ago. The changes were announced by the then Minister for Primary Industries, Simon Crean, but resulted largely from the work of his predecessor, John Kerin. Kerin, who is one of the few politicians most farmers speak of with something resembling respect, set up a task force to review drought policy. It was this task force that for the first time made the 'normalcy' of periods of drought official. It was probably the first time anyone in government had looked at the issue without the ingrained

*Continued p18*





## Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!

*I love a sunburnt country,  
A land of sweeping plains,  
Of ragged mountain ranges,  
Of droughts and flooding rains.*

**G**ENERATIONS OF CHILDREN have been taught to sing about love of this country in terms that, to minds trained in a European tradition, make the attachment seem foolish if not improbable.

City people reading about the present drought might be forgiven for feeling slightly impatient. It seems that every few years there is a fuss about lack of rain, or too much of it. The drought that Bob Hawke seemed to claim credit for breaking in the early 1980s got international coverage because of its severity. There was another drought in 1988-89, yet surely it was only a couple of years ago that there were appeals for farmers affected by flood?

The song got it right. Australia is very different from Europe. The eastern half of our continent is governed by seesaw-like climate oscillation which means that periods of drought and flood are normal. In recent years, this realisation has been reflected in changes to government policy that seek to encourage a view of drought as a normal part of farm management, rather than as a natural disaster.

One side of the climatic see-saw is known as the El Nino effect. El Nino translates literally from Spanish as the 'boy child'. Peruvian anchovy fishermen used the term, a reference to the Christ child, to describe the appearance of a warm ocean current off the South American coast at Christmas time.

Now meteorologists understand that El Nino affects the entire Pacific Basin—almost half of the globe. When the climatic seesaw is pitching towards El Nino, ocean temperatures in the central and eastern Pacific become warmer than average, while the west cools. At the same time, air pressure in the eastern Pacific becomes lower than normal, and pressures over Australia in-

crease. These changes mean that rain that normally falls over eastern Australia falls over the ocean instead.

After an El Nino period the seesaw normally tips the other way, towards La Nina ('the girl child'). During these periods, the effects are reversed, bringing Australia much higher rainfall than usual, and often floods.

According to the head of climate analysis for the Bureau of Meteorology's national climate centre, Mary Voice, there is no reason to believe that climate conditions have changed since European settlement, or as a result of the greenhouse effect: Australia just is a riskier place for agriculture than most other places in the world, and it is normal for substantial parts of the continent to be in drought about twice a decade.

Having said that, however, it remains clear that the present drought is unusual in that there has been a chain of El Nino episodes that have not been separated by Las Ninas.

The 1990-91 wet season was very wet in Queensland, yet the next year there was virtually no rain, and drought set in across the north of the continent. The El Nino effect then began to weaken, bringing the floods of spring 1992 to south-eastern Australia. Then, unusually, El Nino revived and then weakened again in 1993, bringing more floods to the south, and a cool summer. Now El Nino has again reimposed itself.

Although the floods indicated a weakening in El Nino, there was no intervening La Nina effect in the Pacific. Queensland and northern New South Wales remained in drought throughout.

**T**HE HISTORICAL CLIMATE records show that a sequence of unbroken El Nino effects of this length has only occurred once before in the history of European settlement, in 1911-15. There were other long El Nino episodes at the end of the last century, and at the beginning of the Second World War. One of the main problems for farmers is that meteorologists usually cannot predict an El

Nino year until April or May, which is after time and money has been spent ploughing, fertilising and sowing crops. Had good farmers known they were heading for an El Nino year, they may have decided to preserve top soil and save money by leaving the land fallow.

Mary Voice says: 'Once we have seen the whites of El Nino's eyes, so to speak, we can get a fairly good idea of how long it is likely to continue, but the problem is that is too late for some really crucial farming decisions.' The bureau believes the present El Nino effect will last until around November, then begin to break down, bringing rains in late summer or autumn. This will be too late for this year's crop, but if the bureau could convince farmers of the accuracy of its prediction, it could influence other decisions with implications for land conservation.

'The outlook means there is no sense in keeping stock on land in the hope of rain soon, and just degrading the land further,' says Mary Voice. 'Those with agistment options or the ability to transport stock elsewhere would be better advised to look at that. Of course, the hard fact is that many farmers simply don't have those options.'

At present research is aimed at predicting the onset of El Nino before autumn, when farmers make their most crucial decisions. The predictions must be based on complex computer modelling of the interactions between two fluids—in this case, the Pacific Ocean and the atmosphere. The bureau and the CSIRO are among the world leaders in developing the necessary computer models.

How responsive are farmers to the bureau's advice? Mary Voice says farmers are an increasingly receptive audience. 'Some farmers still sow every year on Anzac Day, come rain, hail or drought, but most realise that in Australian conditions, all your management decisions have to be based on complex variables.' ■

—Margaret Simons



*Stock coming off the trucks are as bad as he has seen: Noel Hook, Carrum Downs farmer for 30 years and abattoir stockman for seven years. Photo: Bill Thomas.*

assumptions of European agriculture. The policy that resulted stated that drought was not a calamity, and not a national disaster requiring special effort and sympathy, but a normal part of Australian farming. Government policy would be aimed at encouraging management of the drought risk, and the taxpayers would only be called on to help farmers who were good producers, and good for the environment. Even in times of exceptional difficulty, such as a prolonged drought, only the 'long-term viable' farmers would get government aid.

**J**IM LEES, FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND'S rural development centre, says the change was common sense. 'Why did it take so long? I think it was just folklore that drought is a natural disaster and therefore should come under natural-disaster policy. Kerin was imaginative enough to raise the question: is this sensible when some area of Australia is nearly always in drought, and we have a major drought every three to four years?

'There are methods of dry-land farming developed in South Australia which are probably uniquely Australian, but by and large we still farm with similar assumptions to the ones that operate in Europe, although we are in radically different circumstances.'

The operation of the old RAS had certainly been a problem. The scheme tended to operate as a lender of last resort for farmers who could not get bank finance. These were often the very people whom everyone—from soil conservationists to their neighbours—wanted off the land. Good farmers often weren't needy enough. They got no help.

Now, in theory at least, the only circumstance in which non-viable farmers can get RAS help is if they are wanting to leave the land, in which case they can apply for up to \$45,000 to establish a new life. If they are not willing to give up farming, then the gov-

ernment ignores them altogether. At the other end of the scale, the RAS provides interest-rate subsidies of up to 50 per cent for farmers borrowing to upgrade their farms or their skills. As well, in times of exceptional difficulty, such as long-term drought, interest-rate subsidies of up to 100 per cent would be available to farmers who meet the eligibility guidelines.

Mary Ewing says that most good farmers do not argue with the underlying principle behind the government's drought policy. The problems are in the fine print and the implementation, and they are so basic that one can only conclude that they are the result of blindness on the part of government and bureaucracy. For

example, the guidelines for access to RAS grants in times of exceptional difficulty are phrased entirely in terms of helping farmers make productivity improvements, despite the fact that common sense tells you that in the middle of a four-year drought, after half a decade of declining commodity prices, improvements to productivity are hardly likely.

You do not have to be cynical to regard the guidelines for 'exceptional difficulty' RAS grants as being a Catch 22. If you are sufficiently well off to be borrowing for increased productivity, then you probably don't need help. The best thing that can be said is that in the zeal to encourage farmers to be self-reliant, nobody seems to have thought through what 'exceptional difficulty' might mean in real terms. Not surprisingly, RAS grants paid out during the past two years have fallen short of the amount allocated for them, meaning that there have been amounts of up to \$150 million earning interest in government coffers while the breeding stock has been slaughtered, children taken out of school and properties run down.

Jim Lees says more problems have also occurred in assessing which farms are sustainable in the long-term. 'They do get it wrong consistently. They usually don't even go onto a property, but look at the income and expenditure figures. You can find plenty of farmers who have been refused RAS [help] because they were not meant to be sustainable, who are still there 10 years later, and others who are refused it because they supposedly don't need it, who go under.'

The government has issued many press releases about moves to encourage and assist farmers to prepare for drought. In fact the effort has been half-hearted. Farmers are meant to be able to gain tax benefits by putting surplus cash from the good years in the Income Equalization Deposits Scheme. This cash would then be available for withdrawal in bad years. The IED was the main mechanism announced by Crean to encourage planning for bad years. But again,

the fine print means the scheme is of little use. Interest-rate terms and withholding tax make deposits in the IED so unattractive that out of about 130,000 farmers in Australia, there are only about six thousand or so deposits in the scheme.

There are very few marginal seats in farming Australia, and the real problem, one suspects, is that there aren't any political parties who are actually interested in the inland. Basically sensible policies like those initiated by Kerin and introduced by Crean have been slow to come, then fail in the execution and the fine print, largely because nobody is watching and nobody in power is listening.

Communication with rural communities has been woeful. According to Joan Kennedy, of the Smith Family charity, some of the most desperate families—mainly in Queensland, where the drought has persisted for four years—have approached the charity for help without realising that they might have been eligible for farm household support, or some other assistance from Social Security. Nobody had told them about it.

Mary Ewing says that crucial guidelines governing RAS eligibility were not published but rather communicated by telephone—and only then when she asked for them. As well, grants made available to help with employing farm labour were announced in a news conference, but no information was released. Ewing's telephone calls to find out about the application procedures were passed from department to department, until she found out that guidelines had not yet been agreed. 'Oh yes, we're having a meeting about that next week,' she was told. Meanwhile, agricultural labourers joined the lists of the unemployed. It is hard to believe that any other major industry would be treated in the same way.

**A**T THE FORBES SHOW, the children paid high prices to take sideshow rides decorated with pictures of Michael Jackson and Bart Simpson—international symbols of confused and belligerent youth. But their parents tended to shun the fast-food caravans and instead patronised the tea tents run by the Uniting Church. Here you could get a sandwich, two slices of cake and limitless tea from giant aluminium pots, all for a couple of dollars. Next door there were rissole sandwiches, sausage sandwiches and steak sandwiches for two dollars apiece, courtesy of the Baptist Church. The faces around the tables, when relaxed and unconscious of observation, set into stubborn lines. A handwritten poster read, 'God Provides All We Need. Have You Said Thank You Lately?'

In mid-September, after some parts of the country had been in drought for nearly half a decade, the Government changed the eligibility guidelines for the RAS and increased total funding, as well as introducing a new type of Social

Security for farmers in extreme difficulties who previously had been shut out because the assets test. The announcement of the changes followed Keating's tour of drought-affected Queensland, but bureaucrats were hinting at them for weeks before.

The Department of Primary Industries' director of rural access and communities, Bernie Scott, described the changes as 'fine tuning'. Certainly they do not depart from the basic government position of not treating the drought as a national disaster. Nevertheless, for drought-affected farmers the moves were more like an engine refit. They effectively put the social security safety net that city dwellers take for granted under farmers as well, guaranteeing that, just like city folk on hard times, they would at least be able to pay the household bills and put food on the table.

How the changes to the RAS will work remains to be seen, but perhaps the most significant thing is that these basic, hard-to-argue changes took so long to achieve, although there has been support for them from all sides—Labor backbenchers, Democrats and the National Farmers Federation.

In the longer term, farmers may also be helped, by tax incentives, to plan for drought. Silos, for example, which can be used to store surplus wheat for use as feed in bad years, may be able to be 100 per cent written off against income in the first year. Again, this is a small but significant move which has been put to Canberra in submissions from a variety of groups for many years, but without effect until now.

Only when there is a drought, and the impact is felt on the national accounts, does attention flicker in the direction of the inland.

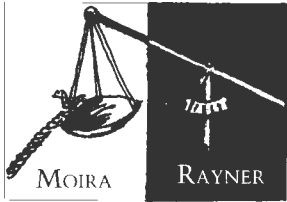
Then we put scarecrows in our banks. ■

**Margaret Simons** is a freelance writer and regular contributor to *Eureka Street*.

*Photo: Bill Thomas*



*Paranoia in the bush leads some to believe that Malcolm Fraser is right about a campaign to rid the country of farmers, but the recent history of drought policy does not show active hostility, so much as neglect. As in most things in life, the cock-up theory seems more likely than the conspiracy.*



# Beware those radicals, Kennett & Co.

**V**ICTORIA'S KENNETT GOVERNMENT TURNS TWO on 2 October 1994.

Last month the Victorian *Law Institute Journal* published an article attributed to the state's Attorney-General, Jan Wade, which said: 'Some lawyers ... seem to have found a new enthusiasm for such previously fuddy-duddy concepts as the division of powers and the rule of law now that they see an opportunity to deploy them against a conservative government ... we have heard diatribes on subjects ranging from an alleged explosion in the use of legislative clauses ousting judicial review to the manner in which the replacement of the Equal Opportunity Commissioner with a five-person commission outraged the separation of powers, the last of which must have had both Montesquieu and Sir Owen Dixon, if not spinning in their graves, then at least in a state of considerable subterranean confusion.'

As the author of one such 'diatribe' and the subject of Mrs Wade's little joke, I reply:

*First*, that the Kennett government is not conservative. It is a radical right-wing government bent on dismantling the accountable state to achieve free-market objectives. In the August 1994 edition of *Civil Liberty*, Spencer Zifcak lists what it has already done to weaken the independence and relative power of:

**Parliament and the people**, through time-limits on debate on bills; ensuring that all new parliamentary committees have government majorities; substantive lawmaking by subordinate legislation; the replacement of elected local-government councils with commissioners.

**Courts and judges**, by routine exclusion of jurisdiction of the Supreme Court; dismissal of 11 Accident Compensation Tribunal judges; attacks on the DPP (and, I add, dismissal of the Industrial Relations Commissioners, and failure to reappoint 'ALP-associated' Administrative Appeals Tribunal members, or the Liquor Licensing Commissioner who investigated Kennett's licence).

**Quasi-judicial bodies**, through exemptions for 'cabinet' documents (and through privatised government business dealings, such as the Melbourne Main Events Company) under Freedom of Information; dismissal of the Commissioner for Equal Opportunity (I indisputably exercised quasi-judicial discretion in my inquiry into discrimination against women prisoners); ministerial control over conciliation and punitive costs provisions to discourage complaints;

assumption of direct planning responsibility by the Minister for Planning (at the expense of the AAT); 'review' of the Public Advocate and failure to fill his vacant position; placing the Ombudsman and other statutory officers (including the new Equal Opportunity Commission) on contracts. (To these, add the resignation of the coroner and efforts by Nick Pappas, former DPP prosecutor and now chief magistrate, to remove the head of the Children's Court.

**Administration**, with 40,000 public servants gone; the introduction of private-sector management style (including 'contracts' terminable on a month's notice without cause); removal of state-owned enterprises from public-sector accountability mechanisms.

Conservative? The face and style of Victorian government have changed utterly in two years.

*Second*, that the constitutional provisions entrenching the role and jurisdiction of the Supreme Court of Victoria were enacted by the Hamer Liberal

government in 1975 explicitly to protect the 'rule of law' and to establish the court as part of the essential legal framework of the state. That government even considered incorporating a bill of rights into the constitution. Mrs Wade now appears to think this is 'fuddy-duddy', but until 1993 she was a member of the Victorian branch executive of the International Commission of Jurists (as I was and still am)—a body predicated on defending the rule of law and independence of the judiciary.

*Third*, of course the 1975 constitution had been amended before Kennett, but on nothing like his scale of butchery.

Section 18(2)(b) of the constitution requires any bill that derogates from the Supreme Court's jurisdiction to be passed by an 'absolute majority in both houses' or it will be void. By 1989 it had





become apparent that Parliament had inadvertently breached that provision by ordinary Acts which gave exclusive jurisdiction to other courts (such as the AAT) or excluded review entirely (such as the Retail Tenancies Act 1986). These were retrospectively validated in 1990. Since 1992 a specific provision calling the attention of the Parliament to the intended amendment of the constitution has been necessary.

It is hard to identify 'indirect' amendments before 1992, but I conducted a quick statutory search in mid-September. I found that under Cain and Kirner there were arguably four such amendments in 1990 (three excluding claims to compensation for resumed land, one validating the State Bank transaction) out of a total of 94 statutes; there were 10 out of a similar number in 1991, and 10 before the change of government in 1992, nearly all of which limited land compensation. One was particularly controversial, and concerned the sale of land to Collingwood Football Club.

The ALP's hands are not clean, either, but they less mired than those of the Kennett Government.

I also noticed one particularly unsettling constitutional change made under Kennett. In 1991 Kirner had explicitly established the Supreme Court's right to review decisions made under the Casino Control Act; in 1993, Kennett removed the Supreme Court's jurisdiction entirely.

*Fourth*, it is a novel defence to a charge of wrongdoing to argue that someone else has done it before. Is genocide less culpable because Hitler, Pol Pot and the Rwandan Hutus have practised it? And dismissing criticism as politically partisan ignores the fact that members of Jan Wade's own party have also criticised her for misunderstanding the principles of the rule of law.

*Finally*, I was Victoria's last Commissioner for Equal Opportunity. I was removed and replaced by a five-person commission of very limited independence on 1 March 1994 because complaints of discrimination had been made by people affected by new government policies—employment laws, public sector cuts, school closures, public transport and women's prisons; I was blamed for enabling them to assert their claims of right, and thus being an obstacle to efficient government. Individual rights complaints are always a splinter in the bannister of administration. It was my statutory duty to promote the human rights that the Equal Opportunity Act was enacted to protect, originally (again) by the Hamer Liberal Government, and I was appointed to do it for five years, by the Governor-in-Council in 1990.

Kennett's Government is committed to absolute authority and to free-market principles, and to being accountable only through elections and the measures of economic performance that it sets itself.

Happy anniversary, fellow Ozarkians. ■

**Moira Rayner** is a lawyer and freelance journalist.

## A When in Rome ...

**A**RCHIMEDES AND FAMILY were at New York's Kennedy Airport awaiting a plane to Rome when boarding calls were made for a Paris flight scheduled at the same time. With hundreds of others, they were still waiting when the Paris flight took off.

Finally the Italian announcer crackled into life. We are sorry for the delay, she said. No, it wasn't a mechanical fault or a baggage handlers' strike. Someone had forgotten to tell the crew that it was the eve of a long weekend in the US, and they were caught in traffic somewhere between their Manhattan hotel and the airport. Instead of becoming angry, the waiting passengers gave a good-natured sigh of recognition. In the midst of New York, they were already in Italy. And in the end, despite leaving 90 minutes late, the flight arrived in Rome on time.

Travel is a healthy antidote for those who think technology necessarily destroys culture. For instance, computerised vending machines have revolutionised tourism in Italy. No longer does the hapless visitor face the impossible task of working out just when Italian banks and post offices are open. Now, one just has to decipher the puzzling instructions and insert a credit card in such a way that the machine does not swallow it for good.

There are automatic machines to dispense almost anything—the latest videos, train tickets and Italian currency. Their smooth functioning ultimately depends, however, on having humans to explain how they work, or to fill in when they break down. And that's when the fun begins, because there is nothing that Italians like better than talking.

One gets the feeling that for 3000 years (and probably more) Italian culture has revolved round negotiation—and technology merely contributes to the game. In Rome, pedestrians are in constant negotiation with the drivers of cars and motor scooters, and minor accidents tend to be resolved peacefully by ritual athletic negotiation.

And now Italians can negotiate in ways undreamt of before mobile phones became so compact and widely available. Not surprisingly, Italians have taken to the cellular phone like Australians to wine-coolers. After all, when all else fails one can negotiate via phone. No well-dressed young man about town would think of leaving home without a mobile phone in a designer-leather pouch clipped to his designer-leather belt. And speaking of phones, the advent of the phone-card has completely changed the public phone system. Gone are the ubiquitous *gettone*—the telephone tokens that used to serve as currency in times when change was short.

It is hard to take predictions of cultural extinction too seriously when surrounded by abundant evidence of the technological prowess of previous Italian cultures. The ancient Romans had heated swimming pools and flushing toilets, and better roads than their modern counterparts have. In the Coliseum they produced a stadium the equivalent of an MCG which has lasted two millennia. And all this technology hardly seems to have destroyed the vibrancy of Italian culture.

There is one thing Italian scientists could work on, however. If someone could genetically engineer an Italian dog to clean up after itself in the same way that millions of Roman cats do, then cultural life would be greatly improved. ■

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

# Migration: the flow becomes a trickle

**S**INCE WORLD WAR II Australians have become accustomed to comprehensive immigration programs. Governments have done much more than secure the integrity of our borders: they have sought to introduce policy that managed the movement of people in a way that would help develop the nation as a whole. Given our history it's no surprise that the settlement of people lies close to the heart of our nationhood. However the intake announced for 1994/95 by the Minister, Nick Bolkus indicates that we may be witnessing the demise of the extensive immigration program.

According to Senator Bolkus, the nominal increase of 10,000 (to 73,000 for this year), mainly made up of individuals already on-shore, was not a prelude to a more active immigration program. He stated that the low increase was a recognition of a 'need for the benefits of Australia's economic recovery to be focused on the country's unemployed'.

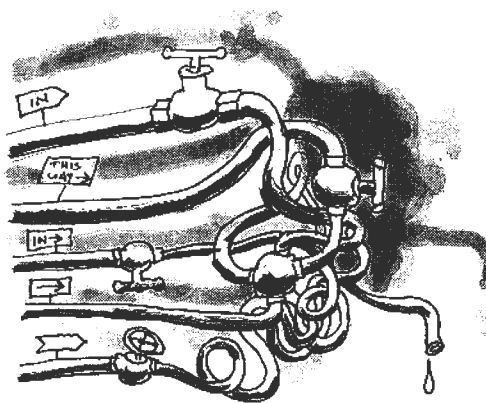
Despite the impression that in the future policy will no longer be framed on an economic basis, Labor still pays regard to notions of how immigration can best serve our economic goals. In many ways the policy that is currently being articulated by Canberra represents a convenient marriage of the arguments both for and against immigration. Moreover, the refugee program is now more dependent upon questions of cost than need.

Those opposed to high immigration argue that new arrivals place demands on the public sector, requiring extra spending in housing, health services, education and social security. This spending stretches the current account deficit, which is not adequately compensated when migrants find their feet and become more economically productive. Most importantly they compound our unemployment problem.

Opponents of this viewpoint believe the net economic effect of immigration must be assessed more closely. Australian-born residents also place demands on the public sector, so these costs are not solely imposed by migrants. And new arrivals tend to show more than the usual amount of initiative and thereby contribute more through their very enterprise. Supporters of immigration policy dispute figures that show its nega-

tive impact, arguing that no definite conclusions can be drawn until extensive studies are conducted over a longer time frame.

Even though the Government has decided not to use the stimulus of immigrant labour as we move out of recession (as has been the policy in the past) it still recognises the economic potential of migrants. Included in the planned intake for 1994/95 are those designated as having investment potential. Canberra hopes to bring \$600 million into the



country over the next three years in this way.

For the Government, such migrants represent a magic solution. The resources they bring to Australia, both personal and financial, provide a much-needed fillip to the economy, and they are not as much of a burden on government services. It is the search for the perfect migrant, and the bureaucratic process of filling those 73,000 places will function to support this.

A third of the new arrivals in 1994/95 will be admitted under the 'skills component', which is administered by a points test. Applicants are assessed on their level of education, work experience, age and command of English. This also applies to a quarter of the places put aside for family reunion. If an applicant fits into the 'concessional category', i.e. he/she is not a parent with more children in Australia than elsewhere, a spouse or dependent child of someone already in Australia, then he or she must also comply with the test. Effectively, this means that half of the migrant intake will be accepted by the department on the basis of their skills and resources.

Added to these policy directives, the

*Migrant Reform Act 1992* came into effect on 1 September. The overriding feature of the new legislation is the greater discretionary power placed in the hands of the Minister and the department. Most significantly, the act diminishes the power of the Federal Court to review the decision process.

What the Government is designing is a leaner, more economically dynamic program. But the concern the Government has shown towards the cost of settlement extends beyond the migration program itself to those admitted on humanitarian grounds.

Labor has presided over a steady diminution of the offshore intake under the refugee and humanitarian program. Over 21,900 people were settled in 1981/82. This has fallen to a projected figure of 13,000 for 1993/94. Nicki Marshall from the Ecumenical Migration Office in Melbourne finds it unacceptable that these figures have dropped: 'You have massive increases in global migration and displaced people and refugees and at the very same time we actually have a halving of Australian refugee and humanitarian intake'.

If those arriving on humanitarian grounds are accepted on a different basis from other migrants, why is it that the two intakes rise and fall together? Mark Deasey from Community Aid Abroad argues that it has much to do with the intertwining of immigration and refugee policy: 'These two have been confused. As the migration intake has been progressively pegged back we've had the refugee intake pegged back as well'. Deasey concedes that the Refugee Review Tribunal, established in July last year as part of the new act, has the potential to provide a more just process for on-shore claimants for refuge, but that off-shore numbers seem likely to remain more or less at current levels.

The shift from a mass immigration policy is perhaps a reflection of the change in the fundamentals of an economy no longer reliant upon labour-intensive production. The Government would now prefer new arrivals to start a company of their own rather than go on to the factory floor. Refugees, on the other hand, must fit in where they can. ■

Jon Greenaway is a staff writer.

# Isolation

*H Division used to be the maximum-security punishment section in Pentridge. It was built in the 1850s, but prisoners broke rocks as punishment there up till the mid 1970s. By the time it closed, in August, I had spent four long years there. I was assaulted on occasions, but the real torment of the place was the sense of isolation. I wrote what follows during 1993. It touches briefly on what the place was like, and draws from my years there.*

—Craig W.J. Minogue

**I**N MY PRISON BED I SLEEP CURLED UP, my arms tightly wrapped around the pillow. I long for the feel of another person, to feel their breath and heartbeat on me, to touch the soft skin of my lover.

The isolation closed in on me at first; the world withered away and I was enclosed in a dark, damp box, the walls slowly moving in. Outside the door are disembodied voices. Three times a day, hands push food through a small hole in the steel door. I look up to see the face but the opening slams shut.

After some time the claustrophobic shrinkage stopped. My mind took over and expanded the space. It compensates by running at full speed, filling the void with snapshots of my life that flash past in a blur of colour. In spite of myself I grow to like the isolation. I have only myself, I don't have to interact, I don't have to be real. I just exist; me and my mind.

I become accustomed to the 4 x 6 metre yards with drain holes to urinate in. But then I fight against the shame and embarrassment, as I squat over a drain hole to defecate because they will not let me out of the yard. The worry of becoming sick grinds me down. There is no real medical treatment in H Division. Don't get sick, I say over and over to myself. Human touch becomes something I don't know how to approach. How do I shake hands? I have to be too close. Touch your fellow isolatees on the shoulder and they spin around, their accusing eyes burning. I find it hard to touch. I don't know how to do it, and it becomes normal not to touch.

Visitors arrive. I feel the strangeness when shaking hands. My mind transports me out of the scene and I become the observer; there is something wrong but I cannot put my finger on it. The handshake breaks. No longer the observer, I wonder if it was too long or too hard. I feel the embarrassed flush of blood to my face and hope they have not noticed.

We hug. My flesh hardens, a shell forms on me like a dead thing which is not my own. This is not me. I love, I feel, but I now find it hard to express emotion, they are taking it from me. I wonder if my visitors see behind the veneer I am working so hard at making. I want to fight against what this place has done to me but I can only try to cover it, to hide it from view. The isolation, it's an empty space. Not like an isolated landscape, it has nothing in it, only my mind that goes over and over every conversation, every moment. It's all churned up.

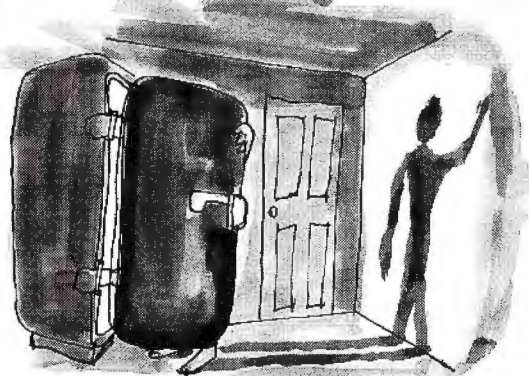
I feel worn out as I return from the visit. A letter awaits me. A man I saw in our prison yard only days before writes for help. He had stepped onto the tram only metres from the prison gate, and felt like exploding—he felt threatened by the people, the noise, by an ordinary weekday tram. He writes: 'if only I had a gun I would be safe. The people were too close, they were looking at me. I sat there and saw myself shoot them all.'

He is slowly coming to terms with the effects of this place and has not exploded. But as I write this I am only a few cells down from where I remember lying on the concrete floor, my naked body shaking from the bitter cold and isolation that ran through me like an electric current. Toilet paper wrapped around my icy finger tips. The world evaporated, I could not picture what lay beyond the cell, it was all blank.

I concentrated on the warm patches that were my bruises and baton welts and tried to make the warmth spread. I slept. Another day in an Australian prison. Isolation. ■

Graphic by  
Tohm Hajnci

**Craig W.J. Minogue** is serving a term of a minimum 27 years in the Victorian Prison System.



# My childhood door

*Cynthia Rowan retraces her Murri family life*

**W**HAT WILL I WRITE? What can I say about my life when I have had so many different experiences as the second youngest of eight children. It could be just *my* perceptions of what it was like growing up on the fringes of society and becoming a mother at 15 years of age.

The one constant aspect which has sustained me throughout my life is the unconditional love and respect that we as a family have for each other. Our mother, only surviving brother, sisters and our children are the immediate spiritual strength which enable us to overcome the pain and indignation of racism and prejudice in our lives. Our mother has had a powerful influence, but her love and understanding could not always protect and keep us safe from the bitterness and hate projected from the wider community to us, just because we are Murri people. In spite of this, we have survived, and look back in astonishment on the many trials we faced and overcame.

My earliest memory of our mother was her beautiful voice. She sang to us when she was working around the tin humpy. Some times she would whistle various tunes; it still brings joy to my heart when I think of those times. Even though we lived on a pensioners' reserve, in a tin shack with a dirt floor, it seems that the smaller children were sheltered from the struggle that our parents were going through.

Our parents had separated when I was a small child, but our father lived near by and had close contact with us throughout his life. Dad died when I was very young. As a result my only memories are of a man who would do anything I wanted. My sisters tell me that Dad spoilt me.

On reflection it seems that, unlike many Murri families, we were not exposed to the family network during our early years. It was later in life that we found out that Dad's relations were on government reserves and could not come and go as they pleased. I recall one cousin who would visit us at school. He was not allowed on the school grounds. We had to go to the front gate to speak to him. Much later we came to understand that he was permitted to visit us when he was brought to town as part of his work. But we were never given an explanation as to why he was not allowed onto school grounds.

We were great explorers and would mount an expedition into the bush and discussion would focus on what Murri people would do in the area. We knew that this was not our country, and made sure that we only went to areas where we were allowed to go. When we played with other Murri children we discussed

such things as our meat (totem) and where our fathers' country was. We knew some of our language and would take great delight in exchanging words and their meanings with the other Murri kids. These moments were magic. The experiences reinforced our Aboriginality, and gave meaning to our existence.

My first experience of the way in which 'white' Australians considered us as inferior was when playing with a 'white' girl. Her next door neighbour told me that all I needed to know was how to write my name. At the time I did not think much of that comment. When I returned home I told our mother what the lady had said to me. I recall Mum's saying that education would help me not only to write my name, but to learn many things.

As we grew older we became more exposed to comments such as these and began to realise that we were considered different from other children and that we should not aspire to anything higher than domestic work, even though my sister and I had dreamed of becoming air hostesses when we grew up.



Our school experiences reinforced what 'white' adults were saying to us, that is, we should not expect to get good jobs. My most painful experience occurred when the School Inspector asked me to read a section from our Social Studies book. The section was on Aboriginal people—we were described as dirty, lazy blacks. I still remember the humiliation and indignation I felt when reading the paragraph. I became upset. The teacher attempted to console me by saying that I was a 'part Aborigine' and it did not refer to me. I often wondered if they had ever considered what they were really saying. We were unable to attend school sometimes because we did not have any food or money for bus fares.

On many occasions we had to explain the situation to the Head Master, who was sympathetic but unyielding. We got a good talking to. At times the



racism from other children would become unbearable, but we fought back. On several occasions we were ganged up on by 'white' kids, but we were good fighters and would come away winning the battle. After these experiences the 'white' kids would tease us from afar.

But not all our experiences were negative. We had some really good friends who would invite us to their homes and their parents would welcome us without reservation. We went to birthday parties and other family activities. Some of the teachers taught us well and encouraged us to learn. As a result I have warm memories of their efforts—they were contrary to what other 'white' adults were telling us.

We were encouraged to learn as much as possible. Our parents purchased a set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which was kept in our tin humpy for us children to use.

When I think of the condition of our housing (if you could call it that), our most expensive asset was books. We were also encouraged to read as much as possible. This included reading magazines and newspaper articles to Mum, and drawing up a list of groceries. Any government documentation was interpreted by us and we were expected to undertake household duties, as well as school work.

On reflection, these skills have stood us in good stead. Our mother constantly told us that honesty is the best policy. As an adult I tend to become very indignant as I expect people with whom I interact to be truthful. But sadly this is not always the case. Other values our mother enforced included sharing of our resources without reservation. To this day she still would give her last cent to assist someone in need. Her words were: 'Share what you have with others.' Mum also told us that we were equal to everyone else. A person in the gutter is just as good as someone who is rich. It seems that this was her way of teaching us that everyone has human dignity and should be treated with respect regardless of their situation. She reinforced these values daily not only in words but also in her interaction with others.

**M**UM ALWAYS CARRIED HERSELF with dignity and was proud of her American Negro/South Sea heritage.

I seem to recall that it was only a small group of 'white' kids who found offence with our colour. During all our schooling experiences our mother never failed to support us in words and action. As the youngest children in our family, we grew up pretty fast and we were soon taught how to handle 'white' people who tried to belittle us. By about grade six in primary

school the attitude of our friends towards us had begun to change. The warm friendship of the early years of primary school was no longer there. It seemed that there was no future for us in the education system. After leaving school I gained employment in a variety

of jobs. These ranged from domestic duties to factory work.

We often talk of our childhood experiences and the happy situation of our growing years. When we gather on occasions such as Christmas or other holidays, laughter and teasing are part and parcel of our activities. Card games and storytelling keep our children amused for hours. Like many Aboriginal families, we marvel at the expressions on our children's faces when they begin to realise that we were once children who struggled against racism, prejudice and rejection. Our experience in overcoming such situations has prepared our children for these issues.

I worked in Brisbane for almost a year and returned home when I was pregnant. All my former school friends avoided me and 'well-meaning white' people told me to give my baby away. My family supported me in many ways and did not reject me like so many others did. At that particular time, single mothers were frowned upon and considered to be a blight on society.

I was blessed with a healthy son who grew up to be thoughtful, kind, considerate and unconditional in his love for me. Most of all he is my friend who looks out for me. I often thank God for the many blessings bestowed on me, especially for my son who has been my strength and the focus of my love.

After the birth of my son I did not work for several months. I then found employment that took me from home early in the morning and I arrived home late. The heartache and joys of being a single parent have sustained me throughout my life. I had to contend with racism but my son faced both racism and the stigma of being a child of a single woman. How he survived he has never told me, but he found a good friend, who considers him as his brother, and their friendship has spanned more than fifteen years.

On many occasions in his growing years there would be up to six boys in my house, visiting and checking out the refrigerator. To this day I cannot understand why they would open the fridge door to check out the contents. The ritual of walking in the back door and opening the refrigerator may have been another way of saying hello. ■

**Cynthia Rowan** is a lecturer at the Capricornia Aboriginal and Islander Tertiary Education Centre in the Central Queensland University at Rockhampton.



## Sound Bites

*Domenico Scarlatti  
was driven almost batty  
by friends who said, 'Please  
won't you play Kitten on the keys?'*

*Gregorio Allegri  
enjoyed watching Maigret  
but Arcangelo Corelli  
despised the telly.*

*Maria Callas  
turned down a part in Dallas,  
saying 'I'm La Divina,  
book me for Palestrina.'*

*Jean Baptiste Lully  
was such a bully  
he even got his way  
with Le Roi Soleil.*

*Baldassare Galuppi  
was a bit of a yuppy;  
there was no one smarter  
at a toccata.*

*When Harry Birtwistle  
choked on some gristle  
he complained, 'The gravy's  
all gone to Maxwell Davies.'*

**Peter Porter**

## Rain

*Late afternoon: rain brushes past the window  
And I feel less alone. I know that, soon,  
It will all stop; but now it breaks the day  
In a procession of days, each shining, whole,*

*And turns stray minutes into someone's life.  
Not mine: in forty years I've never thought  
How strange to hold a cup and watch the rain,  
The tea gone cold, my finger wandering*

*Over the rim; and for the first time ever  
I feel thick drops of varnish, and take them  
As kindnesses, not meant for me but loved  
As though they were. The Hassidim will tell*

*About the life to come, how everything  
Will stay the same. That stain upon my chair,  
It must remain; my cup cannot be smooth.  
This world will be untouched, they nod and say,*

*But just a little changed. Late afternoon:  
I sit here, deep inside this April day,  
Half-thanking someone I will never meet,  
The rain outside now striking hard and fast.*

**Kevin Hart**

## Each Morning Once More Seamless

*Mother and type of evolution,  
the New Testament of the scholars  
may be likened to a library catalogue  
of the old type, a card index console  
of wooden drawers, each a verse.  
And you never know which ones are out,  
stacked up, spilt, or currently back  
in, with some words deleted  
then restored. And it never ends.*

*Reputations slide them out,  
convictions push them in.  
Speculations look backwards once  
and stiffen to salt-crystal proofs.  
Dates grow on palms in the wilderness  
and ferment in human minds —  
and criticism's prison for all poems  
was modelled on this traffic.*

*Most battered of all are the drawers  
labelled Resurrection, The.  
Bashed, switched, themselves resurrected  
continually. Because it is impossible,  
as the galaxies were, as life was,  
as flight and language were. The impossible,  
evolution's prey, shot with Time's arrow.  
But this one is the bow of time.*

*Shadowy at a little distance tower  
other banks of card-index drawers,  
other myriad shelves, jammed with human names.  
Some labelled in German are most actively  
worked over, grieved, and reinserted.  
More stretch away in Eastern scripts,  
scarcely visited. Dust softens their headwords.  
Yet the only moral reason to leave any  
in silence fragments and reassembles  
in the swarmed over, nagged, fantasized  
word-atoms of the critics' Testament.*

**Les Murray**

## Don't Do Anything Silly or Clever

*Stay close to the upper world  
 where fantasy is just a story,  
 don't consider the number you must wear  
 of all the never-to-be-counted numbers  
 in the catalogue of DNA,  
 pay respect to this extraordinary misrule  
 we call reality,  
 perfect the mantra of your fear  
 in steady repetition of your love,  
 your family and your sense of others,  
 acknowledge that both guilt and shame  
 make no pretence of offering evidence,  
 practise faith as you would polish  
 the one good table in the house,  
 ignore your animals' ignorance of death,  
 your body is more privileged,  
 shout at your kids on the escalator  
 'don't do anything silly or clever!'  
 which means that vindication  
 belongs to bankers and not ballerinas,  
 indulge the aphorisms of the future  
 but live only in the present,  
 observe great artists with detachment  
 accepting that the brain's an arriviste.*

*Despite all this  
 dying will thrust on you  
 the inevitable heroism of a god.*

### Pebbly Beach

*The sand  
 the mirroring sand  
 smooth  
 in the full glass of wine  
 dusk*

*glimmering  
 like talk about dying  
 when you're still half young  
 under clouds  
 displaying grey  
 beautifully  
 like lyrebirds*

*and when the light  
 seeps away  
 goes black  
 like a rotten tooth*

*what do you listen to?  
 the amniotic sea  
 and its warm illusion*

*what do you go back to?  
 the smell of mushrooms  
 spitting in butter*

*and books, books.*

**Dorothy Porter**

**Peter Porter**

### Ice Bear

*Hour after waking hour the white bear  
 of pride is on the move, leaving  
 pug behind pug in the smashed crystals, his body  
 a wedge driving towards you, the black  
 cap of his nose drinking in your odour,  
 the drilled eyes locked on your courses.*

*He was here before ever you came, his clan  
 reaching back to the caves where bones  
 of men and bears rubble together, and he  
 will be prowling the ice still when you  
 have gone the way of all the earth, a marker  
 scarring the permafrost briefly.*

*There are devices, you think, to deal with him  
 and his like. You band with other hunters,  
 whetting the blade of deprecation, testing  
 the Mannlicher of compassion, inching  
 behind the hummocks of humility,  
 invoking the spirits, gambling your breath,*

*and for a while it is possible to suppose  
 that the day will be yours. You see redness  
 begin to darken on fur, on snow, on your mittens.  
 Each time you think that, you try to forget  
 what comes when the flaying's complete and the gaunt body  
 displays at last its human form.*

**Peter Steele**

## Missolonghi

*" 'Tis time this heart should be unmoved."*

*Byron Jan.22 1824, Greece*

1

*Even the leeches, Loukas,  
don't bleed  
my lust for astonishment*

*how does the heart  
that disobedient pump  
make its choice?*

*why do I drag  
myself out of bed*

*every morning*

*just to watch you?*

2

*I'm not really asleep, Loukas*

*I'm only foxing  
so I can watch you  
moving about my room*

*take it, take it,  
it's only my watch  
I've had a gutful of Time*

*hold its old gold finish  
against your smooth cheek*

*tick.tick.tick.tick.  
like an old heart*

*how can I roar out of bed  
and blame you  
for stealing from me?*

*I've sacked and looted  
everyone I've ever loved.*

3

*Last night I dreamt  
I took you pistol shooting*

*it was a ghost dawn  
the ground was smoking*

*but your face was clear*

*I have dreamt  
stars like tar pits  
I have dreamt  
an arrow sticking out  
of a defeated eye*

*last night, Loukas,  
I dreamt*

*we were pistol shooting*

*the ground was smoking  
a ghost dawn.*

**Dorothy Porter**

## Death And The Moggie

*Good Morning, Citizen Cat,  
I am Death who's come  
To take you from this flat  
Back to where you're from.  
Are you ready, Comrade Cat?*

*Don't pester me, Sir Death,  
This is my morning rest  
When I forget that teeth  
Shred flesh from bone with zest.  
I'd fillet you, proud Death.*

*Stay calm, Signore Gatto,  
You have to leave but you're  
In that anthology from Chatto  
On page 174.  
Va ben', amico gatto.*

*Listen, egregious Hades,  
Those only give you power,  
Fine Gentlemen and Ladies  
Who recognise their hour.  
Don't mix with rough trade, Hades.*

*The time has come, Herr Katz,  
To chew what you have bitten,  
This languor is ersatz—  
That you're no skittish kitten  
Ein Rätsel ist, mein Schatz.*

*I'm not, you Modern Hermes,  
Quite ready yet to die.  
Though this the end of term is  
I'm still as bright of eye,  
A beautiful brown Burmese.  
Each star helps light the sky.*

**Peter Porter**

## Diptych

### I

*Purple sails, Tyre,  
girls tormenting fabrics, rocks,  
a green sea, the Greeks.*

*Some weeds inspire me  
the way they mimic plants deemed  
lovely, edible.*

*Lullabies, nipple  
music, contracting eyes, mother's  
morphia, sleep sleep.*

*The ocean sizzles,  
titanic bouillabaise,  
tall clouds of black steam.*

*Enough is enough  
the poxy young blade let drop  
to the guillotine.*

*A bench, advocates,  
silks, briefs, Status versus Greed,  
a mule in a wig.*

*High table, sherry,  
gowns, bluestockings, English teeth,  
a don in aspic.*

*A womanizer  
she sighed disapprovingly  
wriggling little toes.*

*Meat is sweeter near  
the bone, wheezed Casanova  
forking a lean dish.*

*Salade Rachel. eels,  
bearded clams à la de Sade,  
pêche pudding, whipped cream.*

*Meat is sweeter near  
the fat ejaculated  
the Sumo wrestler.*

*Beethoven expired  
unwifed, loverless, shaking  
his fist heavenwards.*

*Beethoven's coiled brain  
uncoiled the future's music  
with brown growling sounds.*

*Such disappointment,  
the sandwiched aeons, high hopes  
reduced to low fears.*

*Grapefruit sails, Tyre,  
hags igniting embers, cocks,  
a blue sea, the Brits.*

### II

*a tanka runs for  
five lines of five syllables  
or segments, seven,  
five again, and seven twice,  
no rhyme, no metre, chunked sense.*

*a tanka is less  
exacting than a haiku,  
those extra fourteen  
syllables encouraging  
upholstered loquacity.*

*a tanka is less  
virtuous than a haiku,  
those extra fourteen  
syllables resemble a  
pageant of buttocks and breasts.*

*a tanka is less  
Jungian than a haiku,  
those extra fourteen  
syllables coagulate  
the blood of archetype, myth.*

*a tanka is less  
Wittgenstein than a haiku,  
those added fourteen  
syllables can lure poets  
from the malls of common sense.*

*a tanka is more  
orchestral than a haiku,  
those further fourteen  
syllables babble over  
the stark aphasia of sound.*

**Jack Hibberd**

# The Cuban conundrum



*Mothers of the revolution: women in Santiago, Cuba.*

Photo: Tania Jovanovic, M33 Photoagency

**W**HEN I WAS 16, in 1970, I picked up a book in the local library entitled *Venceremos: A collection of the writings and speeches of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara*. The text left me cold, as does the dreary earnestness of so much Marxist polemics. But the picture of Che on the cover—the youthful stubble on the chin, the dash of the green military fatigues, the huge cigar protruding from a broad, confident smile—caught hold of my imagination and wouldn't let go.

My interest then was purely aesthetic. Professional radicals at the time, in schools and universities, had adopted the war in Vietnam as their cause and

many had chosen the Vietcong as their heroes. It was serious stuff but all so confining. Besides, Ho Chi Minh had nothing on Fidel Castro. Ho was old and frail even then, and unexciting in that Oriental sort of way. Fidel was electrifying. Castro had arrived in Havana on 6 January 1959 like Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the jubilation, like the Christ-like beard, had stayed. Everyone associated with the revolution—even Che who seemed to court martyrdom and achieved it in the jungles of Bolivia in 1967—was oddly carefree, enthusiastic and, well, happy.

It was as though the pieces of that jigsaw puzzle called the 'Sixties'—Jimmy Hendrix, free love, campus revolt, and getting stoned—had come together and it was Cuba.

I took a more serious interest in Cuba in the mid-1980s, when I was asked to help teach a course on US-Latin American relations at a university in Sydney. Given the misery and repression so typical of the rest of Latin America, Cuba seemed like an island of sane policies and human values. There were prisons and prisoners of conscience in Cuba, but I also knew that there were no death squads or bodies being dumped on the rubbish tips in the middle of the night. I appreciated that Cuba had swapped its economic dependency on the US for another kind of dependency on the Soviet Union.

But people were fed and housed, and there were education, health and careers open for all. I was aware that Cuba was a one-party state. But I knew as well that decades of US hostility had thrown the political development of the revolution off course and that, to some extent, it continued to explain some of Castro's excesses. I was curious.

And so I decided to visit Cuba in July and August of 1989.

**F**IRST IMPRESSIONS ARE EASILY RECALLED: MiG fighters on the runway at Havana airport, the drive through streets where billboards advertised revolutionary values instead of Coca-Cola and Sony cassette recorders; cold beer and cool jazz in the bar of the Inglaterra Hotel; old Havana with its vista of domes and rooftop statues; the diplomatic suburb of Miramar with its leafy colonial mansions and police drowsing lazily in pillboxes; and the lovely wide Malecon joining both parts of the city and cradling them from the sea.

Cubans could be intrusive and inquisitive in those days but generally they were relaxed and friendly as well. Young girls giggled as they tried to hustle male tourists—in a land of sexual liberation, easily available contraception, and abortion on demand. I guess they felt there was nothing much to be lost by offering companionship for the night in return for a trip to the dollar store in the morning.

After several days in Havana I flew to Camaguey to hear Castro give the annual '26 July' speech commemorating the Moncada uprising in 1953 and the first shots fired in the revolution. While there I visited a new rural housing project only to find myself joining a select tour group being led around the complex by Fidel himself.

The 'maximum leader' had little time for foreign journalists but an obvious rapport with the construction workers and campesinos. He embraced them and they badgered him about poor electrical wiring and the lack of onions in the market.

Fidel seemed genuinely interested in these minutiae of the revolution. It was part of his attachment to his people. At the open air rally the next day he

spoke for three hours about the revolution's most recent achievements in milk production, animal husbandry, hospital beds and schools. Then he finished with his standard rhetorical flourish: *Socialismo o muerte! Venceremos!* ('Socialism or death. We will win!') I don't think anyone realised the full implications of that choice in 1989.

Within a year of my visit the Soviet Union was falling apart, Cuba was losing its old Communist-bloc subsidies, spare parts and markets, and the island's economy was deflating like a pierced balloon. Fidel announced the beginning of a 'special period in time of peace' and began putting the country on the equivalent of a war footing.

There was rationing and belt-tightening as living standards were cut and labour disciplined to build an internationally competitive export economy virtually overnight. There were shortages and blackouts, and little time or opportunity for fun. The carnival in Havana was cancelled. There would be no more cheap beer, all-night street parties or salsa bands for the masses—but there would be a thumb in the nose for the Yankees and a grim determination to survive.

The situation aroused my curiosity again and so I returned to Cuba for another look this August.

The first thing I noticed on my second visit was that the elegant decay of Havana had turned into mere decay. The sewerage system, the water supply and regular garbage collections were clearly breaking down. There were still plenty of cars on the roads but none of them seemed to have exhaust systems. The two electricity-generating plants in Havana were burning a particularly low-grade crude and they were doing it without any thought for filters.

There was a brown slick in the air above the city on the days when there wasn't a black one. The port of Havana, I was told, had earned the dubious honour of being the second most polluted harbour in the world. By the look of the grease and grime in the water, that wasn't hard to believe. The buses were overcrowded, the restaurants appalling, the queues long, and the state stores generally bare of goods and customers. Cuba truly had joined the Eastern bloc, even though the club was now deserted. There was no reason to celebrate.

**B**UT THE BIGGEST CHANGE WAS in the mood of the people of Havana. The frustration and discontent were palpable. Every Cuban I spoke to was hustling—selling sex, cigars, interviews, anything—in return for a few dollars that would buy meat or soap or designer labels in the hard-currency stores. There was a sullenness on the streets, and a danger there too. Tourists were robbed with violence in downtown Havana during broad daylight—something that was unthinkable five years earlier. And the girls were no longer giggling.

Back in the 1950s, Cuba was a whorehouse for gangsters from Las Vegas and businessmen from Mi-

*The old consensus was built on an agreement to deliver rising living standards to all. But these days winning overseas markets and keeping them requires a new culture of entrepreneurship, individual incentive, and, dare one say it, class division. This is the real crisis of the revolution.*

*Cubans buy their supplies on the black market—stolen goods—or steal them from state warehouses or directly from other Cubans. Individual initiative is encouraged but social breakdown—division, discontent, distrust—is the result.*

ami. These days it is fast becoming the brothel-of-choice for package-deal tourists from Moscow, Budapest, and Mexico City.

It is easy to exaggerate the meaning of these images. After all, there are no beggars in Havana, no one living on the streets, and no one selling their bodies just to survive. The food ration has been cut repeatedly and severely, but infant mortality rates have continued to drop throughout the 'special period' indicating the strength of the country's nutritional and health-care programs. And in the countryside outside Havana, where 70 per cent of Cubans live, the decline in living standards is not so apparent. Household gardens supply many people with a variety of fruit and vegetables that they wouldn't get in the city. New apartments are still being built for rural workers, although not quite to the standards of those I had seen in 1989. There is far less mechanisation and more use of animal power, but then life is generally slower and more relaxed anyhow.

IT IS ALSO TEMPTING to blame Fidel—once referred to by *The New York Times* as a 'Marxist museum piece'—as the culprit behind Cuba's backwards slide. But Cuba is not the only Latin American country undergoing a difficult transition from an economy geared to domestic consumption to one primed for export, and in many ways it is doing better than most.

At a summit meeting of Latin American leaders earlier this year, Castro pointed out that Cuba had not closed one school or hospital during the 'special period'. By contrast, much of the social wage has been destroyed by free marketeers in countries like Argentina, Brazil and Peru and public infrastructure has been abandoned or sold off to profiteers.

Moreover, Cuba's transition has been made more difficult than most. Its economic lifetime to the Soviet Bloc was unexpectedly severed. The US continues to wage an economic war of attrition against the island. (The 1992 Cuba Democracy Act provides for sanctions even against US allies for trading with Cuba.) Internally, the adjustment has been enormous.

The old consensus was built on an agreement to deliver rising living standards to all. But these days winning overseas markets and keeping them requires a new culture of entrepreneurship, individual incentive, and, dare one say it, class division.

This is the real crisis of the revolution. Hardship is tolerable as long as it is shared, but the need to compete in the international market is leading to policies and practices that conflict with the collectivist and egalitarian ethos of the revolution.

Western liberals, generally, fail to grasp this. Their disenchantment with Fidel and Cuba's revolution began early, when it became apparent that the overthrow of Batista was not about fulfilling a bourgeois dream of electoral democracy and an end to corruption in the bureaucracy. It was about political and

economic independence—the two are inseparable—from the US, an end to exploitative labour relations in Cuba, and the construction of a society in which there would be opportunities for all, even if that meant taking away the privileges of some.

The reality may not have lived up to the promise, but at least the effort was made. What many Cubans now wonder is whether the effort has been abandoned.

These days it is often said that Cuba's revolution brought health and education and housing, but that it has outlived its usefulness. Those who say that usually then add that what Cuba needs is freedom, at the ballot box and in the market, and everything will be right. Most Cubans appreciate that this is nonsense. They know that they are still better off than they were before the revolution.

Back in the 1950s, they toiled long hours for little reward to please Americans. Desi Arnaz was the gringos' idea of a likeable Cuban buffoon and everybody was expected to live up to the image. And in the last days of Batista's dictatorship you could end up dead and hanging from a lamp post as a warning to those who would seek change.

Most Cubans don't want a return to that. And when they see the pimps and casino operators and assorted opportunists in the Cuban American community circling the island like vultures, they appreciate that this is their most likely fate if Fidel goes now and the revolution comes unstuck.

But the social fabric is being ripped apart even before the vultures have landed. In July 1993, the government passed a law allowing all Cubans to deal in US currency. Ordinary Cubans can now shop in the dollar stores for the luxuries unavailable on the ration card. Like Hemingway, they can sip Mojitos in the nightclubs and dine in the 'better' restaurants—if they have dollars.

The change means the difference between a bearable life and a comfortable one and it ensures that hard currency eventually finds its way out of private pockets and into state coffers, where it can be used for the benefit of all. But not all Cubans have access to dollars. And those who do are not all that interested in sacrificing their personal advantage for the good of all.

People with friends and relatives in the US have access to dollars—or at least they did until President Clinton stopped remittances when he tightened the economic embargo in August. Employees of foreign companies get dollars as an incentive to turn up for work. (Worker absenteeism is more than 10 per cent in the state sector but less than one per cent outside it.) Workers in the tourist industry, black marketeers and prostitutes have access to dollars.

For the rest—perhaps 85 per cent of Cubans—it's beans and rice and a cake of soap a month. All Cubans are equal, but some are becoming more equal than others.



It doesn't end there. Recently, the Cuban government privatised about 140 service occupations. Cubans can now go into business for themselves as taxi drivers, handymen, or vendors supplying small private markets. But the materials necessary to make these businesses viable are unavailable. The petrol

The minutiae of the revolution now are balance of payments figures, hard currency reserves and overseas investment flows. The most obvious, or at least the most visible, beneficiaries are the slick operators and anyone with 'connections'. Those outside the group are angry. When I was in Havana in August sev-



ration, when it operates, is half a tank of gasoline a month. There are no nails in the shops, and few of the raw materials needed to make crafts.

Consequently, Cubans buy their supplies on the black market—stolen goods—or steal them from state warehouses or directly from other Cubans. Individual initiative is encouraged but social breakdown—division, discontent, distrust—is the result. Moreover, to add insult to injury, other private business opportunities are now open to foreigners, including Cuban Americans—the *gusanos*, or 'worms' as they are known locally, who deserted the revolution for the bright lights of Florida—but not to Cuban citizens themselves.

eral hundred Cubans threw rocks at a tourist hotel and trashed two downtown dollar stores. They were the outsiders trying to get in. Once again, it may come to Cubans fighting Cubans. Or in the name of liberation the revolution may have to adopt the tactics of oppression. Interests are dividing. Moral principles are getting confused. The US desire to see Cuba destroyed as a possible model for the rest of Latin America is being realised from within.

Socialism or death—if only the choice were that simple. ■

**Chris McGillion** writes for *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

*Knotty problem: Cuban cowboy practises for a rodeo in the shell of a dinosaur park.*

*Photo: Tania Jovanovic, M33 Photoagency*



# Trade winds

'S O LIVING IN HONG KONG AGREES WITH YOU?'

The old man grimaced as he drained his coffee cup, lit another cigarette and then pressed it into a mound of stubs in the saucer in front of him. 'Well, it'll give me something to do until '97. Watching all that happen, I mean. I don't know that the job is any more satisfying there than it was here, but I've long since passed the age where the job was the main game, anyway.'

'I don't know that the job is all that satisfying anywhere these days, mate. Certainly not in this town. You've done the right thing, finding an interesting place to live where you can also sell whatever skills they're prepared to buy.'

He fell silent, and then tried to find a new topic of conversation by congratulating me on my marriage. But that made him remember that marriage is not his favourite subject. He had had three wives and been married four times—the first and third marriages were to the same person—so we were soon back on the only thing we had in common. Newspapers.

He mentioned meeting a friend with whom we used to work on a Melbourne daily. The friend had told him about a meeting of the paper's journalists that passed a vote of no confidence in the editor for, among other things, failing to ensure that there were enough subeditors to produce the paper each night.

'That wasn't any news. It's obvious just from reading the paper. If you can still find anything in it that you actually want to read, that is.'

'The circulation figures suggest that fewer and fewer people want to read the paper.'

The old man grunted and steered the conversation back to subeditors. 'Nice of all those gilded youths and café courtesans to acknowledge our presence at last.' He always reminded me of the fabled American editor who, on being handed the results of a readership survey, was said to have wheezed: 'What the hell would the *readers* know about newspapers?'

'It always was the sort of job that people only notice when it's not being done,' I offered by way of consolation. 'The gilded youths will never know how many of them owe their gloss, such as it is, to you.'

'Yeah, but the generation before them wasn't like that. The reporters always hated the subs, true, and the feeling was mutual. An' it was all good and proper because great newspapers were made out of hate like that. But the old reporters didn't think they were all that special, either. They didn't suffer from the illusion that the paper couldn't come out each morning without their particular sparkling contribution.' He knew what he was talking about. He was an old reporter, too.

'Yes, but mate, you're talking about *reporters*. The problem with the gilded youths and café courtesans is that they're merely *writers*.'

The old man's satyr face rippled into furrows, which rose and fell with the hacking cough that was as close as he ever came to a genuine laugh. 'That's it! That's the old hate! You're a tonic, mate, and wasted on those Christians you mix with now. Nice people though they are, I'm sure, but I bet they don't know how to use hate like that.'

'In one way or another, Clarry, I've mixed with Christians all my life. I haven't met one who was incapable of hate.'

The satyr laugh returned and subsided like its predecessor. 'Yes, mate, I know. And you've reminded me why I never bothered with that Christian stuff myself.'

A waiter stooped to announced that Clarry's taxi had arrived, and the old man began to make his farewell. Neither of us really expected to see the other again but he went through the motions. 'Bring your wife to Honkers, mate, and the kid, too. We'll have a good time, just like the old days.'

I smiled and promised something indefinite.

HE NEVER WROTE AND NEITHER DID I. But his wife did, as she had for all of their marriage, to all of his friends. Long, matter-of-fact bulletins about sights seen and restaurants visited, and trips to Beijing or Shanghai to satisfy her curiosity; or shorter, coy bulletins about trips to Manila or Bangkok to satisfy his satyr-like propensities. It was that sort of marriage.

Then for months there was nothing. I thought about him sometimes, when our former paper published some new idiocy that I knew would amuse him. But I never bothered to send the clipping, and merely wondered whether perhaps his wife had stopped writing because she was tired of the trips to Bangkok and Manila, and he was now looking for spouse number five. Or number four, depending how you count these things.

When the letter came I realised I had been expecting it. His wife sent *me* a clipping, from the *South China Morning Post*. There was a covering note which read: 'Clarry always said that if something like this happened I was to send you the story from the paper. He said you'd understand.'

'Post Journalist Found Dead', it was headed. Then three paragraphs reported that his body had been found in a hotel room in Manila, and that the police had said there were no suspicious circumstances. The usual euphemism for suicide, a form of words that has been in the trade even longer than Clarry himself. He would have liked going out on a traditional note.

Pity they couldn't spell his name correctly, though. ■

Ray Cassin is the production editor of *Eureka Street*.

## Mending Gloves at Anglesea

*Uphill from Demon's Bluff and the long blue haul  
 To pack-ice and white night ,  
 The curtains drawn, slow bubbling at the stove  
 For company, a year and a day near done,  
 I'm needling the soft leather, with all  
 A male's half-lost, half-won  
 Belief in patience, pleasure at putting right  
 Something gone wrong, and an eye to the next move.*

*Without the prospect of North American snows,  
 They'd have stayed, dark and unstrung,  
 Stashed in a drawer. As it is, they'll be heading, hand  
 Over hand, for another country, another world —  
 That zone where anything goes that goes,  
 Precariously unfurled  
 From the heart's perpetual tundras, smoothed and hung  
 Up there for admiration, Narcissus Land.*

*Come to think of it, all that flourish and dash  
 Should suit them down to the ground:  
 The stonemoss brown mittens of Gotland, the sleek  
 And finger-kissing gloves of Moretto's lord,  
 The jewelled, brodered, macing flash  
 On the hilt of England's sword  
 When Elizabeth came to town, the gage to found  
 Promise or menace — speechless, all of them speak*

*Of themselves, and ourselves, and pelted in the pelt,  
 Born and bred for display.  
 Pricking a thumb-ball, I think of Burgkmair's storm  
 Of spears and crossbows, banners and furbelows,  
 Whose eye's right at the knight's belt,  
 Where mailed fists dispose  
 The Landsknechten's ferocious swagger, and play  
 The hand of beauty in its lethal form.*

*Our puppets, stuffed with gold, or shielding the bearer  
 From brute unbiddable things —  
 Ropeburn, frostbite, talons — they've bodied us out:  
 And this time round the stitchwork will proclaim  
 The amateur status of its wearer —  
 Ferric and stoney by name,  
 But understrapper among overlings,  
 A lightweight in the contest for chief lout.*

*The soup's looked after itself, and the sun's gone  
 Some distance alone in the dark:  
 The wind's come up with a sprig of cold to speak  
 Of more salt for the pot. It's time to pause,  
 Time to allow the truth come home,  
 With or without applause  
 That needle, brainpan or ladle sends an arc  
 From pole to pole when hunger meets technique.*

Peter Steele

1894

*That wall, how long did it take them?  
 Like a vertical shore  
 it looms in the morning,  
 supporting its terrace,  
 survivor of a thousand mortal businesses.  
 Frantic they drive past, careerists,  
 oblivious to such fadeless elegance,  
 storeys of amber and gold.  
 Bring them back,  
 those easy sculptors,  
 range them against the speckled height.  
 Summon the mortar, the sinews,  
 the buttress of time.*

Peter Rose

## In Today's Paper

*I'm reading the obituary of someone I loathed.  
 De Mortuis etc. has brought the sun out  
 On a comradely world where aptitude clothed  
 In resourcefulness has eradicated doubt.*

*He wasn't like that, my uncharitable mind  
 Insists on complaining: a pedant, a prig,  
 A bad-tempered loser, contender inclined  
 To pick on the powerless, and worse, a pig*

*To his women. Ah, but reflect, death has the power  
 To make everything living seem preferable  
 To the ultimate blankness, the stopwatched hour,  
 To seek corruption in Heaven, not perfection in Hell.*

Peter Porter

# It's hard to get good tradesmen these days

**T**HE LEGENDS OF THE WILD WEST are many and various, but none is more strange than the tale of the Nuns who Sold their Miracle. It begins with the Indians. Okay, Native Americans if you prefer, but bear with me here.

We saw them across the Plaza, hunkered down in the winter sunshine on folding chairs, their pottery and jewellery spread before them on blankets. They sat with their backs to the thick adobe wall of El Palacio Real, the Governor's Palace from which Spanish grandees had ruled a province stretching from the Mississippi to the Pacific. They wore battered Levis and tractor caps and looks of stoic indifference. Great, we thought. Exactly what we'd come to Santa Fe to experience. Indigenous culture meets Hispanic ambience in a genuine setting.

Our little family ambled along the portal checking out the wares. Concho belts and bolos, bracelets set with turquoise from the hills of Cerrillos at the tail of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, Kokopelli the Flute Player in beaten silver, money clips and tie-pins. The craftsmanship was superb, the prices astronomical. These Indians hadn't come down with the last rain dance, that was for sure.

They, their ancestors at least, had been sitting here when the Franciscans trudged up from Mexico in the 1540s. They were here when the first cowboys drove their longhorn cattle up the Santa Fe Trail out of Texas, and when US territorial governor Lew Wallace sat inside of those adobe walls and wrote *Ben Hur*. And they had been here in the summer of 1945 when the physicists with European accents came down the hill from Los Alamos to do a little shopping and take a break from the Manhattan Project. Although maybe the scientists didn't notice the Indians. When you're up to your cerebral cortex in the thrill of particle acceleration, you can't be expected to notice the natives.

We stopped to admire some earrings, beaten silver teardrops, each with a device etched into it, a stick figure with outstretched arms. I recognised them as *yei*, the local earth deities. The jeweller, a hefty, fit-looking guy with long black hair, pushed his hat back off his face and leaned forward into our conversation.

Was he a Navaho, I wondered, or from one of the local *pueblos*? In any case, I was prepared to bet he'd driven into town in a dusty old Ford pick-up.

'What language are you folks speaking?' he asked softly.

Australian, my wife told him. His face creased into a knowing smile. 'Ah', he said. 'Walkabout Creek'. He paused while this sank in. Okay, so everybody in the global village watches TV. We knew that. Then he went on, 'I guess that makes me an Aborigine. Do something for the Aborigines - buy some of my stuff'.

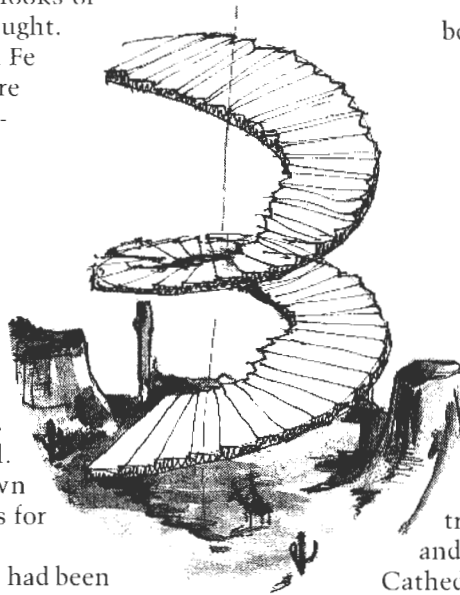
How could we do otherwise? We bought the earrings, two pairs. He guaranteed the silver content, showed us his maker's mark, gave a discount for cash, and handed us his business card. As he began to wrap our purchase in tissue paper, I asked about the designs. With this indigenous stuff, you've got to get the mythology if you want full value.

'A source of great power,' he said. 'Found in the desert. High voltage electricity pylons.'

If the local Aborigines weren't going to cough up with any mysteries, it was time to turn to more traditional sources. We got our map out and headed east, looking for St Francis' Cathedral. Its sonorous bells, according to the Official Santa Fe Convention and Visitors Guide, still call the faithful to prayer. Those few who don't yet own digital alarm-clock/radios, presumably. Those not too busily engaged in arts trafficking, the main business of the district.

Fortunately for the late sleepers, the sonorous bells were silent that Monday morning. The cathedral itself stuck out like a sore thumb, a bristling Gothic revival pile in a street of curvaceous adobe, badly out of sync with a municipal building code that has made it illegal since 1957 to build anything inside the city limits that doesn't look like a set from *The Magnificent Seven*. We passed it by without going in and moseyed down the Old Santa Fe Trail. That's when we saw the sign. Struck paydirt, as I sincerely hope they still say up in them thar hills. *Loreto Chapel*, it read. *Miraculous Stairway. Open Daily.*

'The original *Stairway to Heaven*?' our son wondered. He might be only eleven, but he's very cultur-



ally literate for his age. 'And who are these Laredo Sisters?' said his mother. She probably thought they were k.d. lang's backing band.

'That's Loreto', I said. 'An order of nuns'.

'Oh no', said the Kid, making a break for it. 'Not another church'.

It's time like this you need roping skills. 'I used to go into churches all the time when I was your age. Never did me any harm, did it?' Before he could answer that one I wrestled him through the entrance. 'Besides which, going into churches is what tourists do. It's in our contract.'

Only we weren't in a church, we were in the annex of a hotel lobby. Through an arch we could see the check-in desk. The chapel was to our left. We paid our admission, opened the door and came face to face with the Miracle.

1876 was a worrying year for the only nuns west of the Pecos. To the north, Custer's cavalry were coming off second best to the Cheyenne and the Sioux. In neighbouring Arizona, Geronimo's Apache had busted off the reservation. Ranchers were using gunslingers to run homesteaders off their land. And in the Chapel of Our Lady of Light there was one mucho grande problema. Three years into construction and nearing completion, it was discovered there was no way up into the choir loft.

With money in even shorter supply than architectural common sense, the sisters took the only course open to them. They fell back on prayer. They prayed and prayed and prayed. And one day their prayers were answered.

Out of the west rode a stranger. Quite a strange stranger, actually. Very mysterious. A carpenter, no less. He threw his saddlebags over the convent hitching rail, unpacked his tools, and asking no payment, commenced to saw and to chisel. This he did for many weeks, saying only as much as was needed for the sisters to hustle up some tubs of hot water in which he might soak and shape his timber. No nails did he use. Then one day, hey presto, he was nowhere to be found. Vanished. Rushing inside the chapel, the nuns were confronted by a wondrous sight. Linking nave to choir-loft was an incredible staircase. Two complete 360-degree turns with neither internal nor external bracing. A self-supporting spiral, a technical impossibility. A certified Miracle.

**B**UT WAIT, THAT'S NOT ALL. The mystery deepens. The timbers of the staircase, it was discovered, were neither of pinon nor ponderosa, nor any of the locally known woods. And the lumber merchants of the town had filled no orders on the convent account.

'Obviously the work of St Joseph', I said.

'Who's he?' said the Kid.

This was going to take some time. Where to start? 'Did you know,' I began, 'that in ancient Irish our surname means 'servant of the church?' Not lately, though.

The Kid headed me off at the pass. 'And what's Shane mean?' he said.

Handsome stranger, I told him. High in the saddle. Fast on the draw. Killed Jack Palance, but only because he had to. At which point we were back in the hotel lobby, facing a counter selling locally produced pieties. Turquoise and silver rosary beads, that sort of thing.

'Hey', said the Kid. 'More Indian jewellery.'

What this boy needed was a severe dose of the nuns. I went looking. There weren't any in the lobby, or even the bar. Long gone, I was told. Over the years so many visitors came to view the staircase that a hotel chain made them an offer for it, chapel and all. Those Loreto sisters were no fools and knew when they were on a good thing. So they sold their Miracle. Now it's called the Best Western Inn at Loreto. It has a toll-free number for worry-free reservations. I wonder if the local Aborigines knew that?

I consulted my tourist guide and tugged the family away from the rosary franchise. 'You want scenes of amazement, paths to heaven?' I said. 'On the bridge at the end of this street, a perfectly rational man called Klaus Fuchs gave the secret of the Atom Bomb to Joseph Stalin. Out of love. How's that for incredible?'

'Another Joseph!' cried the Kid. 'How am I supposed to keep up?' He was right. All this chasing superseded cosmologies was hungry work. It was time for lunch. And in the Wild West that calls for a degree of expertise I do not possess.

'So tell me again, son', I asked. 'What's the difference between an enchilada and a burrito?' ■

**Shane Maloney** is a Melbourne writer. His novel, *Stiff*, was published this year by Text.

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# South Seas traveller

*James Cook was reminded of Scotland so he called it New Caledonia. Robert Louis Stevenson's reaction was mixed. So was Peter Pierce's.*

**W**E ARRIVED AT TONTOUTA Airport in the dark, which was just as well. The mini-bus drive through scrub country into Noumea was frightening enough without the knowledge, (which we would acquire when leaving) of the cliffs that fell away sheer beside the road. A few weekends before, seven people had been killed in traffic accidents in New Caledonia.

The daily newspaper extrapolated with curious civic pride: this would have meant 2000 deaths in the 'metropolis'. The mathematics was odd, and no-one is quite sure how many New Caledonians there are to multiply, although the high figure of 270,000 is now given most credence. Nevertheless, the chief inference was clear: we had entered a *département* of France. Noumea was its capital, but Paris the metropolis. The political violence of the 1980s is now a diplomatically suppressed memory as New Caledonian separatists look to the 1998 referendum for resolution and independence.

In daylight, one could take in the distracting indications of all the things in the streets of Noumea which aped, and the others which resisted, France. The old, open-sided market is now the bus station. Its modern replacement serves coffee and *crôques-messieurs* in the Parisian fashion. *Traiteurs* offer brilliant versions of the take-away food in which one rejoices everywhere in France. The *consommation* (tariff) sign that hangs in all French bars was prominently displayed at the Hotel Ibis, but when one stepped from the bar onto a terrace, it was to be caressed by warm, sub-tropical air and to look across a hazardous,



*The well-togged traveller:  
Robert Louis Stevenson  
in tropical kit.  
From a drawing by  
A.S. Boyd*

busy road at the fine and resonantly named Baie des Citrons. The centre of town is a reminder of a century of France at war, from Napoleon's time (Rue D'Austerlitz) to the Crimea (Rue De l'Alma, Rue de Sébastopol), to the Great War.

Yet tourists and expatriate French folk shared the streets with the more numerous Kanak residents of the islands, many of whose T-shirts did homage to Bob Marley, rather than to *La République*. There were West Indians in plenty, part of the variegated waves of immigrants to New Caledonia since the nickel boom of 1969-70. Japanese and Indonesians have also settled in small, but signif-

icant numbers; Tahitians too, as well as people from the poorer islands far out in the Pacific, such as Wallis and Futuna. Seemingly at ease in their condominiums perched on hillsides above Noumea's corniche, or relaxing in the yacht clubs of the Baie de l'Orphelinat, the French have subtly begun their withdrawal from the centre of the islands' life.

We had come to the main island of Noumea and parts south for a holiday. For those who prefer the monoglot company of fellow Australians, a Club Med is located around the headland from the Baie des Citrons. More luxury hotels are planned. In the Val Plaisance, for instance, the race-track has been demolished and a temporary swamp created before the foundations of more condos are laid. Tourists who adventurously leave the Club Med, and the nearby, over-priced restaurant strip of Anse Vata Beach, can take the genial, green Number 6 bus into the centre of Noumea. Or can in theory: at various times of the day the bus

is so crowded with people going on and off shift at the Club Med or the Casino, that not a seat remains to be folded down for passengers. Thus one is left with the pleasant alternative of walking by the edge of several bays into the place which Robert Louis Stevenson described as 'a town built upon vermouth crates'.

**O**N A SUNDAY MORNING, we climbed the hill above this town. From that vantage point, Noumea is ringed on three sides by mountains which appear perpetually to be under grey mist. In town, rain falls sudden and sharp; stops as quickly.

Yet in this Southern Province of New Caledonia, the earth is red and dry, smeared rather than enlivened by the frequent showers. A harbour view completes the hill-top prospect. There are yachts and cruise ships to the south, a nickel-processing plant to the north. In an optimistic interpretation of this outlook, the industrial complex represents the economic past of New Caledonia, the marinas its hopes of future prosperity.

Walking back down the hill, we came upon the two largest churches in Noumea. Initially the evangelical Protestant Church of New Caledonia and the Loyalty islands detained us. The women of its congregation wore bright dresses and flowers in their hair. This was an outing in which they seemed to find more of pleasure than duty. A few hundred metres on, the worshippers at the Sacre Coeur Cathedral had solemnity and European faces to show. Inlaid in the façade of the cathedral, a plaque informs the onlooker that Guillaume Doumre, first bishop of New Caledonia, 'a donné ce pays à Dieu' (has given this land to God). Oddly, the Protestant congregation appeared more receptive to this happy circumstance than their Catholic counterparts. Here again, perhaps, were New Caledonia's past and future juxtaposed.

It was James Cook, passing in 1774, who was reminded improbably of Scotland by the topography of these islands, and called them New Caledonia. Unlike the New Hebrides to the north (named on the same principle, and now Vanuatu), New Caledonia did not suffer the peculiar government by condominium which gave Port Vila two of everything—gaols, municipal offices, police stations, languages. In 1853, New Caledonia was annexed by France and—if reluctantly of late—with France it has remained.

During our visit, the nub of irritation with the colonising power concerned Air France. Annoyed that Corsair and Avion Outre Mer had moved into the New Caledonian market, the national carrier responded haughtily, cancelling two weekly 747 services to France, and sacking numerous local staff. Fortunately we had flown with Air Calédonie,

which,—although owned by Air France—was exempted on account of its name from the bitter strike that grounded all other airlines. Air France jumbos were stranded on the tarmac, daubed with slogans, barricaded with fork-lift trucks and sundry debris. In Noumea, the Air France office prudently closed. Along the Rue de Sébastopol, enraged *ôtages d'Air France* marched in search of someone to take the blame for their being marooned. No-one was ready to accept responsibility, so that they were still fuming when we left Tontouta, waiting for Qantas to fly them to New Zealand, whence an escape to Europe might be effected.

**B**EFORE THEN, we had flown south from the old Noumea airport, travelling above the vast, reef-bound lagoon, to the Isle of Pines. For my wife, it was a nostalgic culmination of the trip. Twenty-nine years before, she had spent six weeks studying French at the *Lycée La Perouse* in Noumea. The school is still there, one wing given over to the use of the many Australian school groups which buy a cheaper serve of French language and culture than is to be had in Paris. In 1965, her student party from Launceston made an overnight excursion to the Isle of Pines, long before it had made its hesitant way into travel brochures and onto the itineraries of cruise ships. She had travelled, then, from one Pacific prison island, one paradise defiled, to another.

In August 1890, Stevenson embarked from the steamer Janet Nicoll to spend a week in Noumea before resuming his voyage to Sydney. He stopped over, as he wrote to Charles Baxter from the Hôtel Sébastopol, 'partly to see the convict system, partly to shorten my stay in the extreme cold ... of Sydney at this season'(!) the idea of settling in Samoa was fixed in his mind, but Stevenson found plenty of incongruities to amuse him in Noumea, as the French authorities sought to translate metropolitan decorums to a setting which soon undid them. Stevenson wrote of 'this town of convicts at the world's end'.

If prisoners were what he had

especially come to see, he had arrived too late. After the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871, 270 people were sentenced to death, nearly 4000 more 'to transportation to a fortified place'. Communard Louise Michel demanded to be shot, exclaiming to the prosecutors at her trial 'If you are not cowards, kill me!'

Instead, they sent her to New Caledonia, in particular to the Isle of the Pines, off the southern tip of the mainland (or La Grande Terre). The prison convoys left France in May 1872 for a five-month voyage. When the Orne docked in Melbourne, 300 of the Communard convicts (more than half its complement) had scurvy. Those who survived the journey, bar a handful who later escaped to Australia, were to remain in New Caledonia until the amnesty of 1880.

To receive the Communards, the headland by the harbour on the Isle of Pines was fortified. A doctor's and the commandant's house were built there in stone, and still stand in the sunlight, outwardly as benign as the non-penitentiary buildings of Port Arthur, away across the Pacific to the southwest. Inland from the harbour on Kuto Bay, five kilometres along a road cut through encroaching bush, the main prison buildings are to be found. Grim shells in pale stone, gone piebald with age, they rear above the undergrowth which has flourished in their insides. This is a desolate, and sinister place.

Away from the most beautiful beaches that God put in the Pacific, there is much to disturb one on the Isle of Pines. Mooching islanders with cane-knives and sacks on their shoulders vanish up bush tracks. Like

*The bus is so crowded with people going on and off shift at the Club Med or the casino, that not a seat remains to be folded down for passengers One is left with the pleasant alternative of walking by the edge of several bays into the place which Stevenson described as 'a town built upon vermouth crates'.*

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Prospero's, 'the isle is full of noises/sounds and sweet airs'. Trees sigh in the warm morning air. Birds call. Somewhere out of sight, domestic animals—dogs, horses, cows—make racket. Dogs infest the Isle of Pines, fighting on its beaches, interrupting tourist somnolence. On the main island, their depredations are more serious, threatening with extinction the national symbol of New Caledonia, the cagou, a bird which has forgotten how to fly.

From our *gîtes* (concrete bungalows, rudimentary but altogether adequate for reasonable needs), it was a three-minute stroll to Kanumera Bay. Walking there, we encountered giant snails, coloured chocolate with cream stripes, which are everywhere in the woods. They are the island's export industry. The beach is a dream of paradise—white sand, the bay's limpid water clear for ten metres down, an enclosing reef behind, a desert island in the foreground—and all in such extravagant measure as to mock the postcards on which, assiduously, we scribbled. But as we strolled beyond the beach, to the next day, chainsaws disturbed the air, returning us to a fallen world. Another modest resort—the only kind which the Commune de l'Isle des Pins, quaintly named, given this history, will tolerate—is being constructed. Nearby is one more set of ruins: the Club Med which founded years ago on the hostility of the locals.

Lest this place lull us into too much contentment, the third morning of our stay delivered a garish awakening. Hell came to breakfast.

The hitherto near-empty beach was infested with Australian tourists, delivered ashore in hundreds from the Crown Monarch to harvest this idyllic landscape with cameras. Feeling an improper proprietary resentment, we watched while island children, early apprenticed to cynicism, posed for cute photographs. Helpings of *bougna* were offered to those who trudged along the beach. This was the same fare which had been made for us as a feast the previous evening. Staple root vegetables of the region—taro, yam, manioc—are cooked over hot coral in a pit, then mixed with chicken or lobster and served within the green outer leaves of the banana. 'The only meal of any complication in the Melanesian diet', as the author of a recalcitrant guidebook, *Reflections of New Caledonia*, tartly informs the sojourner there.

This was neither the language nor the spirit of that tourist propaganda which promises in the islands of the Pacific, not only escape to exotic elsewhere, but illusory freedom from the demands of time. Challenging that possibility are the convict ruins of the Isle of Pines. Bluntly visible, if usually ignored, they have not yet been turned into the Historyworld of Tasmania's Port Arthur. Yet that fate may be in store, as the presence of the serpent in the garden, the conterminousness of prison and paradise, become the tourist brochure's guarantee for tomorrow. ■

**Peter Pierce** is *Eureka Street's* turf and travel correspondent. He teaches Australian Studies at Monash University.

## Talking Point

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## Three's company

**B**RIAN CASTRO'S *Drift* HAD A strange beginning. Some years ago, his local library was selling off unwanted books. Outside the library, Castro noticed sheets of paper blowing around in the street. The pages happened to be part of a work by B.S. Johnson, an English novelist who was renowned for producing the kind of book in which the chapters were bound individually and sold in a slip case so you could read them in whatever order you chose. You got the raw ingredients for a novel but had to make them up into something yourself. Another of Johnson's books was published in a loose leaf folder. This was the book which Castro's local library had withdrawn from circulation. Unfortunately, the buyer had only wanted the folder and cast the contents to the breeze. So Castro first came across Johnson, picking pages of his writing at random off the footpath. You can only suppose that Castro is the kind of reader Johnson would have died for.

At the time he committed suicide in 1973, Johnson had finished the first volume of a trilogy in which he invited the reader to complete the work. This is precisely what *Drift* does. It adds 20 years to the lifespan of B.S. Johnson and, in spite of his having been a notorious stay-at-home, takes him on a trip to Tasmania, a place which 'has madness in its name'.

Castro is one of our most sophisticated storytellers. As the title suggests, different forces make the running in *Drift* at different times. But at the heart of the book is an unsettling vision of the 19th century.

Orville Pennington James, captain of the *Nora*, embarks upon a whaling expedition because he dreams of writing the book which Melville eventually achieved in *Moby Dick*. He puts 'the book before real life'. His first mate, Sperm McGann is a sadist who keeps captured women below deck. McGann leads a mutiny against the captain. At the very moment that Penning-

**Drift** Brian Castro William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1994  
ISBN 0 85561 570 2 RRP \$24.95  
**The Yandilli Trilogy** Rodney Hall Picador, Sydney, 1994  
ISBN 0 330 27491 0 RRP \$17.95

ton-James 'had real material to write about', he is put ashore on an islet without his logbook and quill and is faced with the task of remaking himself on his own. McGann, the only other literate on board, scuttles the ship elsewhere and pitches a barbaric settlement beyond the reach of written laws. When Pennington is eventually rescued, the effort of writing a simple explanation is beyond him. He is mistaken for Mr Crusoe.

Generations later, one of Sperm's descendants, an Aboriginal, Emma McGann, initiates the correspondence which brings B.S. Johnson to Tasmania. Johnson's story tacks in and around the cruel wind which blows back from last century. At one stage he almost drowns and is regurgitated by the sea as Jonah Johnson, a writer who 'cannot form a basic sentence'. He is brought back to a world in which 'words are no longer sovereign' and decides to accept that 'the core is an emptiness' because this means that 'death is inside life'.

**T**HE CORE OF *Drift* is its quest for a way of speaking of the unspeakable. There are plenty of voices from the literary past within the novel and it treads, for example, some of the same ground as Marcus Clarke's *For The Term of His Natural Life*. Convict cannibalism and juvenile incarceration at Point Puer trail in the shadows of both works. But Clarke turns this nightmare into melodrama, pulling emotional responses with frightening confidence in a book's capacity to titivate and please the reader. Clarke shares with his time a belief that, whatever experiences may befall, words will be found. Castro undermines this belief. He reduces his characters to silence. He believes ultimately in their capacity to re-

member the past and live their own lives beyond easy words.

Emma McGann's brother, Thomas, makes this point. He is a kind of tour operator. Initially, we see through the eyes of visitors the kind of comfortable frisson to be expected from convict ruins: 'the institutionalised viciousness of the past remained the one true repository of anticipation for present-day tourists, its gloom powdered with English lawns, mouldering stones and melancholic trees, its savagery residing only in popular mythology and imaginings.' Thomas McGann denies his tourists such pleasure. He shows that 'there's absolutely nothing here'. He hopes that 'they've stumbled upon loss. Enlightenment comes when you've lost.'

If anything, Rodney Hall's *Yandilli Trilogy* is even more ambitious in its recreation of the nineteenth century. Hall's three novels are set in the same area of settlement, on the south coast on New South Wales, about a generation apart. The location holds the work together. Each novel is the confession of a different kind of violence. *The Second Bridegroom* (published in 1991) is the story of a transported forger who attempts to kill the convict to whom he is shackled, jumps ship and is subsumed by a group of native men. Being shortsighted, he sees close detail but not the complete landscape. 'I had arrived at a place where all my knowledge was useless. The joy, as I found myself filled with it could not be described.' *The Grisly Wife* (published in 1993) tells of Catherine Byrne, wife of the self-styled prophet, Muley Moloch and one of the 'Household of Hidden Stars', a community of physically damaged women which Moloch establishes on the fringe of the bush.

*If this tangled moral wilderness is what the 20th century makes of the 19th, God knows what the 21st will make of our own.*

*Captivity Captive* (published in 1988) deals with a triple murder which has festered unresolved within a community for sixty years. The storyteller, Pat Malone, is a brother of the three victims. In 1956, the fabricated confession of somebody else draws the story from him like an impacted tooth.

Occasions of violence flirt with religion. In the moment he satisfies his lust for the blood of Gabriel Dean, the convict forger finds 'he believed in a forgiving God.' Catherine Byrne believes she is carrying the second incarnation when in fact in the depths of consumptive delirium she has been violated by Muley Moloch. Pat Malone's parents observe a flint-like Catholicism. His mother dies of grief because she cannot weep; the father never laughs.

Hall pulls at the acceptability of profound untruths. In each novel, there are vivid icons of this. The convict who forged a manuscript of Mark's Gospel finds the European settlement a 'counterfeit England'. He recoils from the 'bondage of be-

ing able to call this thing a cabbage, this thing a peapod.' Before leaving England, Muley Moloch takes Catherine Byrne on a tour of a tannery, a manufacturing plant which is a vision of hell. He arrives in the tangled wilderness with one of their wedding presents, a lawn-mower, tucked up neatly in a box, not unlike the piano sitting on the beach in Jane Campion's film. Pat Malone looks on as a photographer fakes an aboriginal camp scene and advertises the prints as 'a most appropriate wedding present'. He understands his complicity in the murders as a result of his being tempted beyond 'the very boundary of our known world and its morals.'

**A**T EVERY TURN IN HALL'S TRILOGY, the imported culture and its impedimenta are made ridiculous. Above all, the English language is seen as an entirely inappropriate instrument for responding to what was found.

Yet, the deepest irony is that these inabilities, these unfreedoms, can be freely spoken of. It is the second bridegroom who is redeemed by using 'words to take captivity captive'. In *Captivity Captive*, Malone's brother, Willie, once stood up to their seething father and was permanently handicapped when the father chained him to a bed and thrashed him. He is a victim of straight talking, the kind of truth that can both 'love and defeat' the dark forces which, time and again, get the flesh creeping in Hall's overpowering prose.

Both these trilogies are crafted with the kind of close accounting which gives up its riches slowly. They are both superb. Mind you, if this tangled moral wilderness is what the 20th century makes of the 19th, God knows what the 21st will make of our own. ■

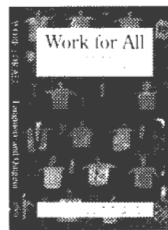
**Michael McGirr SJ** is contributing editor of *Eureka Street*.

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## Cold comfort for Cold Warriors

*The Shadow of 1917, Cold War Conflict in Australia*, Robert Manne, Text Publishing Company, 1994. RRP \$16.95, ISBN 1 87584 703 0

**T**HIS IS AN IMPORTANT BOOK. It focuses upon the role, the morality and the psychology of left activists, especially the left intelligentsia, during the 50 years of Cold War in Australia. Riveting concerns, so to speak. But there are also studies of Wilfred Burchett, the Petrov affair and the election of May 1954, the self-destruction of Dr Evatt, Pol Pot and the intellectuals, and the Coombe affair. Manne attempts to block the return of the mythmakers, the rewriters of the rewriting of history. Whether he succeeds, whether anyone can succeed in such prophylaxis, is difficult to say. But it's worth a try.

All but the first and last chapters have been published in other places, and even one of the two 'new essays' turned up recently in the *Melbourne Age*. The reason for this recycling seems clear enough. Four chapters appeared in *Quadrant*, which most leftists I know boast they never read, and never will. (Principled, enlightened lads they are). Much of the Burchett material appeared overseas. And so on.

What Manne fears is the operation of the laws of denial, selective memory, and political recidivism on the part of Australia's left intelligentsia. They denied or scrubbed around the endless atrocities and

destruction of human rights of Russian communism, from the time of the Cheka almost until the Wall fell down, and then suddenly admitted it had all been a terrible mistake. But nothing followed from this admission—nothing good that is. No remorse, no contrition, very little of the self-criticism the party had always been calling for.

**M**ANNE, I THINK, has a lot of unfinished business to settle with the old left, and feels cheated of his prey. So there is a measure of concealed anger running through this book. Perhaps one thing that sticks in the author's craw is the reappearance in our political life of people who cheered on Uncle Joe, Chairman Mao and Pol Pot, people who called critics of those creatures fascists, cannibals, CIA running dogs, or lily-livered liberals.

People who, with new flags, slogans and uniforms, are practising the same intolerance, the same outings, censorings and character-assassinations, the same holier-than-thou posturings that made so many of the left anathema to those who had listened to the cries and screams from within the communist systems, and *hadn't* hardened their hearts; who had listened to those who had escaped from those nightmare countries, and didn't call them liars or reactionaries.

Manne thinks that the people who refused to hear those cries, who drowned them with bluster and abuse, should at least be on a good-behaviour bond; should resume the ways and attitudes of Liberal democracy—or else adopt them for the first time. But our contemporary world is too tragic and chaotic a place to afford, let alone empower, new waves of great simplifiers, organisers of fresh intellectual and political programs. There are no heroes or gurus left standing, no high moral ground, so far as I am concerned. Only too many skeletons in too many cupboards. And this applies to Australia's right as it does to its left.

One of the important dimensions missing in Manne's collection is an explanation of how many Westerners of apparent good will came not

only to support the Eastern European, Russian and Chinese régimes, but managed to deny, for *so long* the manifest moral and political failures of those régimes and their endemic barbarities. The answers are multi-causal, but as Manne is concentrating upon our left, some illumination is possible.

It helps to have been around long enough to remember, or to have been told at first hand, of the events which produced the kind of left and leftists whom Manne now abhors. The ruling classes—or élites—of the Anglo-European West failed their countries and their peoples three times running. First, in leading their citizens to the mindless slaughter of World War I, then denying that it had been a monstrous blunder. Second, in giving us the Great Depression. Thirdly, they plunged us into a dreadful Second World War by encouraging and appeasing Hitler and Co., including Japan, until the very last moment. Our conservatives very nearly lost us the West, and showed their unfitness to rule; plus their fatal attraction toward armed right-wingers a lot nastier than themselves. They still indulge this taste.

And yet, by means of the exploitation of the Cold War, and the almost total domination of the Americans, we and just about everyone else found ourselves landed with the same seedy, compromised, misanthropic bunch who had sold out to Fascism in Europe, and nearly let them through the gate here. *This* crowd started up as soon as World War II ended, with the obvious intention of destroying a decent social-democratic government—by whatever means—and paying back all their past and present conduct.

**I**T WAS THE OBVIOUS malevolence of the right, and its insolent refusal to admit fault or to concede any patriotism and goodwill to their intended victims, that kept so many on the left for so long. To leave the field to the McCarthyites, Colonel Spry's happy band, and newspapers that could have had names like *Der Stürmer*, seemed like ratting. But it was a mistake. The left lost the plot,

and suffered death by a thousand moral compromises.


Manne's four important articles from *Quadrant* probably wouldn't have been published elsewhere—such was, and is, the measure of intolerance in our public demesne. And for years *Quadrant* seemed a sole unpopular witness to the monstrosities going on in the major communist countries. (Some other parts of its agenda gave me the irritis—but what's new?) The author feels angry that not only were he and other bearers of bad tidings regularly reviled and sometimes marginalised, but that, along with this, tragic and momentous human events and processes were ignored or denied.

He is right to be angry. It's just that his charmed circle have done the same to us, when strong enough, and would do the same again again. The fault lies not in the stars, Horatio, but in our national character. ■

**Max Teichmann** is a freelance writer and reviewer.

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## Facing up to Edna

I SUPPOSE IT MIGHT BE the same for junior barristers in their first courtroom and for the new season's AFL recruits in their first game, but when the Melbourne Writers' Week Committee said we are putting you on Edna O'Brien in a Spotlight Interview this year, my knees went wobbly.

I've always been nervous about doing interviews and there's a set of stages I seem always to have to go through.

First, will I be eaten up? Edna O'Brien's motto is 'I don't want to be to war or to tragedy or to laughter a tourist'. She tells a critic, who undoubtedly needs no telling, 'I want to disturb people. Let's have a bit of disturbance. Who needs nice neat books?'. And: 'You say my book is disturbing, and I say "Yes! That's the kind of writing I'm interested in."'

Then there's *me* and what I think of her writing. What if I don't like it? Should we only interview the people we admire? Or people like ourselves? O'Brien's latest book is *House of*

*Splendid Isolation* and that's the book we'll talk about. The critics tell me it's something new for her, a wider canvas with violence and politics on it. An English journalist—splendidly called Dorian Wild—tells us the book shows a gunman as a human being. 'This is perilously close to saying Adolf Hitler was a statesman, but O'Brien is adamant. She abhors bloodshed but she understands what the IRA is fighting for. She sounds hopelessly romantic about it, but that's nothing new for O'Brien.'

I'm reassured by the fact that 'hopelessly romantic' are *his* words. But still, how we will get on, both of us Irish but not living there, and me the wrong sort. For here, I mean. Dinny O'Hearn let me join in his Oz Irishism and we were sentimental together over stout and stories of Irish heroism and a snap of his Dad. But though as usual the only *born* Irishman in the room, I still had only honorary status as an Irish Australian.

What will Ms O'Brien think of

my northern, Protestant past? Will we have to keep off the politics of the book?

I'd be amazed if we did, and disappointed. In one printed interview she says—and I like this very much, it's what I've been trying to do as an academic—'Everything political is also human; everything human is also political. I wanted, for the first time in my books, to gel those two aspects of people.'

Anyway, she's a writer, not a politician. The commentators are saying what's new in the new book is the Troubles in the two Irelands. But *she* says what's new is men. In this, her 18th book, she has been 'more mindful of and compassionate towards the masculine sensibility'.

That's the third stage of preparing for an interview. It's not exactly finding common ground, which sounds a bit like committee work, and I imagine she's no better at that than I am. I like the idea that Donald Winnicott, paediatrician and psychoanalyst, had of 'potential space'—

Photo of  
Graham Little  
by Bill Thomas

the trustful space where the mother and the baby, and later two grown human beings, meet to learn by creating things.

I don't know if every interviewer goes through the same thing, turned by the charm and the beauty and the intelligence of the unmet guest into a grump looking for faults and rehearsing to be clever. A stage of envy and self-doubt. But stage three, where you start to trust yourself and the guest, is all the better for it, perhaps. There's a French phrase about stepping back a pace all the better to go forward. Anyway, it was always a marvellous moment when I was doing interviews for *Speaking For Myself* on SBS when she or he arrived. They'd be so alive, so actually *there*, you realised you wanted nothing more than to show them off.

There was a view around that I wasn't as good at interviewing men; it is true my interviews were about the parts of life supposedly assigned to women. I remember Captains of Industry and Captains of Labour seeming, throughout the interview, either bemused, their eyebrows raised, or shifting in their seat and on the point of bursting out, 'What's my childhood got to do with the economy!' Mind you, the last interview I did was with the guitarist John Williams, who came into the studio rubbing his hands and saying

'Oh I do so enjoy this sort of thing!'

**T**HERE'S A PROBLEM THERE that writers present too. Edna O'Brien must have had her fair share of interviewers who ask about her life because they're too ignorant to have questions about her work. I would hate to be like them so I start wishing I were a professional literary person. I'm trying to recall what people asked in those famous *Parisian Review* interviews with writers we read many years ago, or what Helen Daniel asked Robert Drewe at the last-but-one Writers' Festival.

But I hope she'll let me ask where some of the things she writes have come from, and why from her in particular, and a little bit about how she does it, the job-of-work aspect, and about which parts, lines or characters or insights, please her still.

And maybe one or two she's sorry about. Will she let me ask about her childhood, how it shapes her work? Or even if it escapes from it?

Above all, I want to know what it means that she goes 'demented' when she can't be forming sentences. What *is* language that being a master or a mistress of it can keep a body sane?

*House of Splendid Isolation* is one of those books that warns, as maybe all best books should, against relying too much on books. Here is how it concludes:

To go in, within, is the bloodiest journey of all. Inside you get to know. That the same blood and the same tears drop from the enemy as from the self, though not always in the same proportion. To go right into the heart of the hate and the wrong and to sup from it and to be supped. It does not say that in the books. That is the future knowledge. The knowledge that is to be.

I've found the French phrase. It applies equally to high jumpers, writers who've lost the plot or the verb, generals making strategic retreats and all of us at times of personal crisis where we have to take stock even at the risk of getting depressed. *Reculer pour mieux sauter* ('To step backward in order to leap forward').

Unfortunately self-examination is anathema to much of politics because it slows the momentum of battle—though just now, in Edna O'Brien's *Ireland* and mine, it's suddenly, apparently, almost in vogue. ■

**Graham Little's** series of half-hour interviews, *Speaking For Myself*, ran on SBS for several years and he reflects on being an interviewer in the book of the same name published by McPhee Gribble.

### Talking Point

The Way Community is having a Springtime Gala at 7pm on Friday, 14 October, in St Ignatius Hall, Church St, Richmond. All welcome.

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# Wrestling with the angel

*Recent American drama in Australia*

I HAVE BECOME PREOCCUPIED WITH American influences in our culture and on our stages. Perhaps this is because Australian kids reportedly prefer an American basketballer as their hero ahead of homegrown sportspeople. Or it may be because Wendy Wasserstein's gentle comedy of Jewish-American family life, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, has been touring the country courtesy of the Playing Australia fund. That was a surprise: whatever merits Wasserstein's play might have, I had assumed that this federal government fund was set up to allow excellent productions of *Australian* work to go on tour.

American drama continues to lure Australian producers and audiences. The grand old man of American theatre, Eugene O'Neill, may be largely ignored here nowadays but his successors Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller are still going strong. One of the most-produced plays in Australia during the past few years has been Williams's detailed study of the urban misbegotten, *The Glass Menagerie*. Other Williams plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* still get an occasional airing, and Miller's modern classic *The Crucible* is produced equally as often.

That some of these works are on Year 12 syllabuses no doubt helps ensure their frequent appearances, but it is interesting that other plays by Miller—the evergreen *Death of a Salesman*, for example—are also popular with actors, directors and subscription audiences. School students are encouraged to examine the politics and social relevance of these plays, but I believe that actors and the general public mainly respond to the concentrated emotion of these

character-based dramas. The work of another writer of Miller's generation, Edward Albee, is not often produced now but his scaring *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* can still get a run. This was one of the landmark plays of the 1960s, with its acerbic wit, extended metaphoric structure and dramaturgical method of peeling away layer upon layer of social charade and deception in order to get at some inner truth.

Various productions of Neil Simon's ubiquitous *The Odd Couple* (including a female version) went around the commercial venues in Australia in 1989 and 1990, while a Sydney Theatre Company production of his quasi-autobiographical *Lost in Yonkers* toured in 1992. In recent decades Australia has seen more productions of Simon's plays than of works by any other American playwright.

A COUPLE OF AMERICAN playwrights of a newer generation had moments of fame or notoriety in Australia before fading away. One of them was Harvey Fierstein, whose *Torch Song Trilogy* was a terrific hit in 1983, even if its revival at Melbourne's Universal Theatre a decade later felt a bit dated. In the interim, the spectre of AIDS and the anti-homosexual backlash in the America of Reagan and Bush had provided a distinctly sobering and disillusioning new background to *Torch Song's* joyful gay-liberationist ethic.

Another of the newer generation whose star appears to be on the wane is Sam Shepard, who was all the rage in fringe theatres in the 1960s and '70s. Two Playbox Theatre Company productions, of his *Buried Child* and *Curse of the*

*Starving Class*, spring to mind. These gothic portrayals of America's rural underclass seemed to hark back to Steinbeck, while at the same time breaking the traditional American moralistic/naturalistic mould.

David Mamet, on the other hand, has revelled in it during the past decade, with more than a dozen productions of plays celebrating and castigating the sleazy side of modern American life. Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*, seen in major productions in Sydney and Melbourne in the mid-1980s, was a stylish exposé of the dog-eat-dog life of a bunch of real-estate salesmen during an annual sales contest. The notion of the 'death of a salesman' was given a new meaning. *Speed-the-Plow*, seen in a Neil Armfield production for Gary Penny in 1989, gave the film industry the same treatment, making David Williamson's *Emerald City* look coy by comparison. Mamet has a highly successful knack of incorporating slang and jargon into his plays: the real-estate hyperbole was rendered in a rhythmic and almost melodic form, reminiscent of contemporary jazz, rather than in the naturalistic speech so praised in his predecessors.

It is little wonder that Mamet's most recent play *Oleanna*, produced in the past 12 months by the Sydney Theatre Company and by Swy Theatre in Perth, should have provoked highly ambivalent reactions among critics. The play, a shocking exploration of the lengths to which that other new American disease, political correctness, can go, depicts a student's false accusation of sexual harassment against her university professor. The accusation results in her being brutally beaten up, and respected critics like *The Australian's* Rosemary Neill were angered by the fact that the brilliance of Mamet's language manipulates the

audience into wishing the student to be so thrashed.

All of this brings us to the latest *wunderkind* of American stage writing, Tony Kushner, whose *Angels in America: a Gay Fantasia on National Themes* embraces aspects of the work of pretty much all of the above. A Sydney Theatre Company production of *Angels*

last year, and a Melbourne Theatre Company production this year, received rave reviews. The two-part play is a seven-hour marathon that tackles all the big questions of American national life.

It is an end-of-millennium project to bring about reconciliation and concerns, among many other things, the ambivalent nature of love, loyalty and betrayal, law and justice, politics and democracy, theology and belief, many of these being set up as binary opposites. And, in a secondary project, the thematic and stylistic history of recent American drama comes together in Kushner's brilliant, if sometimes wayward, writing.

In Part I, 30-year-old Prior Walter is dying of AIDS and is deserted by his guilt-ridden, left-leaning Jewish lover, Louis. He takes up in turn with a Mormon, Republican-voting lawyer, Joe, whose agoraphobic wife, Harper, takes exhilarating/frightening Valium trips (all over the world, as it happens) while Joe goes out 'walking' in the parks of Brooklyn. Joe is in turn being courted—in the line of business, that is—to join forces with the evil Roy Cohn (a fictional-

ised portrayal of the one-time McCarthy sidekick and 1980s power-broker). It is revealed that Cohn is also dying of AIDS, even though he is 'not a homosexual'. He is a heterosexual who sleeps with men, —'otherwise how could I gain this much clout?' America is portrayed, potently and compellingly, as being in the grip of institutionalised disease, corruption and madness.

**K**USHNER'S SEEMINGLY DISPARATE characters are on collision course not only with each other but with a fearsome kind of Judgment Day.

His dramatic tools of trade include, in rollercoaster-ride succession, the gritty realism of Miller, the gothic vision of Shepard, the pistol-fire linguistic dexterity of Mamet, the outrageous campy and brilliant wit of Fierstein and the moody sexuality of Williams, not to mention a complete mastery of Albee's 'layer-

peeling'—plus an extraordinary vision of the theatre that is his alone.

Alas, the tension

and sense of apprehension built up so very frighteningly in Part I of *Angels in America* (in play and performance alike) descend into bathos, repetition and bewilderingly obscure sociological cant in Part II, when Prior is sent out into the world by a wonderfully theatrical angel. The ending, which seems to argue both that we cannot live our lives without a proper theoretical perspective and that we must continue to choose life in this hell on earth, seems limply simplistic after so much compelling evidence to the contrary.

Still, the best of Part I remains some of the most theatrically thrilling American writing I have seen on an Australian stage since I first saw *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* nearly 30 years ago.

Those who prefer a tamer, more civilised vision of the loving American family will find Wendy Wasserstein's *Sisters Rosensweig*, replete with its cast of TV actors, in Sydney for most of October, and in Canberra Theatre and Perth in November. ■

**Geoffrey Milne** is head of the Theatre and Drama Department in the School of Arts and Media, La Trobe University.

Angelus ex machina: Margaret Mills (the angel) and David Tredinnick in the Melbourne Theatre Company's production of *Angels in America*.

Photo: Jeff Busby.



FLASH IN THE PAN



## Wolf at the door

*Wolf*, dir. Mike Nichols (Hoyts) is a werewolf movie, and if that seems to be stating the obvious it's because in this instance the obvious needs to be stated. Pre-publicity for the film made much of the metaphorical significance of its man-into-beast story, but despite the guidance of a celebrated director (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *The Graduate*), perfect casting (Jack Nicholson—who else—as the werewolf, Michelle Pfeiffer as the beautiful woman whose love just might save him), and the collaboration of one of Hollywood's rising talents, Wesley Strick, in writing the screenplay, the end result doesn't go much further than the formula established by Lon Chaney Jr in *The Wolf Man* (1941).

Nichols, Nicholson and Co. do try, though, especially in *Wolf's* establishing scenes, which scrape the civilised veneer from New York's literary establishment in order to remind us that there are beasts which don't have fur, sharp teeth and claws, and jungles without trees and dank undergrowth. But it's all a bit humdrum after that, and if it wasn't for some slick camera work, concentrating on the transformations of Nicholson's wonderfully elastic face, there wouldn't be much to hold audience attention.

*Wolf* also tries to extend the bounds of its genre through exploring what might really be involved in acquiring the characteristics of an animal, such as heightened sensory awareness: the werewolf is able to experience the world in new ways, especially through the sense of smell. But although this is partly used as a plot device, it's mostly played for

laughs and titillation. Ms Pfeiffer, for example, gets sniffed in all sorts of intimate places. —Ray Cassin

## Reanimation

*The Lion King* dir. Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (Village, through selected cinemas). As is our wont when road-testing a Disney cartoon, we took along a motley crew ranging in age from kinder through to baby-boomer fogenydom. Only the baby-boomers were at all worried by the film's dubious politics. 'You can't ask for democracy in a fairy tale,' admonished the Generation X-er. 'You have to see it in Jungian terms,' scolded the undergraduate. 'It was good,' decreed the primary school kids. 'Let's go again,' pleaded the kindergartener.

And there are many positives: the animation is, as with each succeeding Disney project, yet more brilliant than before. Wide-screen sweeps evoking the Serengeti give a

The filmmakers can be acquitted of the homophobia they've been accused of by some American gay organisations. Scar, the villain, is not gay; it's just that to many Americans an English upper-class drawl (provided by Jeremy Irons) sounds camp. I enjoyed the well-drawn, brilliantly voiced hyena gang (which was not a stereotype of marginalised urban black youth), but it would have been better if, in their quest for some natural-law justification for the 'born to rule' theme, the dialogue writers hadn't committed the scientific howler of placing hyenas 'at the bottom of the food chain'. The phrase *doesn't* mean 'last to get a bite of the kill'. It means plants.

The unease I experienced was at the gratuitous reference to Islam as Scar rallies his troops to take over the kingdom. It came, strangely enough, after a scene that was undoubtedly meant to evoke Nuremberg, and possibly also pre-Gorbachev Moscow, with armies goose-stepping past Scar on a balcony. It then cuts to Scar standing atop a minaret-shaped rock with a huge crescent moon behind him. Past and present demons of the American polity are being invoked, but to link Islam's sacred symbols with the rituals of Nazism and Stalinism is, at the very least, unnecessary artistically, and I found the implications disturbing. —Juliette Hughes

### Eureka Street Film Competition

Yes, it's the scene they cut from *The Lion King*. Tell us what Ms Monroe thinks of this outrageous exclusion and we'll award two tickets, to the film of your choice, for the answer we like best. Send entries to: Eureka Street Film Competition, PO Box 553, Richmond, VIC 3121. The winner of August's competition was Kieran O'Brien, of Camberwell, VIC, who thought the angel was promising James Stewart and family '... And another thing, no child will be living in poverty by 1990.'



sense of vastness, and are contrasted showily with close-ups of leafcutter ants climbing a twig against a background of zebras grazing. And the sound track, particularly at the opening celebration of the birth of young Simba, is grandly suggestive of African choral themes.

## Clancy's overflow

*Clear and Present Danger* dir. Phillip Noyce (Greater Union) is the third of Tom Clancy's novels to be adapted to the screen and the formula remains more or less the same as that of *The Hunt for Red October* and *Patriot Games*. Jack Ryan (Harrison Ford), our guy in the CIA, is once again the hero, and this time the unassuming man of action not only takes on the Latin American drug world but saves the constitution as well.

Ryan, assigned to investigate the murder of a friend of the president, discovers that the deceased had links with a Columbian drug lord. While he's pursuing the case through legitimate means, the president author-



ises a covert guerrilla action against the cartel of Ernesto Escobedo. An explosion at a hacienda alerts both Ryan and Escobedo's principal adviser, Felix Cortez (Joaquim de Almeida) to the presence of American troops. The former sets about exposing the truth while the latter tries to use this information to build his own cocaine empire.

The film revolves around the resolution of the plans of these two characters and, as you'd expect, Cortez comes a cropper while Ryan manages to rescue the troops left to fend for themselves in the Colombian jungle before presenting the US Senate with his damaging revelations.

The plot is complex and at times confused—you get the feeling towards the end of the film that the writer suddenly realised things had to be resolved, and the easiest way to do this was to focus on the plight of the abandoned GIs. The storyline demands so much of your attention that the performances almost slip by unnoticed, save for Ford, in the sort of role he probably plays in his sleep by now, and James Earl Jones as his ailing boss and mentor, Admiral Greer.

In *Clear and Present Danger* Clancy has applied the Monroe doctrine to an age where the threat from the south is cocaine, not communism. While Cuba and Haiti continue to give the Clinton administration unlimited headaches at least Jack Ryan can still get his man.

—Jon Greenaway

## Tangled web

*Spider and Rose*, dir. Bill Bennett (independent cinemas). When a new Australian film comes out, I really try to give it a fair go, so I didn't walk out before the end of *Spider and Rose*. Perhaps I should have, because it descended deeper and deeper into the pit it had dug itself. It is ostensibly a road movie, but it never settles on whether it wants to be a road movie sensitive to the problems of ageing, or a road movie completely blind and deaf (but unfortunately not dumb) to any sensitivity at all.

The story is that of a woman

(Ruth Cracknell) being given an ambulance trip away from a Sydney hospital to her Coonabarabran home to celebrate her 70th birthday. She has angina and a fly phobia. She hates flies because she found her husband's body covered in them after the car accident that starts the film.

In fact, at the start there is a promise of some depth. Ruth Cracknell is, after all, one of Australia's best actors, and when you are introduced to the intense first scene you think well, it's not exactly Bergman but it's not at all bad—and then suddenly it's as though someone changed channels to *Hey Hey It's Saturday*. Suffice it to say that the rest of the—for want of a better word—plot is something like *Harold & Maude* meets *Alvin Purple*, in which the grace, dignity and beauty of Ruth Cracknell are very badly served.

—Juliette Hughes

## Come all ye satyrs

*Fellini Satyricon*, dir. Federico Fellini (independent cinemas). 'No one paints pictures like this any more,' laments the failed poet as he guides the young student around a museum filled with cracked Graeco-Roman murals. Watching this scene in Fellini's screen adaptation of the 1st century Latin novel by Petronius, one chuckles at the director's joke—it is a *modern* museum into which these characters from classical literature have strolled—and then realises that the joke has got even better since the film's first release in 1969.

The new print that is now working its way round Australia's art-house cinemas is more than just a welcome revival of a cinema classic. It is a chance to witness a witty debunking of the very notion of a classic, so the fact the film is itself now a classic only adds to the fun.

This sort of debunking, of course, has become an academic industry since 1969, as wave after wave of Althusserian Marxists, and sundry deconstructionists and poststructuralists, have overrun departments of film studies everywhere. Fellini was playing the deconstructionist game long before the term was coined, but there is much more here than tedi-

ous game-playing. The film pulls apart, in relativising fashion, the shared assumptions that make up a culture but it also celebrates them, and that celebratory note is possible because *Satyricon*, like all of Fellini's work, is animated by an '-ism' that is now out of fashion, humanism. All of the master's delight in carnival-

## Valhalla/Kino giveaway

*Love and Human Remains*, starring Thomas Gibson (right) is the latest film from Canadian writer/director Denys Arcand, whose *Jesus of Montreal* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1989. *Eureka Street* has 10 double passes to see *Love and Human Remains* at Melbourne's Valhalla and Kino cinemas, for the first 10 people to write to: 'Valhalla/Kino ticket offer', PO Box 553 Richmond 3121



show humanity is on display in this film, which marks a shift away from the realist mode of early work such as *La Strada* towards the fantasising of his later films. *Satyricon*, made in mid-career, is to Fellini's *opus* what *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's last play, is sometimes said to be in the bard's work: an encapsulation of all his art. But enough about classics—just go and see it.

—Ray Cassin



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## Two-faced crime show

Much of the praise lavished on the ABC's *Janus* in the first few weeks of its run concerned its producers' preoccupation with authenticity. *The Age Green Guide* (1/9/94) reported breath-

lessly that production designer Sally Shepherd went *all the way down to Altona* (where from, the ABC studios in Elsternwick? Right across town, fancy that) to find a *real prison truck*.

Now I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm not all that interested in seeing a real prison truck. I am, on the other hand, very interested in dramatic representations: of legal systems and processes; of humanity, in the dock or on the bench, wrestling with its own rituals; of the way that language tries, and honourably fails, to reconstruct wordless episodes of violence and cruelty. If the show's documentary approach to facts doesn't enhance this subject matter, then neither, on the other hand, does it get in the way.

But what is it about the police and the judiciary—The Law—that makes film and TV critics wheel in the criteria of authenticity when talking about aesthetic value? Why are so many TV critics saying *Janus* is fabulous *because* it follows police and court proceedings accurately? If it were a documentary, then that would be an appropriate—indeed a crucial—criterion. But it's supposed to be fiction. Isn't it? And if it isn't, then what *is* it supposed to be?

One story (*Green Guide*, same article) highlights the sort of problem created when authenticity and aesthetics come into opposition. Former chief stipendiary magistrate John 'Darcy' Dugan, billed in the credits as a special consultant, was asked his advice about whether a policeman would stand in a particular place in court; it would 'help the composition of the shot'. Dugan's response? 'Sorry.' Whether they went in the end for composition or for doco-realism isn't made clear, but the story seemed to indicate that in such matters, Dugan's word is law.

The 26 episodes cover a year of legal procedures against a 'dirt-bag family', the Hennessey clan, perpetrators of numerous crimes. *Janus* is tapping some very strong and very odd national attitudes to legal and/or uniformed authority—courtesy, probably, of such hot spots in the nation's collective unconscious as the convict past, the Kelly gang and the Eureka Stockade. For the Hennesseys may indeed be dirtbags, but to one's horror one occasionally finds oneself barracking for them. Their emotional power over other, nicer, weaker human beings demonstrates their ratbag family charisma, as peripheral characters are sucked into or centrifugally spun out of the whirling Hennessey narrative. Shirl the battleaxe matriarch (like Ma Kelly) is someone whom we are clearly expected to regard as a right old character, to be cheered with whenever she scores a point off some policeperson or legal eagle. At least two of the Hennessey boys are undeniably cute; and the word 'larrikin' lurks near the surface of their characterisation, uncomfortably close to the word 'psychotic'. Such appeal, however bent, is part

of what makes *Janus* compelling: it's Good versus Evil, the best plot in the world, but it's also not as simple as that.

The episodic subplots add variety and density to the central narrative, as does the focus so far on the assorted losers hovering round the edges of the family (a besotted and newly pregnant girlfriend; a broken-down heroin-addicted 'mate'), rather than on the family itself. The screenplay is a gift to the actors, who rise to the occasion; the undervalued Tracy Mann is making the most of her limited role, and the vulnerably thinning hair and soft worried face and manner of Jeremy Kewley work beautifully against one's stereotyped expectations of what a Crown Prosecutor is supposed to be like.

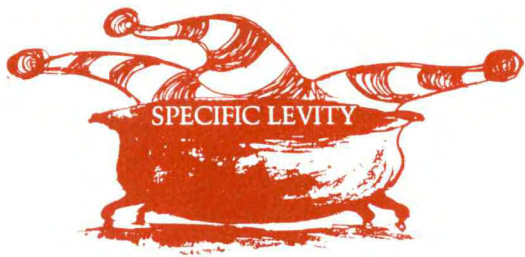
The camerawork is varied and inventive; the use of black and white to signal episodes of private memory is a simple idea working surprisingly well, not least because we—most of the people watching *Janus*, anyway—unconsciously associate black-and-white, the news and doco medium of our childhoods, with realism, authenticity, the genuine. It's also a highly effective and efficient way round the old stage/screenwriting problem of conveying inner visions and voices, in a medium where you can't use the fiction-writer's device of internal monologue.

Most significantly, though, the black-and-white sequences show the viewer what really happened—which is, after all, the thing the court always wants to know, and never fully can. When a character in court has one of these flashbacks to the episode being discussed, what's always emphasised is the difference between the publicly said and the privately seen, a gap exemplified most purely by the failure of language ever to convey the real nature of violence. Even when the witness is trying hard to tell the truth, sometimes events as visually remembered are just not verbally representable. The black-and-white flashback technique demonstrates this unbridgeable distance between events themselves and later attempts to reconstruct them; one of the spookier things *Janus* is telling us, in fact, is that in aiming to get at the whole truth and nothing but the truth, courtroom procedure and practice is always already a failure.

Meanwhile, TV's moment of the month was the sight on SBS's *Australian Biography* of the great Dr H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs with his eyes full of tears as he discussed the failure thus far of white Australians to accept black Australians on their own terms and to work out a way of living harmoniously with racial and cultural difference, describing this failure as the greatest disappointment of his life. A week later, as though to corroborate, Nine won this month's Arthur Tunstall Race Relations Trophy: 'Coming up on *A Current Affair*, the man who built his dream home on a sacred site ... He never dreamed he'd have to share his back yard with the local tribe.'

I bet the 'local tribe' wasn't all that thrilled, either. Who *writes* this stuff? ■

**Kerryn Goldsworthy** is a Melbourne writer and teacher.



# Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 27, October 1994

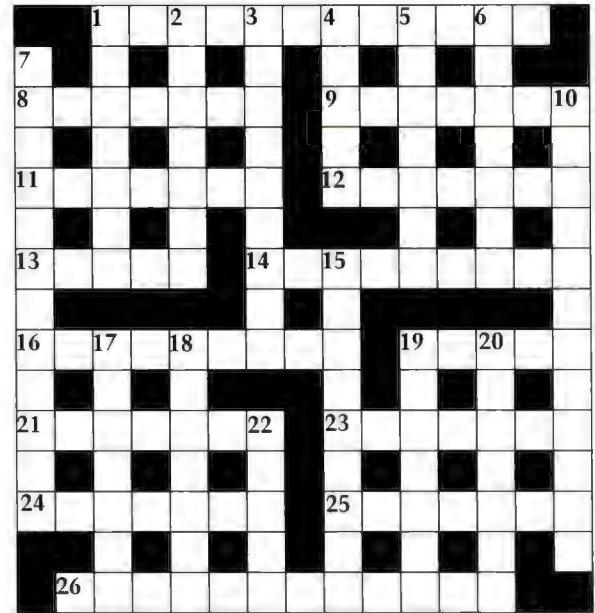
Devised by Joan Nowotny IBVM

**ACROSS**

- 1 Win the lot or clean up for the aquatic races. (5,3,4)
- 8 Duty list includes nothing for the bird. (7)
- 9 Feast again or go back to secluded spot. (7)
- 11 'Am I dust, designed for the arena?' the gladiator asked apprehensively. (7)
- 12 At the beginning of March and at Easter, some receive a Commission. (7)
- 13 Turnip for a European native? (5)
- 14 Shopkeeper giving directions to a sales representative possibly. (9)
- 16 Numbers of them may be in conclave. (9)
- 19 Plant on the southern border of the marsh. (5)
- 21 One may drive an armoured division into the country. (7)
- 23 It's sad to fail badly with silly fib told to the sheriff's officer. (7)
- 24 Sensitive to the sun, rove about aimlessly, fearing a kind of breakdown. (7)
- 25 Perhaps I am in Laos or some other country. (7)
- 26 Unfortunately, dogma ruins reason—without a son to provide a possible yardstick. (9,3)

**DOWN**

- 1 Rot rises in herb container that could be kept in the warehouse. (7)
- 2 Interweave it among the compass points. (7)
- 3 Foolishly I pay Roman arsonist's disease costs. (9)
- 4 Her ma may be in the Sultan's enclosure! (5)
- 5 Favourite international body makes first-class bloomer. (7)
- 6 Subdue me, perhaps, O weaver of dreams. (7)
- 7 Representative sample annoyed religious group in accepting nothing. (5-7)
- 10 The stage for conflict? (7,2,3)
- 15 Lave graduates in suitable container. (9)
- 17 An about-turn is always in the second half of the course. (7)
- 18 Sin, or do otherwise, but not outside. (7)
- 19 Will he object with me confined within the extremes of summer glistening light? (7)
- 20 Doctor lied about Left. He needs to be exercised in discipline. (7)
- 22 An early one catches the sun, perchance, on the vertical pipe? (5)



**Solution to Crossword no.26, September 1994**

D	U	M	P	L	I	N	G	S	C	A	R	C	E
I	I	A	E	B	O	A	I						
S	U	N	U	P	G	R	O	U	N	D	I	N	G
P	C	S	A	N	S	S	H						
O	V	E	R	E	A	T	E	N	T	R	E	A	T
S	M	E	E	R	H								
A	V	E	N	G	E	D	T	A	U	G	H	T	
L	A	O						C	I	P			
S	T	A	B	L	E	R	O	T	A	T	O	R	
R	E	N	E	O	O								
U	P	S	E	T	M	I	L	L	I	G	R	A	M
M	A	W	I	A	N	M	I						
P	R	U	D	E	N	T	L	Y	A	M	I	S	S
U	C	E	Y	E	P	S	E						
S	I	E	N	N	A	P	R	O	T	E	S	T	S



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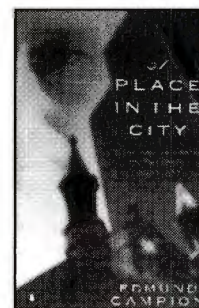
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**Eureka Street has half a dozen copies of *A Place in the City* to give away to anybody who can tell us whose statue they would most like to see inside or outside their local cathedral. Mark your entry 'Eureka Street/Penguin October Book Offer.'**

Last month we asked for suggestions of faces to include on the cover of the Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia. Christine Coo from Leederville, WA suggested Mrs Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, the world's first woman Prime Minister; John Upton of Eastwood, NSW suggested Captain Cook; and Julie Willis, East Brunswick, VIC suggested Agatha Christie. Congratulations to our winners.

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