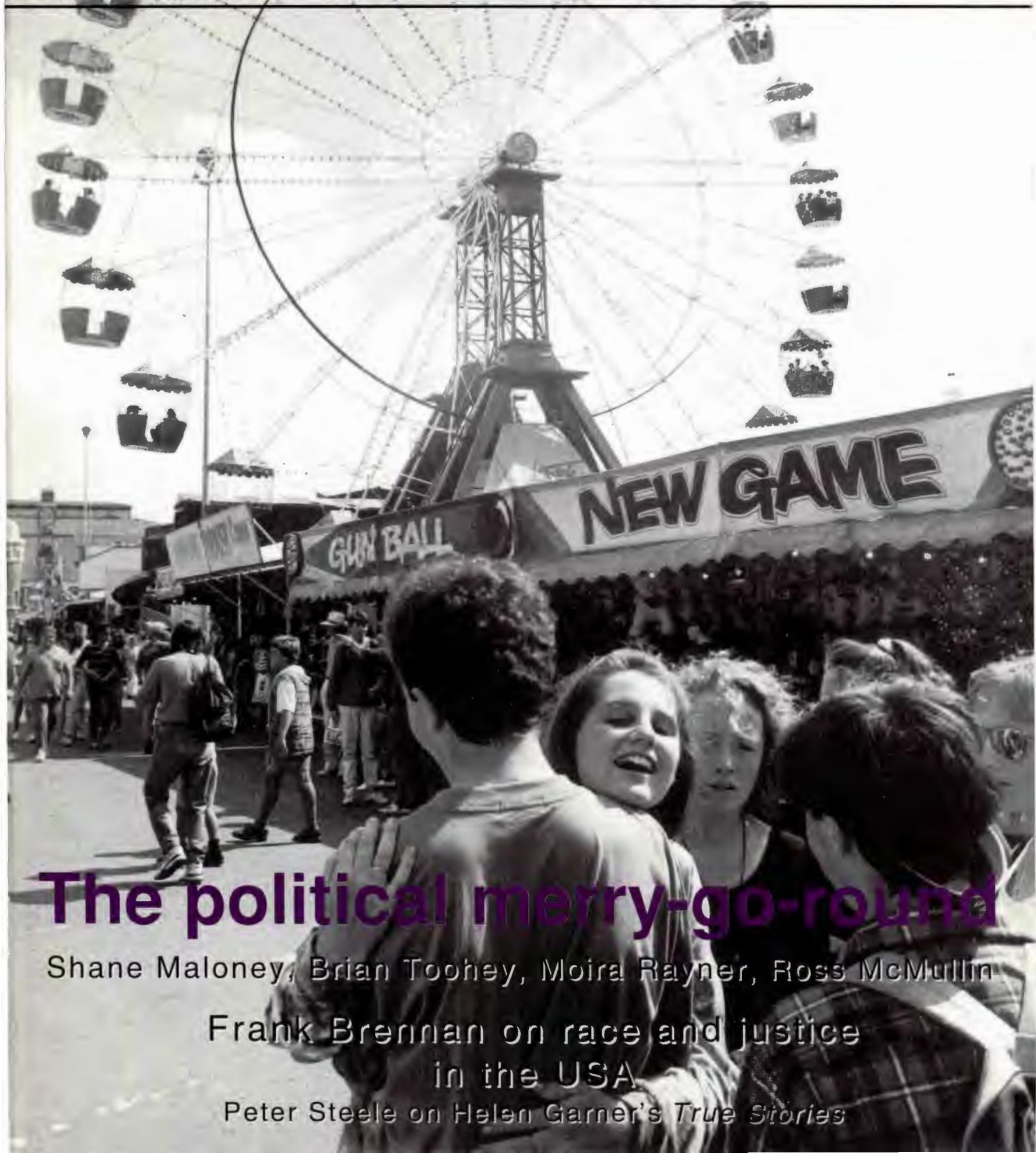


EUREKA STREET

Vol. 6 No. 3 April 1996

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The political merry-go-round

Shane Maloney, Brian Toohy, Moira Rayner, Ross McMullin

Frank Brennan on race and justice
in the USA

Peter Steele on Helen Garner's *True Stories*

Round Fourteen, Third Quarter

*The concentration has gone by now, the Magpies ten goals down,
And only the seagulls seem to know how to pick up the crumbs. It's unpleasurable,
The manic speed of these business men in striped guernseys,
The scoreboard like Super Mario Bros, even umpires with numbers on their backs.
It's all so different, makes me want to take a good hard look at myself.
The gaze moves to the somnolent 'teeth of goal', and that man.
No slave to fashion, he wears the regulation white hat of the fifties,
The white dustcoat of the company foreman or Nobel-winning scientist.
Making sure the posts are not shifted behind the play
He keeps jotting into the little black book with efficient aplomb
All the barbaric point-scoring going on at the other end.
Could he be the centre of meaning in a world gone made with amalgamations?
The one resolute unchanging fixture stands there between the goalposts,
Ready to lean his head back during the thrilling trajectory, pause
In a way to make Stanislavsky proud, then lift the two fingers.
In a better world Collingwood revives in the final quarter, the spiral torpedo
On the bell sealing it, and you wouldn't want to be dead for quids.*

Philip Harvey



*'Party President
Barry Jones stepped to
the podium. It took
ten minutes to list his
credentials, among
them the fact that
he has an extinct
marsupial named
after him.
In retrospect, this detail
may have held prophetic
significance ...'*

—Shane Maloney gumshoeing through the federal electorate of Batman, on the trail of Martin Ferguson. See 'Stand by your man', p16.

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Easter 1996

AT TACH A DATE TO THE WORD 'EASTER' and you agitate the shadows. So much swirls around the word. There is the death and rising, and the beginning of a Christian calendar. Then there are all the events, celebratory and catastrophic, that have been annexed to the word and to its moveable feast, and all concentrated in a moment when the seasons pivot and everything changes.

It is impossible not to think of Ireland at this time: eighty years since the Easter uprising, and still no confirmed peace. And Israel: when we went to press last month it was with uneasy hopes of a brief period, between the assassination of Yitzak Rabin and the Israeli elections, in which sane negotiation could take place with the Palestinians. Within 24 hours the bombing had begun.

Monthly magazines can anticipate some patterns of political and cultural behaviour, but by and large their function has to be different from that of daily newspapers. Prime Ministers and Premiers notoriously do not consult magazine editors when they set their election dates. So we have looked sideways this month, to see what can be gleaned from experiences elsewhere.

Frank Brennan, writing from the USA, looks at the fault lines in American racial politics and law. The picture is not an encouraging one, but there are lessons in it, and, in Australia, still time to learn from them.

David Braddon-Mitchell, in Auckland, looks at Australia through the prism of a New Zealand that has gone much further with radical free-market reforms than we have here. Australia is usually too haughty to look across the Tasman for models of a preview of a possible social future. It's about time we did.

Back home, Shane Maloney has taken a different tack with the elections-that-we-had-to-have. Maloney is a crime fiction writer with an eye for the bizarre and the human ragbaggery of politics. He went deep into what the pundits call a political heartland—the Victorian electorate of Batman—to track the progress of Martin Ferguson, and found out just how complex an organ the political heart can be. If the ALP wants some raw data for their post-loss soul searching they need look no further. At the very least Maloney might help them to keep their political sense of humour.

Good news: Rowan Callick, Melbourne Bureau Chief of the *Australian Financial Review*, has been awarded the Graham Perkin Award for 1995 and named Australian Journalist of the Year. In their citation the judges commented on 'an extraordinary, diverse range' of Callick's work, which included, 'Papua New Guinea's foreign exchange crisis, the "amazing" cement scandal in Port Moresby, economic and environmental problems in the Solomon Islands and perceptive pieces in the journal *Eureka Street*'.

Congratulations to Rowan. And Happy Easter to all *Eureka Street's* readers. —Morag Fraser ■

The ritual setting

OVER THE EASTER PERIOD, the Jewish Museum of Australia, which has recently moved into new premises in Melbourne's St Kilda, is hosting a celebration of Jewish food. The exhibition is called 'The Moveable Feast'. It includes a fully operational Kosher kitchen in which cooking demonstrations are taking place at intervals throughout the exhibition period.

The display also includes explanations of the types of food associated with special Jewish days and the scriptural origins of dietary laws. The Kosher kitchen is as stylish as anything in *Vogue*. It is also, we discover, rooted in an unfathomable tradition. Scripture makes the point three times that 'you shall not cook the meat of a kid in the milk of its mother.' So the kitchen has two sets of crockery and two sinks: one for meat dishes and the other for milk dishes. Yet the eye is equally drawn to the quality of the contemporary benches and cupboards.

The Jewish Museum is a class act, and 'The Moveable Feast' is typical of the pains it takes, both to celebrate and explain Judaism. The permanent exhibition is a kind of interactive catechism. You can walk through a Jewish year and understand where Yom Kippur and Pesach (Passover) lie in relation to each other; you can ponder a life cycle which includes birth, bar mitzvah & bat mitzvah, marriage, death and the possibility of divorce.

You can listen to a Talmudic debate. You can see ways in which the name of God and the word of God are revered: 'the centrality of the Torah in Jewish life is evidenced in Jewish ritual and worship in the synagogue where the Torah is treated with all the respect accorded to royalty.' Nothing is taken for granted. There is even a window to explain the idea of prayer to a visitor who may be entirely unfamiliar with this form of human behaviour: 'Prayer is to remember God's presence, acknowledge God's providence, sanctify life and supplicate God, seeking help, guidance and consolation.'

Not far away from the museum is Theatreworks, for some years an oasis in a city that has increasingly exchanged a rich and varied theatre tradition for a small number of 'major events.' This Easter, Theatreworks and Deakin University, with the participation of the National Theatre Drama School, have developed a community theatre project called *Fayre Play*. The idea was germinated by Robert Draffin, the former artistic director of Theatreworks, who has an

interest in the spiritual possibilities of theatre. On Easter Saturday, a cycle of medieval passion plays, including 'Crucifixion' and 'Harrowing of Hell' are being presented in a kind of market place, where traders and street performers will be part of the show. On Saturday night, when many Christians participate in the annual Easter vigil and use the symbols of fire

and water to evoke the central mysteries of their faith, the church that adjoins Theatreworks will host a ritual in which a body will be shrouded in Easter egg wrappings and a rock will be broken open to release lollies and eggs. Paul Monaghan from Theatreworks says that they chose Easter as the focus of a community theatre project because of the inherent power of the Easter stories and the significance of those stories to a community where Christianity is at least nominally the dominant religion. In point of fact, he concedes, the project is testing how strongly or otherwise a motley community like that in St Kilda continues to relate to the Christian drama of salvation.

In a way, Theatreworks has devised a braver liturgy than many churches have come up with this Easter. It is brave because it risks failure. Most Christian liturgies don't take that chance. They have rosters to make sure people are involved, but only to a certain point, and rest on symbols which have stood the test of time. Christians are generally moved and sustained by their observance of Easter. But seldom surprised. Yet Easter celebrates a surprising and in many respects threatening turn of events.

The Theatreworks project does beg the question of who has proprietorship of the celebration of Easter. It is customary at Easter for Christian leaders to make statements and to remind us, for example, that Jesus continues to be crucified in unjust social institutions. This is perfectly true. But it only touches a single dimension of the vast triptych of creation, destitution and redemption.

THE JEWISH MUSEUM HAS BEEN established by a community a fraction the size of the Catholic Church, and a minute fraction of all the Christian Churches combined. It challenges those who claim ownership of the Christian story to explain similarly who they are and what they mean. ■

Michael McGirr is the consulting editor of *Eureka Street*.



The art of conflict

'In one minute, the direct killings caused by the nuclear explosion were over. Above the massive ruins of the city of Taipei, the immense mushroom cloud went up to 15 kilometres high in the sky in a diameter of about 20 kilometres. Things remained still. The burning was boundless. Whatever that could be destroyed had been destroyed. There were no buildings and streets left in Taipei, for the city had been reduced to an enormous faceless rubble.'

THIS IS A SCENE PORTRAYED in a Chinese work of fiction published in 1991 in Hong Kong by an anonymous author. Entitled *Yellow Peril*, the book portrayed the large-scale migration and dispersion of Chinese to all parts of the world following a series of nuclear strikes. The strikes first destroyed Taiwan and then China itself, involving the then two superpowers the USA and the Soviet Union.

For those who, like me, have read *Yellow Peril*, what is happening now on both sides of the Taiwan Strait is decidedly déjà vu. Despite all the Australian media talk about democracy in Taiwan and China's military threat to it, I am inclined to see this Chinese exorcising show of fireworks in a different light.

In China the spirit of nationalism has been long fostered by communist education and boosted by the recent economic prosperity. For the first time since the shameful colonial past of defeats, the aggressive new generation of Chinese leaders has got a chance to defy the West by showing their recently acquired power. Not only have they got everything that the West has got but they have more: a united China intent on avenging its past grievances and humiliations, even at a personal level. A general manager of a big Shanghai corporation told me in a recent interview that he is very proud of being able to employ *white* people to work for him. In a TV drama set in the USA broadcast in China this year, the main character, echoing the theme of the novel, *My Fortune in Australia* (1991), expressed the similar wish for a future in which white people would slave for him.

With increasing economic exchange, cultural clashes deepen between mainland Chinese and

Taiwanese. As the president in *Yellow Peril* declares, Taiwan as a society is so far removed from the mainland politically, economically and culturally, that most Taiwanese do not regard themselves as Chinese. That perhaps partly explains why, in the literatures of both sides, the portraiture of the other has been equally negative.

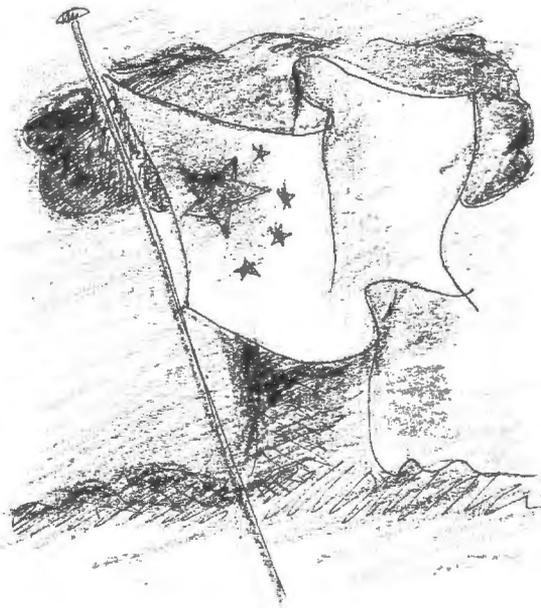
Taiwanese, so incompatible with China, have found a new solution to their worries, which lies in Australia, 'a young country ... with the highest living standard in the world, and a rising Southern star', in the words of a leading Taiwanese magazine, *Common Wealth* (which ran an exclusive 265-page special issue on Australia and New Zealand in December, 1995).

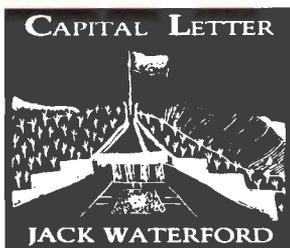
AND THE ACTUAL coming has taken Australia unawares. At a recent parent-teacher interview in a local primary school, a Chinese interpreter was surprised to discover the large presence of Taiwanese parents who had all recently arrived. The local migration agencies, wise to a good thing, have started putting out

aggressive advertisements for Taiwanese migrants in the local Chinese newspapers.

But what can Australia do in the face of this rising emergency? Again, the scene in *Yellow Peril* is probably not without its symbolic significance: the Australian Ambassador to China, surrounded in his Embassy and cut off from the rest of the world, is unable even to send out the news of China's immediate intention to launch a nuclear strike against Taiwan. ■

Ouyang Yu is a Melbourne-based poet and translator.





Very public concerns

'GENTLEMEN, WE HAVE RUN OUT OF MONEY, NOW WE MUST think', Lord Rutherford is said to have told staff in his nuclear laboratory in Britain during the 1930s. Public administrators these days know exactly what he meant.

With tax increases almost entirely off the agenda everywhere about the world, almost everything in the public sector is about doing more with less, about focusing more tightly on programs which people want to retain, about increasing the efficiency of service delivery, by dumping some services altogether and by corporatising, privatising or introducing market-type mechanisms into other services. It is also a great excuse for ideology to intervene: a new government, for example, finds it much easier to slice up a health service if it can claim that it is forced, reluctantly, by the empty cupboard.

At the operational level it can lead to a mechanistic accountant's mentality, a preoccupation with the number of pension cheques issued which in turn can lead to a loss of faith within government and among the public about the capacity of government to deliver. The managerial techniques of seeking efficiency—of devolving power to local managers and focusing on controlling inputs—can seriously erode any sense of broad strategy or performance, undermine service-wide perspectives or focus on the broader interests of government, and trample all over idealisms and traditional values of public service.

It is, of course, by no means all bad. Technology and some managerial discretion does mean that better and more suitable services can be provided for less. The decollectivisation of some welfare services cannot be regretted. A focus on choice—putting money in the citizen's pocket with targeted help for those who have no money or no pockets—can have as much to offer as a continuing massive appropriation of public goods to those who do not really need it and who have tended to organise it more around their own conveniences than those of people who do.

As a treat to myself after an unspeakably dull—and predictable—election campaign, I accepted an invitation to speak at an OECD ministerial conference in Paris on the future of public services. I found the eyes rather more open than I expected.

Australian public policy may suffer from reading too much of the English-language literature of public administration reform and not pay enough attention to what others are finding and doing. Britain and New Zealand have made the most changes, the United States talks up the most; even Australia, if more advanced in what it actually does than the US, finds itself mighty respected in the literature about what can be done and what is being done.

Other countries such as, say, France, Germany and Japan for example are also seeking efficiencies and reform, and have made changes, but they have a rather more conscious eye on social cohesion, public infrastructure and political factors than elsewhere, and they may be succeeding just as well. And where they have not been careful—as with France when it sought to impose massive public sector cuts and found itself virtually brought to its knees by public reaction—they have tended to

learn fast. Just how well one is succeeding, of course, is purely a subjective matter, certainly one incapable of being judged by any measure of government outlays as a proportion of national product. Australia, for example, is down among the lowest three (with the United States and Japan) for public spending as a proportion of GDP, and Britain—the supposed furnace of driven reform—spends about 27 per cent more, Germany about 36 per cent more and France about 53 per cent more.

There are differences, of course, about what these countries do with the extra expenditure—particularly in relation to state superannuation—but so far as the pressure for reform is driven by budget deficits, the evidence is fairly clear that revenue shortfalls are more the problem for Australia than expenditure overruns.

Most of Europe is highly sceptical about whether 'natural monopolies' such as water, power and gas reticulation are any better run in private rather than public hands. Many are as worried about their sovereignties and the protection of their citizens against the increasingly global lobby groups than about introducing more market-type mechanisms that even further reduce government capacity to pull the levers. And much of the world has coalition governments—often with very disparate elements which would never agree about radical change—

and the sensitivities about the powers of politicians as against the administrators are very strong.

BUT EVEN THE ENTHUSIASTS are sounding some notes of caution. A Britain minister spoke wistfully of how a 'contract society' his government had helped create was now visibly losing some of the 'hidden efficiencies' of bureaucratic professionalism and sense of public purpose. Britain could not go back, he thought, but there had been a definite loss. And he talked frankly about how the political need for better and more effective government—which necessarily meant a tendency towards centralisation and wanting to call the shots—ran directly counter to the mantras of better administration, like decentralising and letting the managers manage.

The French, of course, would argue that leadership and some sense of purpose is just as critical as the latest fad. It set up its élite civil service school 50 years ago saying that it:

...must teach its future civil servants the sense of the state; it must make them understand the responsibilities of the administration, make them taste the grandeurs and appreciate the service of the profession. It must do more. By a sustained effort of its best teachers, by recalling the great examples and the great men of its history, it must give to its pupils the awareness of some master qualities, the sense of humanity which gives life to all work, the sense of decision which allows them to take risks, having weighed them; the sense of imagination, which is not afraid of any boldness, or any grandeur.

It is just that sense of imagination which ought to be on the agenda of the latest rounds of cuts and efficiencies. No doubt that's at the top of Peter Costello's agenda. ■

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

Troubles again

From Philip Mendes

Andrew Vincent's analysis of the Middle East peace process (*Eureka Street*, March 1996) illustrates the fallacious nature of much local commentary on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

In particular, the failure to engage with the major contradiction of the peace process—that precisely at the same time that Israel is making historic political and territorial concessions, the level of Palestinian violence and hatred towards Israel appears to be on the increase. [Editor's note: Andrew Vincent's comment was commissioned and printed before the first of the recent spate of Hamas bombings in Israel.]

As a long-time Jewish supporter of the right of the Palestinians to a state alongside Israel, I find this contradiction difficult to accept. It violates all my longheld beliefs—that a doveish Israeli Government willing to cede territory and recognise Palestinian

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seems to be that Palestinian violence is understandable since they have lost as much as they have gained from the peace process. Certainly, many Palestinians have lost their livelihood due to the cessation of employment in Israel.

Palestinian living standards have almost certainly dropped considerably. But one might add that Palestinians have always expressed a preference for Palestinian rule (whether good or bad), rather than the economic benefits of continued Israeli occupation.

Said also argues that the peace process is asymmetrical—that its terms are dictated by a strong Israel to a weak Arafat. The Palestinians are left with a kind of Bantustan, rather than an independent state. According to Said, if only Israel would grant the Palestinians genuine independence, everything would be all right.

In my opinion, this logic ignores the different Israeli and Palestinian conceptions of peace. Israelis define peace as the cessation of war and violence. Palestinians in contrast define peace not as the absence of war, but rather as the establishment of territorial rights—namely the establishment of a Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital.

In a sense this is understandable since Palestinians still lack the secure statehood held by Israelis. But what it

also means is that whilst a Palestinian State may be a prerequisite for peace, it is also possible to have a Palestinian State and a continued state of war. The attitudes here are just as asymmetrical as the power imbalance between the two peoples.

There are Palestinian suicide bombers in Israel trying to destroy an Israeli Government that (contrary to Vincent's suggestion) is willing to cede a Palestinian State, but no comparative Israeli suicide bombers in Nablus or Ramallah trying to destroy Palestinian support for peace. Only a small marginal group of Israelis are willing to use violence to stop territorial concessions, but a much larger number of Palestinians seem willing to use violence to destroy the peace process.

In the end, it will be up to Arafat and the Palestine National Authority. Either they crush Hamas, or Hamas will crush them. Hamas and the suicide bombers are not concerned with getting the Palestinians a better deal from Oslo. They are concerned with destroying the peace process and the prospects of Palestinian statehood.

Philip Mendes
Nth Caulfield, VIC



national rights would provoke a corresponding surge of goodwill amongst Palestinians.

Unfortunately, the opposite seems to have happened. The warning of the Israeli Right—that concessions to the Palestinians would only bring further violence and extremism in their wake—seems to have been confirmed.

The response of Palestinian critics of the peace process such as Edward Said (referred to by Andrew Vincent)

It's not cricket

From Michael Buhagiar

Fr Andrew Hamilton's shallow and imperceptive analysis of the recent Sri Lankan cricket tour of Australia (*Eureka Street*, March 1996) has raised several important philosophical issues. Australian cricket is not 'a

LECTURE

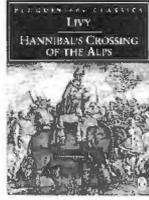
Women's ordination, the church, and the media

Dr Marie Louise Uhr, national convenor, Ordination of Catholic Women, will give the after dinner lecture at University House, Australian National University, Canberra, Wednesday, May 8 1996.

Dr Uhr will respond to the Pope's dedication of Media Sunday, observed on May 12, to 'women, the church and the media'.

Dinner, 6.00 pm for 6.30 pm, \$20.

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This month, courtesy of Penguin Books, the writer of each letter we publish will receive two of the Penguin '60s Classics

metaphor of life seen as a ruthless economic struggle'. The attitude of, not only Australia, but many other cricketing nations to their opponents has immeasurably less in common with the inhumanity of 'numbers' people, at several removes from the living world, than with the primal fury of a mother protecting her young.

It is an unpleasant fact that the individual human life is valued far more highly in some countries than others. At present, if you fall ill, are in trouble with the law, in conflict with Government, a member of the armed forces, and so on, the individual is far better off in a Western democracy; and, on the whole, I believe, preferably in Australia or England. This is surely why so many countries perceive the ideals of English sport as being of value to their way of life. No country has been so single-minded and successful in protecting the interests of her citizens as England (though not without great cost to her enemies and, at times, to wholly innocent bystanders).

The central point is, that to deny what William Blake called 'Nature's cruel holiness' (and Blake, incidentally, was an exemplary 'process' theologian)—to deny its capriciousness and extravagance and waste is, in itself, an act of cruelty. This is the Rousseauist position, and, as Camille Paglia so brilliantly pointed out in her book 'Sexual Personae' Rousseauism is always next to cruelty. A particularly culpable instance of this might be the present attitude of the Catholic Church toward contraception in the Third World.

It may not be a bad thing that the Sri Lankans' fond belief in cricket as a 'gentleman's' game should be challenged from time to time (and this is not for one moment to endorse the

article's egregious misperception that the local officials failed to observe the highest standards of impartiality)—for the same reason that the Jew Harold Abrahams was right to rebuke the Master of Caius, in the film *Chariots of Fire*, for believing that Olympic Gold Medals could be won 'with the ease of gods'; because we are not, in fact, gods, but humankind.

Rousseauism, ultimately, is incompatible with the love of God. It may take Fr Hamilton a lot of reading and experience and meditation to appreciate the truth of this proposition, but, for the sake of his own moral well-being, he should try. There are many theologians who would wish him every success.

Michael Buhagiar
Carlingford, N.S.W.

Union rules

From Richard Honner

I was disappointed in the very first question of your 'Serious Summer Trivia Quiz', which asks 'which is the only country to win a Gold Medal for Rugby at an Olympic Games?' It gives the answer as the United States.

Whilst the USA did win the Rugby competition at the Olympic Games in Antwerp in 1920 and in Paris in 1924, the touring Wallaby Team that happened to be in London in 1908 entered the Olympic competition and won it for Australia; the French were first to win the Rugby competition at the Olympics at the 1900 Games in Paris.

Richard Honner
Burwood, NSW

Editor's note: *Yes, we were wrong. Sincere apologies to trivia fans.*

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Disarray, the American way

Frank Brennan, Australian advocate for indigenous rights, went off the beaten track in the United States and found that American perspectives on race, religion and rights are more complex and more unresolved than he expected.

MY FIRST PORT OF CALL WAS St Mary's near the mouth of the Yukon River in Alaska.

Out on the river one afternoon, I was marvelling at the sun reflecting off the golden onion dome of the Russian Orthodox church in the centre of the village, when around the riverbend came a Yupik family proudly flying the stars and stripes from their craft.

These indigenous people have survived many outside influences. They have been Russian and American, but always Yupik. Their war veterans enjoy a special place, including preference with new housing and employment.

Next day one of the locals took me on tour around the village. We started—strangely, it seemed—at the cemetery. But her explanation of the deaths of those who had been recently buried filled out the picture of contemporary Yupik life: family, community, land and sea, with their attendant joys and strengths, but also demands and strains, including alcoholism, unemployment and violence.

A week later, I was on the Swinomish reservation north of Seattle. This tribe has a successful casino, preferential salmon fishing rights and a well-organised tribal government which has negotiated compacts of understanding with all the levels of government that affect them from outside.

One night, the fire was lit, prayers were offered to the ancestors and I was invited into the sweat lodge. During the ceremony, which lasted for three hours, the latest US warplanes out of Seattle, home of Boeing, flew overhead, practising their turns at speed. Modern America is a land of contrasts.

Then to the big cities, where American Indians feature little in

the consciousness except as the proprietors of casinos in states which have traditionally tried to restrict gambling. Over the last decade the tribes have been exploiting an opportunity opened up for them when the Supreme Court confirmed their sovereign right to conduct gambling on their lands free from State control. Congress left the opportunity open for tribes to conduct any sort of gambling which a State permitted, if only for a local charity once a year.

As I settled into Washington, with its marble monuments, big doors and choices, to ponder the operation of the US Bill of Rights, the urban airwaves were jammed with the O. J. Simpson trial. In salubrious Georgetown, one of my hosts jested, 'Welcome to Johannesburg by the Potomac.'

The streets are numbered and lettered in order from the Capitol. Much of the south-east quarter is regarded by whites as a 'no go' area. The north-west quarter is largely white. There the African-Americans work as domestic helpers and labourers or join the squads of homeless begging for a quarter. For an Australian, the surprises are the number of poor and homeless in the streets and the constant references to race and to demarcation according to race.

When the jury in Los Angeles announced its verdict in the Simpson case at 1pm (eastern time) I was sitting in the marbled Supreme Court, which had resumed promptly after the luncheon adjournment. But at 1.10pm notes were handed up to

the justices at either end of the bench. They handed the notes to each other—an uncommon practice to say the least. Only Clarence Thomas showed any emotion. I took his elation to be confirmation that race had played no role in the processes of the law. It was to be another hour until the court finished its business for the day and I learned the verdict was 'Not Guilty'. Walking away from the Capitol I was taunted by two African-American men walking behind me proclaiming that the verdict would be a lesson to all whites. I wanted to turn and explain that I was not an American but a visitor.

In the weeks that followed I found that, even among lawyers, the chief determinant of views about the verdict was the person's race. One African-American law professor remarked that, 'If the victims were not white, you would have heard very little about this case. It would not have been nationally televised.'



THEN CAME the Nation of Islam's Million Man March. Hundreds of thousands of African-American men descended on Washington to hear a message of hope like the one they heard from Martin Luther King Jr on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, the centenary of Gettysburg. Instead, Louis Farrakhan, speaking from the other end of the Mall, treated the crowd to two hours of rambling antics spiced with theological geometry.

Earlier in the rally, I stood in the Lincoln Memorial and saw many first-time black visitors to Washington posing for photos with their

fathers and sons in front of Lincoln's statue with his Gettysburg address behind them, etched in stone:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion ... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.'

Americans are never just jesting when they say—and I heard it often—'The Civil War is not yet over.'

All this in a country which prides itself on the Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights and the 14th amendment, guaranteeing its citizens due process and equal protection. How could everything be so infected by considerations of race?

After months pondering this question I moved from Georgetown to the north-east quarter, into a black neighbourhood not far from Union Station. Walking home from the station mid-afternoon, I was mugged by two men with a knife. 'All part of the American, inner urban experience', I thought. The terrible realisation for me, when three African-American police came to inquire about the incident, was that my predominant recollection of the two assailants was that they were black.

In a situation of such fear, race takes over even in someone like myself, who has often been in court wondering why victims cannot recollect more about their assailants and who has prided himself for years on guarding against race being a determining factor in judgments.

Next morning I attended the local church where Black History Month was being celebrated and African-Americans were running the singing and most of the liturgy. It was a healing experience to be ministered by them while I came to accept—more on the unconscious level—that not all these people had done this to me. People were generously supportive and apologetic as only Americans can be. The priest was white but all other major actors were African-American. Their prayer was:

Lord, we want to be ready to

struggle just like Medgar in Jackson. To walk just like King in Memphis and Chicago. To speak truth to power everywhere just like Sojourner and Douglass. To march on Washington like Randolph and Lewis. To walk in Jerusalem with You.

PRIDING THEMSELVES ON the first amendment separation of church and state, Americans are preoccupied with religion in their public discourse. Primary school children were horrified to learn that we Australians did not celebrate Thanksgiving. They had difficulty accepting that the first Europeans to arrive in foreign parts might not have been religious pilgrims forever grateful for their new-found freedom. At Christmas time, everyone adopts the politically correct and religiously neutral greeting, even to collared clerics, 'Happy Holidays'. But then every presidential address ends, 'God bless America'. Every sitting of the Supreme Court commences with the invocation, 'God save the United States and this honourable court'.

A highlight of the holiday season is the President's lighting of the Christmas tree. Having just dispatched peace keepers to Bosnia, he referred to the birth of the Prince of Peace. Though the Supreme Court has outlawed Christmas cribs in public buildings, the most spectacular crib is still displayed at the White House and the Supreme Court foyer boasts its own Christmas tree and taped Christmas carols, judicially vetted no doubt to ensure there is no religious content.

In the Supreme Court, the big cases this term are about gay rights and gender rights. Women have challenged public funding of the Virginia Military Institute which trains men for leadership using the 'adversative method' which they may feel constrained to soften if women are present.

During oral argument, Justice Ruth Ginsburg opined that leaders may need to work with women as well as men, and training should be designed accordingly. Presumably

federal funding for such an exclusive single sex institute will be struck down on equal protection grounds.

When gay groups were making gains in ski resort towns like Aspen, Colorado voters passed a citizen initiated referendum banning any municipality from implementing policies which would have allowed gays to claim discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Martina Navratilova and others challenged the measure.

The constitutional issue is whether the Colorado constitution

now denies one group equal protection of its laws. The proponents of the referendum say they were simply ruling out special rights for special groups. The opponents say they only want the right of every person to be free of discrimination.

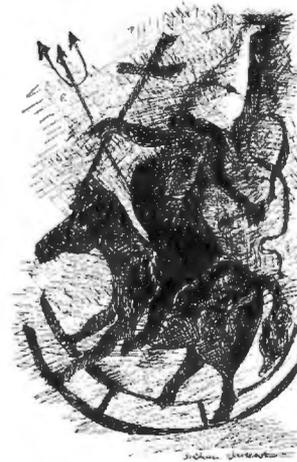
The Supreme Court was packed for the argument. Each side has only 30 minutes to present its case. In these cases, the judges are very divided among themselves and often use counsel as the intermediary through which to make their points publicly to their judicial colleagues.

The Solicitor-General of Colorado was having difficulty explaining the rational basis of the law to Justice Stevens, who was wondering what the rational basis was for people elsewhere in Colorado to be telling people in Aspen what to do.

Justice Souter, appointed by George Bush but emerging as one of the liberals of the court, wanted to know the rational basis for municipalities being able to legislate against discrimination on bases other than sexual orientation, while preserving, to the people of the whole state by vote at referendum, the power to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or practice.

Justice Scalia came to the stumbling Solicitor-General's rescue:

If this is an ordinary equal protection challenge, isn't it an adequate



answer to say this is the only area in which we've had a problem? If localities started passing special laws giving favoured treatment to people with blue eyes, we might have a statewide referendum on that as well? Isn't one step at a time a normal response to equal protection?'

In Australia, our courts are spared consideration of these questions not just because we do not have a bill of rights but also because we do not have such a loose, participative legislative system including citizen initiated referenda which give vent to populist sentiment.

Neither do we have parliaments such as that in Tennessee, which has just legislated for the Ten Commandments to be displayed in public buildings.

In the US, legislators have a greater propensity to legislate, not just what they perceive to be in the public interest, but also their prejudices and hobby-horses. They continue to enjoy this luxury because the courts are regularly expected to strike down such measures as being contrary to the catalogue of individual rights and liberties protected under the Constitution. There is then no one forum for balancing individual rights and the common good. Debate is robust. All extremes are represented through the exercise of the constitutional rights of free speech and freedom of the press.

In 1992, Senator Jesse Helms introduced a last-minute amendment to the Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act aimed at restricting the amount of indecent material carried on leased access channels and public access channels. In February the court heard argument against the law. The cable operators were required to ban or block indecent material which could then be unscrambled only on written request from the consumer.

The free speech petitioners argued that the government's calculus ignored the crucial right of adult cable viewers to receive access to a variety of ideas and experiences. As for the protection of children, the petitioners claimed that the decision should lie with parents and not with the State. They claimed strong,

uncontroverted evidence that lock boxes offer the cable subscriber an easy method of avoiding unwanted programming.

The argument was that free speech could be protected by leaving the decision to the parents. There was some questioning from the judges whether they could take judicial notice of parental inertia in this regard.

NEXT DAY THE MONTGOMERY County District Court heard evidence of an 11-year-old boy raping a five-year-old girl. He had learned about having sex from watching the porno cable channel in his parents' home. But in the US the parents of both children will be guaranteed the right to watch what they want.

While individual constitutional rights are vindicated by the courts, the social and economic rights of the poor are going down the political gurgler. Democrats and Republicans, the Congress and the Administration are committed to ending 'welfare as we know it'. The separation of powers, the vacuum of political leadership and the people's cynicism about the political process have led to government shutdowns and legislation by exhaustion.

E pluribus unum seems to be a figment of the constitutional lawyer's imagination.

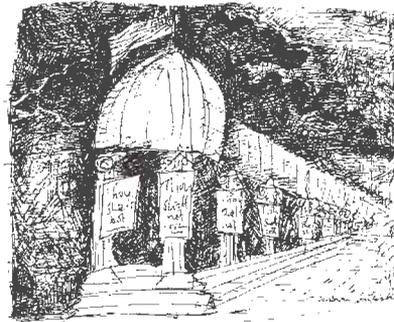
The US Catholic Bishops warned recently that the US is fracturing into three nations: those who are prospering, those being squeezed by downsizing and declining real wages, and those without income, fathers or jobs.

The minimum wage of \$4.25 per hour has decreased in value by 25 per cent, but there is no way a rise can be placed on the political agenda. Gone are the days when a Democrat President would respond to the demands of a strong union movement for just working conditions. John Sweeney, the old time Boston Irish Catholic President of the AFL-CIO, blames corporate America which has been squeezing the workers since 1979.

He advocates a return to JFK's image of the rising tide which lifts all boats. While productivity has increased 24 per cent, the workers' real earnings have declined 12 per cent. Welfare reform is premised on the idea that people will move from welfare to work reform doesn't guarantee that work will pay a living wage. In two years the health agenda has moved from attempting cover for all to trying to maintain Medicaid and its sporadic cover.

The State Governors' plan to break the logjam between Congress and the Administration was strongly criticised by the churches and welfare groups: 'We can't trust the States when it comes to abused and neglected children.' Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Senate's elder of welfare reform, has warned the welfare lobby, 'I don't think we're going to win this. We will return to this after a social calamity.'

Congress is proposing to terminate welfare to children after five years regardless of whether parents have access to employment. By 2005, there will be five million children whose parents have access neither to employment nor welfare, being untrained and time-barred. Half those children will be



black. Moynihan despairs of this gamble with a generation of children, lamenting: 'Not since Reconstruction will a federal government have done anything so obscene to blacks.' Present welfare reforms and proposed cuts would require every church congregation in the country to raise an additional \$2million over the next seven years.

In the forthcoming presidential election, the Catholic vote is crucial. The 1994 elections were the first since the war in which a majority of Catholics voted for the Republicans. The church welfare agencies know their votes are being solicited by the Republicans who claim to protect the unborn and by the Democrats who portray themselves as the ones who care more for the neglected children. When the Ways and Means



Committee of Congress heard evidence on the Governors' welfare reform plan, the Democrats conceded that the Republicans would not listen to any liberals' objections but retorted, 'What about the Catholic Bishops?' The bishops issuing their 'Religious Call to Political Responsibility' have set down the challenge 'to be principled without being ideological, to be political without being partisan, to be civil without being soft, to be involved without being used.'

It is a bitter irony for Americans that at the end of the Cold War, they lack political leadership which they can trust and proudly show the world. While their cities are fracturing along racial lines, they engage in constant soul searching and debate about their responsibility to bring peace and reconciliation to the world's trouble spots.

UPON THE YUKON and in the sweat lodges on the Indian reservations, in the city back streets and in the magnificence of marbled national institutions, people are wondering what it is to be an American when the world's most robust democracy is subject to government shutdowns, when the nation comes to a standstill over a murder verdict that splits the viewers according to race, and when Pat Buchanan, the happy warrior with the angry message, becomes a serious contender for office.

Meanwhile, this same country is the world's most endowed haven for the arts, higher learning, scientific research, and religious liberty.

Attending an inner city all-black Baptist Church, I introduced myself as a visitor coming to learn about the Bill of Rights. The entire congregation laughed, and after the service they wished me luck. They thought well of Australians because our embassy had sponsored the clean-up of their local park, providing a space for their children to play, walking distance from the Capitol, the centre of world power. *E pluribus unum.* ■

Frank Brennan SJ has just returned from the United States where he was the first Visiting Research Fellow in the Center for Australian and New Zealand studies at Georgetown University.

Skimming the surface

THE FEDERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN gave only a sidelong glance at the science and technology community. Early in the piece, the Coalition brought out a new science policy, causing a small amount of excitement among researchers, but after that initial flurry, the campaign proved to be pretty much a non-event for scientists.

There was, however, one curious sidelight, which Archimedes thinks is worth noting as an indicator of the way this country handles new ideas as it speeds into the 21st century. It involves a possible future transport technology—the ground effect aircraft, or ekranoplan. And Australia could be at the forefront if it takes off.

Among his blandishments to woo Tasmania, our erstwhile leader, Mr Keating, promised to channel 44 million dollars into developing a high-speed passenger and cargo link across Bass Strait. When the Coalition promptly matched his bid, the media immediately moved on to other issues. Most assumed the original promise would be a fillip to Incat, the Hobart company that has developed a worldwide business manufacturing wave-piercing catamarans as fast ferries.

But then Sea Wing International, a company in Tasmania's Huon Valley, put up its hand, and started talking about ekranoplans. And the Rada Corporation, a company based on Westernport Bay, southeast of Melbourne, revealed it was already testing a prototype.

The ekranoplan makes use of the cushion of air which becomes trapped between the wings and the ground as an aircraft flies just above the surface. This cushion of air is formed naturally as the wings slice through the atmosphere, forcing air both up and over them and down under them. Ekranoplans, unlike hovercraft, do not need to expend energy to maintain an air cushion while flying, but they have the same advantage of a smooth, almost frictionless ride. Ekranoplans could carry relatively heavy loads at high speed with much greater fuel economy than modern aircraft. The idea would be to fly them across oceans, bays and inland seas. They would be seaworthy, and could simply put down on water if any malfunctions occurred. And, as with flying boats, minimal technology would be needed to provide docking terminals for them.

Although the idea and the technology used in ekranoplans has been around since the 1930s, it was not until the '60s and '70s that a concerted effort was made to build one. The Soviet Union (ekranoplan is a Russian word) decided that these craft would be ideal as amphibious transport for rapid deployment of troops. Not surprisingly, the Russians kept development of the technology as secret as they could, flying their prototypes over the Caspian Sea between the passes of US spy satellites. The CIA, which detected only the wakes left by ekranoplans, dubbed them the Caspian sea monsters.

The Russians now want to export, but the US, which dominates conventional airliner technology, sees no reason to plough money into developing a competing technology. One major US study of the economics of ekranoplans suggests that a successful venture into intercontinental transport would demand developing an aircraft about ten times as large as anything built so far, at a cost of about \$10 billion.

So why are two small Australian companies interested? And why did the University of New South Wales sponsor an international workshop on ekranoplans last November? The answer lies to the north.

The Southeast Asian archipelago has little in the way of air transport infrastructure. A high speed inter-island passenger and freight system based on the ekranoplan would seem to be an ideal solution to its transport problems. And the aircraft involved would not need to be anywhere near as large or as expensive as those needed for transatlantic flight.

In fact, the technology is already available. The most significant obstacle—apart from commercial viability—would seem to be how to regulate the passage of an aircraft travelling at hundreds of kilometres an hour only 20 or 30 metres above the water. Not only would ekranoplans provide a physical hazard to shipping, their passage would leave a destructive wake in both water and atmosphere.

But in an energy-hungry world, the opportunity of a significant improvement in transport efficiency could be too good to overlook. So it will be interesting to see how Australia handles that possibility. Will ekranoplans disappear with the Very Fast Train, or will they be heading into the Strait by the turn of the century? ■

Tim Thwaites is a freelance science writer.

IMAGINE

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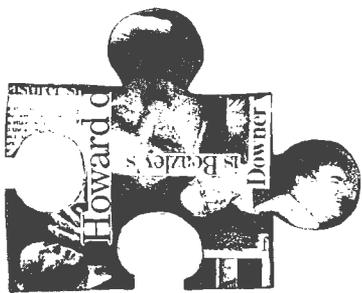
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Too close to the sun

PAUL KEATING GAVE ROBERT FITZGERALD a total of half an hour of his time during the last 18 months of his prime ministership. John Howard gave him as much time as he wanted, as did his advisers.

As President of the Australian Council of Social Services, Fitzgerald had ready access to Keating's main adviser on welfare issues. The problem lay in getting in the door to put a case directly to Keating to balance the conflicting input from other advisers.

Keating has never had much time for people at the bottom of the heap. He prefers the company of the rich. As he put it when explaining his close friendship with the property developer, Warren Anderson, 'I like all the goers ... As far as I'm concerned, wimps are out'. The wimps even extended to Coalition politicians whom he derided in Parliament for not having 'two zacs to their name'.

Despite Keating's lack of personal interest, Labor ministers usually managed to hold the social safety net together. The less obvious problem involved those who were scrambling to hang on just above the safety net.

These are the people for whom micro-economic reform is more likely to mean the sack than an exhilarating opportunity to play the futures markets; for whom the 'user pays' principle is more likely to mean they are worse off than free to savour some economist's notion of 'allocative efficiency'; and for whom Keating's constant boasts about opening Australia up to the world all too often conjured up visions of increased job insecurity, higher mortgage rates, longer working hours, more family stress, and fresh fears about whether their children would ever find work.

Labor always ran the risk of leaving its traditional constituency behind when it embraced the free market so enthusiastically after its 1983 electoral victory. After all, the main reason Labor was established as a political party was to take some of the rougher edges off late-19th-century laissez-faire capitalism. Instead of promoting market forces as the sole organising principle for a society, Labor wanted to make room for co-operation as well as competition. The idea was that individual self-interest would occasionally have to yield to some notion of the common good.

Although these values were by no means totally abandoned after 1983, the Party looked as if it had made a wrenching change in philosophical direction as Hawke and Keating gave every appearance of idolising the fast-money men generated by the 'greed is good' ethos of the 1980s—an ethos greatly encouraged by Labor's deregulatory zeal. Hawke passionately defended Alan Bond. Keating enjoyed the hospitality of some of the country's most notorious tax avoiders, as recently as last year appointing one of the more blatant exponents to an important government board.

Obviously, Labor did not give completely free rein to market forces any more than John Howard will. But Labor's traditional supporters could be forgiven for feeling that they had been taken for granted by a leadership which seemed more sympathetic to the needs of those on BRW's Rich List. At the end of Labor's 13 years in office, its changes to the income tax system meant that even those who were honest enough to declare a taxable income of over a million dollars a year were taxed at less than half the average rate applying under Fraser.

Meanwhile, the cuts in real wages imposed on Labor's 'true believers' under the Accord with the unions helped generate the funds needed to fuel the mad speculative boom which culminated in the savage recession of the early 1990s. People who had done nothing except exercise restraint now saw their jobs and small businesses ripped from under them.

Partly in response to the opportunities created by the hard line ideological stance of John Hewson's 'Fightback' program, Keating's rhetoric began to change over the course of his Prime Ministership. By the time of the 1996 campaign he was lambasting the Victorian Premier, Jeff Kennett, for 'putting chains on public toilets of railway stations and turning the ambulance service out to private contractors—he's lost sight of what his responsibilities are in running a civilised society'.

The only trouble is that these measures are fully in line with the Hilmer process of competition reform which Keating himself had championed so vociferously. They are also an indirect consequence of the disproportionate cuts in Commonwealth payments to the States which were imposed by none other than Keating himself.

In the wake of the electorate's emphatic rejection of Keating's overbearing style of leadership, Labor's new team says that it now realises that many people are frightened by change. There is nothing new about this and certainly no reason for Labor to adopt a Luddite stance.

But it is electoral folly to pretend that everyone automatically gains from greater exposure to the global market place. Some are going to need help to adapt. Some won't be able to make the transition no matter how hard they try.

THE TASK FOR A REVITALISED LABOR PARTY is to modernise its traditional philosophical base so that it remains just as relevant as John Howard's individualistic ethic in coming to grips with the social impact of rapid change. In doing so, it will have to stop confusing its own heartland by looking like it cares more about local spivs and foreign despots than the battlers who understandably deserted to Howard. ■

Brian Toohey is a Sydney freelance journalist and radio commentator.

Stand by your man

Shane Maloney shadowed Martin Ferguson through the federal election campaign for Batman.

I WAS SITTING AT MY KEYBOARD one Sunday morning in late September trying to imagine what it would be like to be a member of the Labor Party when Gary Foley rang. 'Martin Ferguson is launching his campaign at eleven,' he said. 'Thought I'd gatecrash it. Come and give me a lift.' It was an offer too good to refuse.

All through July and August, the media had been running hot with the saga of Martin Ferguson's attempt to secure pre-selection for the seat of Batman in Melbourne's inner north. With a margin of 24.5 per cent, Batman was a prize plum and the battle for its ownership had drawn combatants from near and far. As pre-selection brawls go, this one appeared to have everything—branch stacking, ethnic warlords, factional deals gone wrong, disgruntled true believers, dissolving alliances, strange bedfellows, union heavies and the looming threat of national intervention. By the time the smoke cleared, Batman had become a case study in the internal dynamics of the Labor Party.

As a writer whose fictional characters include members of a fictive Labor Party, my interest was naturally drawn to the affair as one of those moments when the otherwise obscure machinations of the back-room boys spill out onto the street and can be partially discerned through the distorting glare thrown upon it by the drama-hungry press. I put the cover on my keyboard and reached for the car keys.

My motives, I admit, were not entirely academic. The prospect of a prominent Aboriginal activist confronting the outgoing President of the ACTU at his enthronement as ALP candidate for one of the safest Labor seats in the country would be too good a piece of theatre to miss.

Batman begins about two hundred metres from where I live. It's what they like to call Labor heartland, and the term is not a misnomer. At municipal, state and federal level, the Labor Party has always been the only game in town. The streets are named for Labor councillors and the mythologies and demonologies lie thick on the ground. It also contains many of Melbourne's Kooris, and Foley figured that it was about time that its newly endorsed Labor candidate was made aware of that fact.

Two years previously, when the Kennett government closed the only school in the area catering to the special needs of Aboriginal students, the Labor Party had proven worse than useless. Despite the fact that the local member was Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe, the re-opening of Northland Secondary College was eventually achieved by the persistence of what Foley described as 'a pack of boongs and poor white trash' who conducted their battle without assistance from either federal Labor or the unions. The way Foley figured it, Martin Ferguson should be given an early and vocal reminder that his Koori constituents would expect better than that from their new man in Canberra.

But Foley's planned tête-à-tête was not to be. We found the car park empty and the doors locked. Foley went across the road to the phone booth outside McDonald's and returned with the news that he'd been misinformed. Ferguson's launch was scheduled for the following Sunday. Call me then, he said. He'd still want the lift.

AS IT TURNED OUT, he didn't. During the intervening week, the ACTU Congress had met to transfer its presidency from Ferguson to Jenny George. Foley pedalled his bike to the meeting, buttonholed Ferguson on the front steps and wangled some sort of assurance out of him. Pending delivery of promised results, the campaign launch was no longer on his agenda.

But now my curiosity was aroused, and I decided to go along and take a look anyway. A couple of hours, I thought, a spot of light research. With luck, there might be a scene in it, a vignette of Labor life. I tucked my novelist's notebook under my arm and set off to soak up the ambience. The venue was the Preston Cultural Centre, a post-modern zincaluminum shed behind an asphalt car park. This time, the car park was full. I found a spot around the corner beside St John's Greek Orthodox College.

In this part of Melbourne, Greeks are everywhere. And ALP is no exception. Of the 1100-odd party members in the area, some 40 per cent are Greek born. Three of Batman's ten branches are Greek-speaking.

Photographs of Martin Ferguson pp17-19. courtesy Fairfax.

And when state member Theo Theophanous threw his hat into the ring for federal pre-selection, the result appeared to be a foregone conclusion. But Batman was too valuable to be entrusted to the people who live there. The choice of who would represent the electorate in Canberra was made by the ALP national executive, its intervention preceded by allegations that Batman's Greeks were being manipulated by ethnic power-brokers. 'Sheep', Senator Bolkus called them and you'd think he'd be in a position to know. How many of these sheep, I wondered, would turn out to cheer the man imposed on them by the power brokers of the NSW right?

NOT MANY, it transpired. But despite their absence, or perhaps because of it, the Preston Cultural Centre had attracted a capacity crowd. Considering that Batman is a safe seat and the federal election was still to be declared, I had expected the turnout to consist of a handful of local party stalwarts with perhaps a big gun or two to sprinkle a little holy water over the proceedings. What I found instead, when I sidled uncredentialed and uninvited into the hall, was what appeared to be the entire apparatus of the Victorian ALP, coalesced into one many-headed, multi-legged body.

The hall was packed to the rafters. There were grizzled veterans, old men in pork-pie hats who had fought in the Split, their grandchildren scampering underfoot in Oshkosh overalls. Former ministers and current backbenchers. Branch secretaries, shop stewards, industrial officers. Would-be candidates and candidates endorsed. Ministerial advisors and factional ideologues. Joan Kirner, ex-Premier. Dick Wynne, former Lord Mayor of Melbourne. Roly-poly Sebastian Jorgensen, bon vivant from the ageing bohemian wing of the party. Brian Boyd from the Trades Hall. Sang Nguyen, the refugee from Vietnam who'd been given the nod for a safe seat in Footscray. Ranks and files of rank and file. Labor Unity, Socialist Left, the Pledge. War chiefs and spear carriers. The kickers of heads and the lickers of stamps.

But what was it all about? Why such a heavy-duty roll-up on a Sunday morning? What arcane undercurrents were at work here? Did the conspicuous absence of Greeks mean anything? What was the sub-text here? Was I witnessing a settling of scores or a healing of wounds? If you live in the northern suburbs of Melbourne and don't know people in the Labor Party, you're not getting out of the house enough. Among the crowd, as well as faces I recognised from the media, were people I knew from the neighbourhood. Perhaps some of them could tell me what was going on, give me a fix on the mix?

Before I could ask, the formalities began. The first speaker was a former local councillor by the name of Emily Dimitracopoulos. Surely, under the circumstances, such a name was not without significance. 'Emily's Greek,' I was later told. 'But she's not one of



the Greeks.' The nuances in the Victorian ALP can be very finely calibrated indeed.

The people of Batman,' Dimitricopolous began, 'come from many lands. From Scotland and Ireland, from Italy and Indochina...' Eventually they came from Greece. But they came from Macedonia, too. From Turkey but also Kurdistan. Emily cast her net wide and drew them all into the embrace of the party.

The outgoing member was then called upon to give his blessing to his successor. It was a grim bequest. 'Two thirds of unemployment in Australia



Ferguson's public persona is that of the earnest plodder. An economics graduate of Sydney University and the son of a former deputy premier of New South Wales, he speaks with an accent so parodically working class it is difficult to believe it isn't contrived. 'The yune movent', he famously says. 'The strain parment.'

is concentrated in a dozen electorates,' said Brian Howe, looking war-weary from thirteen years in government. 'And Batman is one of them.'

Party President Barry Jones stepped to the podium. It took ten minutes to list his credentials, among them the fact that he has an extinct marsupial named after him. In retrospect, this detail may have held prophetic significance. Barry talked numbers, deployed the arithmetic of the NSW and Queensland elections. 'It will be a close contest,' he warned.

When Ferguson at last rose to speak, there was no doubt about the enthusiasm of the applause. He may well have been parachuted into Batman, but there were many on the ground who welcomed the fact. And despite the meeting's now clearly triumphalist atmosphere, there was a scrupulous absence of gloating.

Ferguson's public persona is that of the earnest plodder. An economics graduate of Sydney University and the son of a former deputy premier of New South Wales, he speaks with an accent so parodically working class it is difficult to believe it isn't contrived. 'The yune movent', he famously says. 'The strain parment.' But the crowd had not come to hear oratory. This was a ritual occasion, an opportunity for the candidate to display his pedigree and reiterate his tribal loyalties. Amid the usual leaden phrases—'infrastructure framework' and 'international marketplace pressures'—he spoke of his forebears, battling immigrants and war veterans.

He may have been brought up in Sydney, Ferguson declared, but now he included himself in 'we of the northern suburbs'. The fact that, at the time, he actually lived in a \$235,000 home in the leafily Liberal eastern suburbs would have been regarded by

his audience as irrelevant. In the ALP, home is where the heart is.

Ferguson spoke the ritual phrases with becoming zeal, invoking The Battler, the Safety Net and the Party of Hope and Opportunity. The crowd responded with a standing ovation that flooded the room with a warm inner glow.

Yes, I wondered, but what about all the bad blood that had been splashed around the press not a month before? Had it all suddenly drained away, or was it out there somewhere coagulating? Before I could ask, or even begin to phrase my questions properly, all those I might ask had spilled out into the spring sunshine and disappeared, presumably to gird their loins for the imminent national campaign.

They were right. This was no time for mischievous conjecture. I had a whodunnit on the boil and a publisher getting twitchy. It was time to get back to my keyboard.

Nearly four months later, my novel finished, my attention was once again drawn to Batman. The election was official, campaigning had begun in earnest and, according to a small item in my morning newspaper, a fundraiser for Martin Ferguson would be held at the Fitzroy Club Hotel. The keynote speaker would be Hazel Hawke. The Fitzroy Club was just around the corner. I rang Pete Steedman, the former member for Casey, a marginal seat out on the suburban fringe and asked how I might go about getting observer status.

Back at the Preston Cultural Centre, he had been sitting in the front row with the big chiefs. Nothing if not entertaining, Steedman is the Peter Pan of the Victorian left, an ageing rocker who heads a pop music promotion organisation and zips about in a red convertible with custom plates that read PETE 2. If anyone had the number of someone I could call, it would be Pete.

AND SO IT WAS. Calls were made. Okay, I was told somewhat reluctantly, I could attend the event as long as I didn't annoy the candidate. Heaven forfend, I swore, that was the last thing on my mind.

Spring had not fulfilled its sunny promise and the February night was cold and wet. But the dinner was a sell-out, chicken for the ladies and beef for the men. The nomenclatura was again out in force, the head table solid with state MPs. Hazel looked like she was enjoying herself, hitting the hustings for the man who overthrew the man who threw her over. 'Would you be happy,' she asked, 'having the Liberals babysit your kids?'

The last time I'd been to the Fitzroy Club, it was called the Albion Charles and featured stand-up comedy. The jokers were long gone, replaced by the mechanical cackle of poker machines. A man with a limp and an insistent hospitality commanded me to eat, despite my protestations that I hadn't bought a

ticket. If ever the much-abused expression 'true believer' fitted anyone, it was Ray from Reservoir. The Labor Party runs on such people, the handers-out of how-to-vote cards and feeders of strangers. 'I used to be a Theo man,' Ray said. 'But now I'm for Martin. He doesn't take people for granted.'

Martin Ferguson's qualities, Ray told me, were something I should judge for myself. He'd be at the local shopping centre the following Saturday, canvassing votes. I ate my beef and told Ray I'd go along and take a look.

The names on the shops in the High Street retail strip read like the Pireaus telephone book. At the entrance to the Northcote Plaza, Emily Dimitracopoulos stood handing out flyers. On the benches inside, old men with faces of a decidedly Hellenic cast sat in tight-knit groups and talked in whispers.

Ferguson was near the supermarket, offering handbills and handshakes. Trade was quiet. An Indian woman tentatively thrust a child forward. 'My son has always wanted to meet you,' she said. What might have been a blush infused Ferguson's cheeks. For a moment, he looked like he might die of embarrassment. He mumbled something appropriate and pumped the nine-year-old's hand.

This apparent lack of guile is one of Ferguson's greatest assets. That open, ruddy face. That stunned mullet expression. He is almost exactly my age and when I look at him I see half the kids I went to school with. I have a vision of him in short pants, playing under a kitchen table at which big men in blue serge suits sit talking about loyalty and betrayal and who has the numbers.

I approached and asked him how he thought the campaign was going. 'The base,' he said, 'is with us.' His face was wide open, but his eyes were watchful. And in personal conversation, his nong accent was much less marked.

When the electioneering moved up the road to the Fairfield shopping centre, I followed. This is the up-market part of Batman. The Video Ezy stocks Greek movies and the Hoit Yim has laminex tables, but there is also a Thai restaurant and a Sandra Rhodes samples and seconds shop. It was a brilliant morning and the two rival butchers were giving away free sausages from gas barbecues. Apart from a little light stirring from a gang of frisky grannies, Ferguson's presence went almost unremarked. I decided to leave him to it. There were better ways to spend a fine summer day.

As I headed for the car, a rough nut in grimy denims begged my pardon. He had, he said, slept the night in a park and was trying to raise the fare to Narre Warren. If I could just spare \$2.80, he'd be grateful. The Australian vernacular does not yet have an expression for these increasingly familiar encounters. The word 'begging' sounds too blunt, 'panhandling' too American. I listened to an elaborate story and

forked over a dollar. 'You might have more luck over there,' I said. 'That bloke's running for parliament.'

'Labor?' The mendicant drew himself upright. 'I'm Labor.'

The last I saw of Martin Ferguson that morning, he was standing beside a free sausage sizzle, edging uncomfortably away from a broke cadger with a tale of woe.

THE WEEK BEFORE THE ELECTION, a notice appeared in Batman letterboxes advertising a debate between the candidates at the Northcote town hall. More than a hundred people turned up, squeezing into the airless council chamber. The Trots had a stall on the footpath. 'Should We Punish Labor?' read the headline on their paper. All of the candidates were there but two. Ferguson, claimed the organisers, had reneged.

The days of such corner electioneering are long gone. Why bother when the result is a foregone conclusion? As they dimmed the lights so the Yogic Flyer could show his slides, I beat a retreat. On the steps, I met a friend who had dragged his teenage daughter along to show her democracy in action. When I told them there wasn't much point going inside, she looked relieved.

Soaking up the atmospherics was getting me nowhere. If I was to discover the real story behind the battle for Batman, I would need to do some serious research. The time had come to hit the phone.

The pre-selection had been a struggle for leadership of the left, I was told. Theo Theophanous had used his highly disciplined Greek hoplites to back Senator Kim Carr. Carr's rivals in the left had used Ferguson to clip his wings.



It was a reaction against branch stacking, said others. Hundreds at a time had been enrolled in the Greek branches, signed up outside church on Sunday, their membership backdated and their dues paid for them. At the unemployed rate of \$7 a half-year, 147 faceless recruits could be bought by anyone with \$1001 and the right ethnic connections. Over in the western suburbs, something similar had been done. In the northern suburbs, it got up the noses of the non-Greek party activists. The ones, presumably, whose supporters don't go to church.

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That stunned mullet expression.

He is almost exactly my age and when I look at him I see half the kids I went to

school with. I have a vision of him in short pants, playing under a kitchen table at

which big men in blue serge suits sit talking about loyalty and betrayal and who has the numbers.

It all goes back to the ACTU, argued another school of thought. Kelty wanted Ferguson out and this was a way of achieving it.

We couldn't let Theophanous jump ship from state to federal parliament, I was told. It would have undermined the credibility of the Brumby opposition and weakened the fight against Kennett.

The Skips resent the Wogs, a man with an Italian name told me. It was all a payback for the fact that the migrants now play the system better than the people who set it up. They can't rely on the same loyalty and discipline themselves anymore, so they rant about ethnic warlords.

THAT'S THE PROBLEM with talking to ALP people. All those axes, all that grinding. The detail is fascinating but you get embroiled in it. I needed an objective view. I went to the library to see what light the political commentators could cast on the subject.

Frankly, not much. Ferguson's pre-selection, according to Michelle Grattan, had been a victory for common sense. It was clumsy, but it was 'the only sensible course'.

After an afternoon of reading her reports, I was beginning to think of Michelle Grattan as the journalistic equivalent of Joyce Grenfell. 'Come on boys and girls. Don't be silly. Line up straight. We want our mummies and daddies to be proud of us, don't we?'

One of the most frequent bylines at the height of the brouhaha belonged to a reporter who had been a high school student of my wife. His social studies essays had once been marked at our kitchen table. 'I

dunno anything,' he told me. 'I covered it for a while, then the paper got bored and stopped running my stories. All I really remember is that Ferguson said he was going to start running the Victorian left.'

The press would offer me few fresh insights, I decided, when I found a small item reporting the fundraiser at the Fitzroy Club Hotel. 'Hazel,' Ferguson was quoted as saying, 'is Hazel'.

Then election day was upon us. 'Labor,' said the voters, 'is kaput.' The base had other ideas. After all the arm twisting and name calling that had gone into his endorsement, the 'quality candidate' would not, as intended, be taking a key portfolio in the second Keating government.

The ALP's primary vote in Batman dropped 8.26 per cent. Compared to the nose dive some other high flyers took, this was just a little mild turbulence in Ferguson's armchair ride. But a ride to where?

For the true believers, the battle might be lost but the war continues. Ferguson's presence in federal parliament, I was told the day after Labor's rout, was an ember of hope in the ashes of defeat. 'The upside is that the Victorian left is now in a stronger position relative to the NSW right.'

But what of Batman? How easy will it be for Martin Ferguson to rule the roost there?

Perhaps it's only fair that Theo Theophanous has the last word on that subject. I spoke to him in his office in the Victorian Parliament. 'I'm with Aristotle,' he said knowingly. 'What is life without politics?' ■

Shane Maloney's second novel, *The Brush-off*, is published this month by Text.

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENCE: 2

DAVID BRADDON-MITCHELL

The Tasman connection

WHAT WAS IT GOING TO BE LIKE, being an Australian expat teaching in a New Zealand University? The weather would be bad, the volcanoes good, the prices frightening. But the crucial question for a committed pollie-watcher was what it would be like trying to follow the dying weeks of the Federal election campaign from abroad.

Not easy was the answer. New Zealanders exasperated by the local media (the two publicly-owned television stations are chockers with advertising, and standard slightly worse than those of the commercial station) turn to the BBC. In NZ the BBC World Service is broadcast on regular AM radio and BBC TV news is available on one of the television

stations. So in New Zealand Aunty speaks with a foreign accent. And she doesn't speak about Australia—or New Zealand for that matter.

Finally I figure out the only real current affairs is on the radio in the morning. Oz affairs get covered to a degree, but I was (perhaps naïvely) surprised to how small a degree. Two Australian 'experts' dominate the media coverage of matters Australian: Pru Goward, who talks on NZ National Radio for a few minutes once a week, and Phil Kathkaludes. Remember Phil? He's the amiable ABC reporter who seems to be given the second-string crime stories in Sydney. Here he's a celebrity, his morning reports gospel to those Kiwis who give a fig about trans-Tasman politics. So famous

is he that he was flown out to open an exhibition of Australian art at the Auckland city art gallery.

I'm afraid Phil's powers of prognostication failed him; he was picking a Labor win, so the Kiwi Oz watchers woke up surprised to find Johnny Howard installed in the Lodge after March 2.

The New Zealand attitude to the campaign and its outcome seems odd to Australian sensibilities. There's a sense here that it was old-fashioned and quaint for Australia to have had a Labor government all these years. Even people who are violently opposed to the reigning National government here find it peculiar—as if out of the natural order of things. So one of the themes that ran through local commentary was that Australia was somehow normalised by the election outcome.

Perhaps it has to do with political cynicism. New Zealanders seem far more cynical about politics than Australians. Sure, we are a pretty cynical bunch about our politicians, and the swinging voters who actually decide elections are the most cynical. But there are chunks of the Australian electorate who actually care, and are passionate supporters of their favoured brand of politics. The contrast in NZ is stark; the betrayal of social democratic values by the NZ Labour party has scarred the political system long-term, and people accept conservative rule, even if they don't approve of it, as some kind of self-flagellating penance for ever having believed that there was any kind of good to be had from government.

One striking way this comes out is in the way the NZ economic debate seems settled as nowhere else, except perhaps the US and Chile. After the Howard victory there was an unquestioning assumption by all media commentators, even those of small-l liberal persuasion, that the Howard government would be good for Australia's economy, whatever else you thought of it. The only question that exercised their minds was whether this would be good for New Zealand. Would a stronger Australia compete better with NZ (bad) or generate a sphere of prosperity in which NZ could participate (good)? Nowhere was there a sense that it is possible to mix a degree of fairness and social responsibility into the liberalising of an economy.

New Zealanders have been taught that the only way to avoid penury is through the deregulating and privatising of everything. Perhaps that's not so odd; it's a lesson, true or false, that has been well rehearsed in Australia. But in New Zealand it's thought of as blending inevitably with regressive tax systems, scaling down of welfare, and cessation of government activity even in crucial infrastructure spending. This

last factor will, I am certain, lead to an economic crisis in NZ as the infrastructure deteriorates over the next decade. One of the greatest achievements of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments was their success in breaking down the package deal mentality in politics. Australians, more than in the rest of the English speaking world, have learned to argue their politics issue by issue. Just because you float the dollar that doesn't mean that you must believe that Government should bow out of reforming and revitalising the trunk rail system. A commitment to cutting tariffs doesn't preclude your designing an aged care system in which the state will intervene to maintain standards as well as funding, and which is the envy of the world.

I look forward to seeing how the economy progresses under Howard; probably the change of government won't profoundly affect the economy in the

medium term. But only fossils amongst Australian media analysts think that just because the new government is ostensibly conservative, it must be good for the economy.

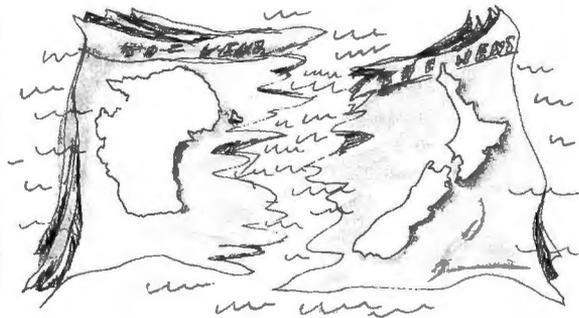
A far greater worry is the thinness of talent in the Howard Government; that's something shared and magnified in the National government here in NZ. Such is the thinness that a man called

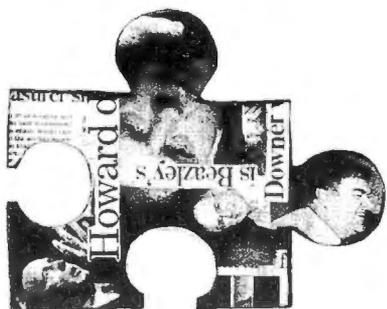
John Banks is a minister in the National Government. He is the redneck radio king of NZ, a one-time minister for Police, and current minister for Tourism. He calls himself Banksie, and styles himself after his Australian hero, Lawsie. But he doesn't *just* style himself after John Laws—he shamelessly imitates Laws' program.

His broadcasts begin with the inane Laws' patter 'Here I am behind the golden microphone, broadcasting across God's great garden' etc, before launching into the bigoted, racist patter on which this kind of radio thrives. Asked if his imitation amounted to plagiarism, he denied it, saying that he and Lawsie 'shared ideas'. He even claimed to have sold Laws, for \$2 million, the right to call his audience the 'people's parliament'! A friend of Banks', John Carter, was Government Whip until it was revealed he had been ringing up talk-back radio pretending to be Maori ('Hone Carter') so as to reinforce the stereotype of Maori as lazy, unemployed alcoholics.

It's as if Bob Katter Jr were a minister. No wonder they are cynical about politics here. I think I'll stop contemplating the convergences and see what news from home there is on the Age web page. ■

David Braddon-Mitchell, ex-Canberra resident, now teaches philosophy at the University of Auckland.





Accentuate the positive

WHEN I LEFT MY LAST—and it probably will be—government office, I registered a new business name for my infant consultancy: High Moral Ground. The joke has worn as thin over the last couple of years as has the ALP's claim to that territory over the last 20.

The Federal ALP government left office last month from a somewhat lower altitude than that vacated by Gough Whitlam after the as devastating, but less complete, deluge of 1975. As Alan Ramsey pointed out in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, [March 9] Labor has not been as comprehensively turned out of the temple since 1931, with a paltry 39.1 per cent of the national primary vote, and its lowest ever in NSW (heartland of Labor loyalty) since 1906.

Ramsey's critique of the Hawke/Keating years was devastating: 'They disillusioned the faithful, alienated the loyal and disenfranchised the activists,' he said. After 13 years of wave after relentless wave of upheaval—labour market reforms, deregulation of capital markets, and lower tariffs—and few of the promised benefits such as higher real wages for average workers, voters took their revenge on March 2. The ALP now has a majority of seats only in Canberra ('where it rains money every fortnight'), which returned all three Labor candidates, and Tasmania (three out of five). One million voters said no.

Labor lost its natural constituency: ordinary working women and men and those who once saw the ALP as the party of reform. I believe I know how they felt. Not long ago I went to my Sydney office (I work as a consultant to a national law firm) and found myself alone: my desk, chairs and a useless phone and computer were still there but my colleagues had flown to other accommodation, and since I was but nominally of the organisation, and not central to its purpose, had overlooked telling me. So might those who joined the ALP to win rights for women, save the environment, stop war and achieve land rights and equal opportunity for Aboriginals, gays and ethnics have felt, when they called on the old lady for a cuppa: moved on, leaving no forwarding address.

As the Federal ALP machine ponders who to blame for what happened they should think upon the lesson of a sour little piece written by ex-Minister, ex-ALP MP, ex-Victorian-turned-Queenslander, Mr Gary Johns, in the *Age* on March 4.

In Johns' view, the ALP lost because it became politically correct, favouring minority rights, feminism, gays and Mabo; it insisted on tribal loyalty to witch-hunt victim Carmen Lawrence, and showed embarrassing compassion for Aboriginal women's business at Hindmarsh, and favoured the 'rights'

culture over the concerns of the ordinary men and women of the towns.

Abandon the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, he urged, and abolish the Law Reform Commission, for 'whoever heard of a standing law reform body, anyway' (we've had them since 1978). To Johns, tertiary-educated, a Party employee since the late 1970s, 'ordinary' Australians resent rights and minorities, and wrought their revenge, justifiably. If he speaks from the heartland of the ALP of the 1990s, no wonder it's deserted.

I do not think he does. There is nothing more cynical than a disappointed idealist. Voting patterns don't, in my view, bear him out. Women voted for women candidates, who happened to be Democrat and conservative women because the ALP factions deemed the quota inoperative until next century.

The mortgage belt and the working class voted for politicians with a recently-acquired common touch: fumbler like Fischer, or re-worked 'working class' Liberals like Howard, or simply, the 'anti-establishment'. Two of Western Australia's prize Liberal seats went to conservative 'independents,' disendorsed Liberal candidates replaced by Crichton-Browne favourites. Ratbag independents in Oxley and Kalgoorlie and even Bob Katter won huge popular swings. Yet, apparently to ensure against Kennett-style ram-raid government, the same voters seem to have handed Senate control to Cheryl 'keep-the-bastards-honest' Kernot. The vote, I believe, was a vote of no confidence in government.

It seems that the ALP lost the faith of the people when it had lost faith in them. At the National Press Club, just before the election, Keating laid unequivocal personal claim to achieving vast social change, painting his leader's big picture. But in a democracy the people make the change, and not just at elections. Aneurin Bevan said that 'who would lead must articulate the wants, the frustrations and the aspirations of the majority.'

Leadership requires putting into words what the people have already got around to believing. The ALP government—dominated by the NSW right—power-brokered, instead. How many Graham Richardsons can one government take?

Keating's 'big picture' did not lack integrity, nor was it wrong. It simply did not draw in the people. It would be as unacceptable to change Labor's policies to fit Gary Johns' astigmatic vision as it would be to take the so-called racist vote—for Katter and Burgess, Hanson and Campbell—as a mandate to disband or defund law reform and human rights. We cannot go

back. Ordinary Australians still expect a fair go: they felt denied it by Labor.

Labor, traditionally the party of compassion and justice, turned dry economic changeling. How can anyone believe in a party that opposed selling Telstra, but sold Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank? which decries human rights abuses in Nigeria, but embraces it in East Timor? Wept for the dead of Tiananmen Square, but locked refugee children behind barbed wire for years because of their parents' crime of queue-jumping? The party that publicly went to bed with big business, then wore virginal white on polling day?

The scale of the Federal ALP disaster is undeniable, even to the lieutenants of the unsinkable Titanic. It slammed into the icy fact that ordinary people don't understand and will not judge parties on economic policy, but from their own experience: don't say youth unemployment is 8 per cent, when 30 per cent of our kids can't leave home because they can't find work.

What, then, must Labor do to reclaim the high ground? Disaster makes for a wonderful simplicity. It must not promise more than it can deliver: no-one believes, now, in a cure for unemployment, for example. It should not drop apparently unpopular policies, but it must be informed about what people are coming round to believing. It can only do this by rebuilding its membership base, and enlarging upon our sense of community.

IT NEED NOT LOOK TO THE POLLS which, after all, failed to predict the catastrophe, and at best give only short-term indications of voting intentions. Polls don't detect the underlying currents of political emotion. As Graham Wallas, a Fabian writer, wrote in 1910, most political opinions are the result, not of reasoning tested by experience, but of unconscious or half-conscious inference fixed by habit.

The ALP's strength as a party came from its ability to inspire support across regional and cultural boundaries by its vision of justice and compassion, but the Liberals have claimed that vision now. Labor has never really been a voter-driven party. It wasn't populism which induced it to change Family Law, get out of Vietnam or recognise Aboriginal land rights: it was a keen sense of justice which from time to time struck a deep chord of resonance in the people.

Historically, conservative parties, now the radical Tories, have appealed to the greedy: Labor sought to be the party that cared. It won most voter support when the people felt part of a community, when altruism was at its highest. In the 1970s Labor was identified with a sweeping change of mood, in the 1980s with progressive optimism: it went into

government, and became managerialist. Now the public has lost that faith in the Party, which the Party itself had lost.

The Australian Labor Party needs to make a bonfire of its love letters to the politically correct economists whose advice drove it to defeat. There must be an intellectual and heart-felt challenge to the received wisdom which made the ALP more conservative than the Fraser government ever was.

The once-strong Labor voters have splintered off and now worship at many altars. There is no loyal working class, there are no large groups of professional middle-class progressives. The largely moribund ALP branches, once sources of local activism and ALP

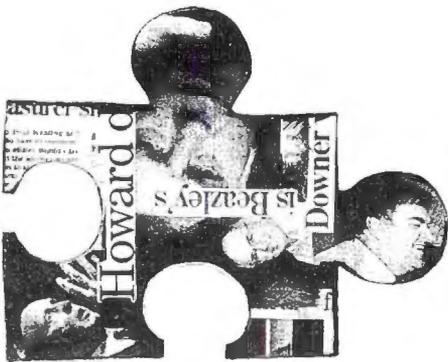
WE COULDN'T GET HOLD OF A CRISIS COUNSELLOR - BUT I'VE LOCATED SOMEONE I THINK YOU'LL FIND RATHER AMUSING!



policy, where enthusiasm is seen as evidence of subversion, should be revived and empowered, and take their place as the Party's life-line to the habits of believing in the people. At the very least, Labor must become an Opposition that challenges intellectually, and makes people think, as well as a party that knows how people feel. Above all, Labor must address those fundamental concerns of the people: how to resolve the tension between those who see a role for the intervention and power of the State, yet desire to put power in the hands of the people. How do we reconcile greater equality, with sacrifices of liberty?

Martin Luther King said more than 30 years ago that if you haven't discovered something you would die for, you aren't fit to live. Equally, a party without a vision is not fit to govern. ■

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The view from the hill

THE RESULT OF THE RECENT FEDERAL ELECTION was one of the most remarkable in Australian political history. Since the First World War there has been only one other occasion, in 1949, when Australian voters have removed a national government without there being demonstrable ineptitude or scandal, usually with major financial ramifications, and unless there was an opposition presenting itself as a compelling alternative.

Only the most one-eyed detractors of the Keating Government, or conservative economic commentators, would claim that it had governed incompetently since 1993. There has been, since 1993, no major scandal or demonstrable incompetence on any matter of major significance. According to many commentators, the explanation for the result is that the electors' collective decision was not based on how the government had performed since the last time they had delivered their verdict.

Voters, they argue, were really delivering a retrospective rebuke for the recession and for Labor's prolonged leadership contest. With the benefit of hindsight this seems a compelling conclusion. It also helps to explain the remarkable popularity initially attained by Alexander Downer as Opposition Leader.

The election result on March 2 has some parallels with the change of government in 1949. Liberal enthusiasts have often portrayed the 1949 election as if the Menzies-led Opposition was an irresistible force that brushed aside an inferior ALP government with glorious inevitability and ushered in the halcyon years of Menzies hegemony. This is fanciful.

It is true that the 1946-49 Chifley Labor Government was prone to controversy, but this did not derive from political scandal or incompetence. Rather, the government became controversial because it implemented party policy in controversial spheres. The Chifley Government, like the Keating Government, was vigorous, purposeful and presented the Australian people with an array of reformist achievements. Nevertheless, to the amazement of some of its most prominent identities, it was defeated in 1949 (largely because of lacklustre campaigning and some ordinary political judgment).

There are interesting parallels between Labor's most successful federal eras, 1941-49 and 1983-96. Awareness of the similarities between the Prime Ministers who led Labor into government in 1941 and 1983 has been increased because Bob Hawke drew attention to them.

He and John Curtin both became prominent in the broader labour movement before entering parliament. Both had a dual base in Victoria and Western Australia. Both had to overcome a personal battle with the bottle before leading their country. Both were unusually popular Prime Ministers. Both led governments that made national cohesion a priority.

The similarities between these most successful Labor eras extend further. It may seem bizarre to link Ben Chifley, who tried to nationalise the banks, with Paul Keating, who deregulated them, but they do have plenty in common. As Treasurers in the governments led by their predecessors, both Chifley and Keating were significant figures (and after they took over the Prime Ministership probably did not have the benefit of a senior colleague of equivalent influence). Both were from New South Wales. Both led governments that differed from the Curtin and Hawke Governments in that they were more self-consciously activist about pursuing ALP policy objectives, and less concerned about the impact on national consensus.

KEATING HAS BEEN PRE-EMINENT in the realm of striking political vernacular, but Chifley was no slouch either. (He attributed the 1949 election result to the fact that people who could not afford a bus ticket when Labor came to office in 1941 were up in arms eight years later about petrol rationing.)

Chifley and Keating also shared an unwillingness to be overly fussed about image, which made it easier for opponents to portray them to the electorate as ogres. (Those closest to both men described them as amiable, charming companions.) There was a significant revelation in a little-noticed Channel 10 documentary on Keating during the recent campaign. A feature of the documentary was an interview with Keating's sister Anne. She admitted that she would often cringe when she saw how her brother was depicted on television—acknowledging that while it was a reflection of the media's obsession with gladiatorial politics, it was also substantially his own fault—and that she had unsuccessfully tried to persuade him to allow the real Paul Keating to get through to the electorate. If he had done so, she contended, the 1996 election would have been a pushover.

In the same documentary Ros Kelly revealed that Keating would sometimes terminate cabinet deliberations because he had another engagement, which turned out to be something like a daughter's dentist

appointment he wanted to attend—just to make sure everything went smoothly. Long before Keating became Prime Minister he was described by Kim Beazley as ‘the best family man in politics’. Labor would have benefited significantly if more of Paul Keating had got through to the voters in ways that did not threaten his commendable protectiveness of his family.

Keating will have an exalted place in Labor history. If the voters were determined to deliver a retrospective rebuke whatever his government did after 1993, there was certainly no sense, from a Labor perspective, in shunning reform and being excessively cautious. Far better to extend the political parameters on issues like the republic and Aboriginal reconciliation.

MOREOVER, WHAT KEATING PREVENTED was as important as what he did. By winning in 1993 he prevented a comprehensive national slash-and-burn operation. ‘Fightback’ was about much more than the GST. Now, three years later, the coalition has won by doing their utmost to blur the policy differences and pledging not to touch so many of the things that would have been demolished if ‘Fightback’ had been implemented.

The upshot, as Keating claimed on election night, is that Labor has won the social agenda on issues like Medicare, the environment and the various programs that make up the welfare safety net. That is a notable achievement.

But this analysis—as sceptics of the incoming government’s credibility would caution—presumes that the Howard Government will adhere to its campaign undertakings. Has the new Prime Minister really become a moderate and put his 1980s-ideologue phase behind him? Will he be able to control colleagues who are not at all moderate?

How competent will the new government be when its depth is questionable, and only Howard himself and two colleagues have ministerial experience?

While we wait for the future to determine the answers to such questions, Federal Director of the Liberal Party Andrew Robb has been defending some aspects of the coalition’s campaign. It was ‘not well recognised’, he claimed, that the coalition had put out no fewer than 61 policies before the election. Odd, isn’t it, that these initiatives, kept from the people until the last minute, were not properly recognised. Further, Andrew Robb contends that the election victory was largely based on distinctive policies, and that Labor is now in deep trouble.

Surely a more compelling conclusion is that the mood of the electorate ensured that Labor would probably lose—however the Keating government

performed after 1993—if the coalition could position itself as closely as possible to Labor and could at last manage a competent campaign.

As for the ALP, the party is obviously bruised, but claims that its future is questionable are hardly convincing when it has just completed its most successful era in federal politics by far, when it has won five of the last six elections, and when the Keating government is likely to be increasingly acknowledged as a good government.

A period of review and reassessment is inevitable and appropriate. (This appraisal will presumably evaluate whether there was a Whitlamesque emphasis on the delivery of reform without enough attention to explaining the benefits.) The adjustment to opposition and the climb back from there to government will not be easy, even though there is a substantial record of achievements between 1983 and 1996. The knowledge that every incoming govern-



ment since 1931—whether coalition or Labor—has been given at least two terms by the voters is hardly encouraging for the ALP.

However, as Bob McMullan pointed out on election night, Labor bounced back from a more devastating defeat in 1977 to come very close at the following election, and the electorate has become much more volatile since then. There is still plenty of emerging talent in Labor’s parliamentary ranks—Lindsay Tanner, Stephen Smith and Jenny Macklin are three among many. The historical parallels connecting 1949 to 1996 are likely to involve only the period leading up to the 1949 election, not the decades of coalition dominance that followed it. ■

Ross McMullan is the author of *The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party 1891-1991*.

View from the flat: electoral posters and other advertising from the 1993 election Keating won against the odds.

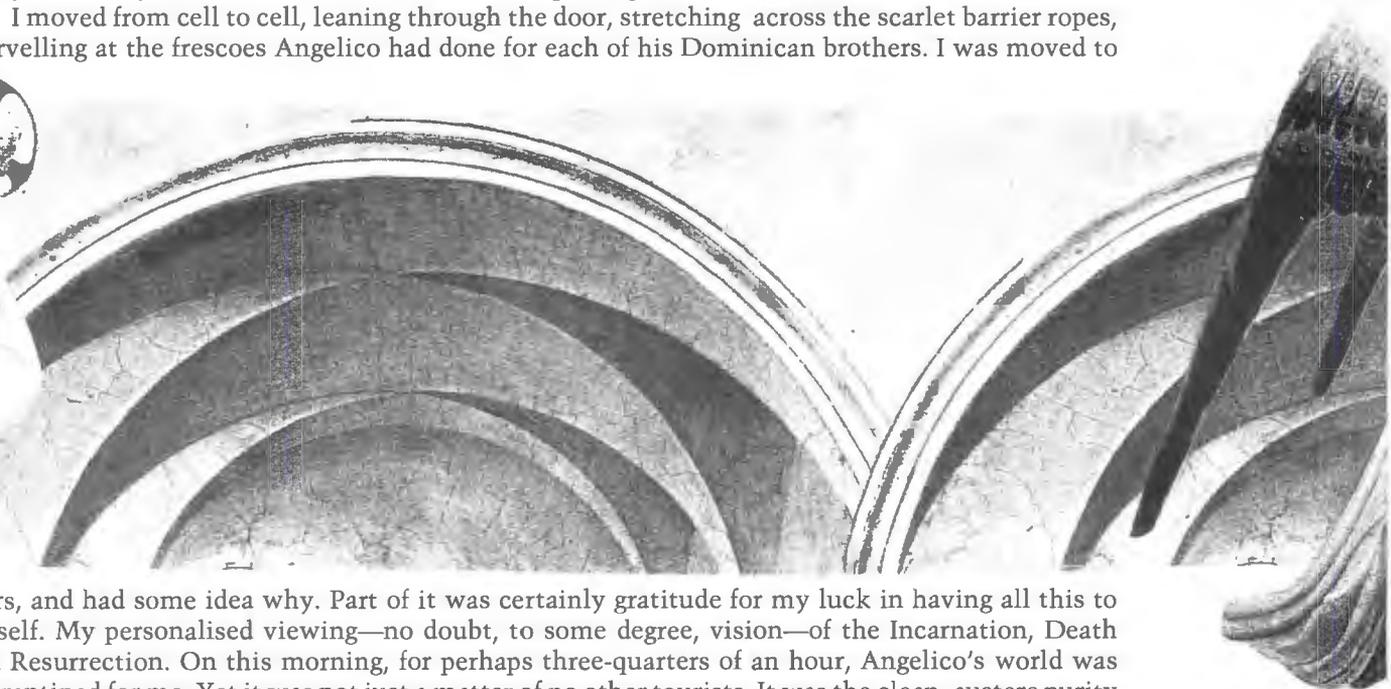
Photograph: Andrew Stark

Encounters with religious Italy: Florence

ON 2 FEBRUARY, THE FEAST OF THE PURIFICATION OF THE VIRGIN, thirty-one years ago, I rose at 5:25am and took what turned out to be temporary vows as a Jesuit. This year, on the same day—but I was forgetful of that fact—I was in Florence, and I got up to the sound of the campanile on the Duomo striking 5am. It was a cold, wet morning, but when the old Dominican friary, now the Museo di San Marco, opened at 9am I was there. I skipped straight towards the cells on the first floor. I rounded the corner to mount the second flight of stairs and of course the Annunciation was in progress. The two children, angel and virgin, bowed and blushed towards one another. In the light to the rear of Gabriel the museum attendants stood aside in a cluster, warming themselves for their day. I was the only visitor. They all ignored me. They made no move to disperse. Soundlessly an elderly cleaner slid his cross-beamed mop along the floor of the corridors.

I moved from cell to cell, leaning through the door, stretching across the scarlet barrier ropes, marvelling at the frescoes Angelico had done for each of his Dominican brothers. I was moved to

tears, and had some idea why. Part of it was certainly gratitude for my luck in having all this to myself. My personalised viewing—no doubt, to some degree, vision—of the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection. On this morning, for perhaps three-quarters of an hour, Angelico's world was quarantined for me. Yet it was not just a matter of no other tourists. It was the clean, austere purity of the cells, their whitewashed rectilinearity within the square of the cloister itself, and even, at the bottom of this scale, the deal board shutters on each merely sufficient window and within that again the peephole shutter that might funnel in just one keen shaft of light. No tombs, no ornaments, no plaques, no encrustations. The only alternative refuge on this level of the convent was Michelozzi's library, so level-headed in its scale, colonnaded but the pillars slim and the arches vaulting lightly, and the long slashes of the windows sliding the light generously down into the room. Everything about this architecture spelt out the soul's discipline and focus and a classical containment. In this setting, in each cell, I found the squared-off concentration of colour and



humanity that were Fra Angelico's contemplative matter for his friars. The friars were caught by the paintings because the friars were in each painting. No scene of Christ's drama, from Annunciation to Resurrection, had ever taken place without a Dominican being present, tactfully at the edge, in the wings, watchful and meditative. They might have the cleft skull and the trickle of blood of Peter Martyr or the displayed text of Thomas Aquinas, but each had a different face—five o'clock shadow or sharp nose or rusty beard or high-coloured cheeks or a greying goatee. I could only imagine that Prior John of Fiesole, called The Angelic One, had depicted his brothers, his subjects, as these champions of belief, and had drawn them all as relentless witnesses to the mysteries of Christ's life. Those strong pastels, those stock-still tableaux of fierce emotional communion ... I could have left Florence happy then.

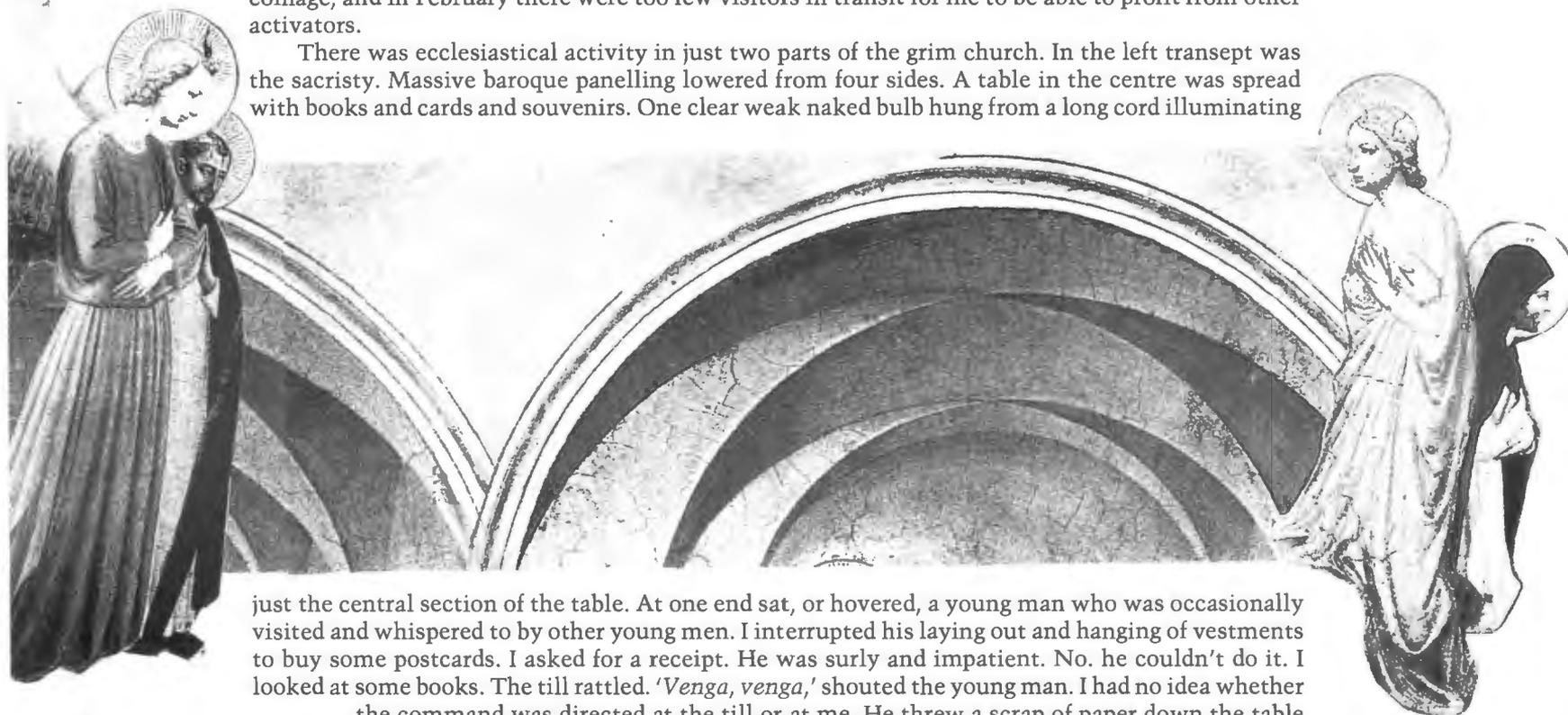
THREE CELLS IN THE WESTERN CORNER are now dedicated to the memory of Girolamo Savonarola, prior of San Marco sixty years after Fra Angelico. There are none of the master's frescoes in these cells. The portraits there do not purport to be of Dominic or Peter Martyr or Thomas Aquinas. They are of Savonarola himself. The bodiliness of the image is disconcerting. The cowl is drawn so far forward that we see no trace of the tonsure. The black eyebrows cross the forehead in an unbroken line. Then the steep convex nose, and hollows rather than dimples in the long olive cheeks, and lips that are exceedingly fleshy but firm and authoritative. I was frightened by this man. Angelico's friars, Savonarola's predecessors and brothers, were homely, venturing no further than the edge of the stage for the crucial drama in their lives, yet adaptable to any role their prior chose for them.

A few hundred metres away, other Dominicans care for the church of Santa Maria Novella. I was chilled by the wintry gloom of this place, and the higgledy-piggledy ostentation of its adornment—hardly very different of course from the tens of thousands of other Italian churches. The slot machines illuminate half an acre of Ghirlandaio for only one minute, and they are only activated by 500 lire coins. Yet no one—or certainly not I—could carry sufficient quantities of the right coinage, and in February there were too few visitors in transit for me to be able to profit from other activators.

There was ecclesiastical activity in just two parts of the grim church. In the left transept was the sacristy. Massive baroque panelling lowered from four sides. A table in the centre was spread with books and cards and souvenirs. One clear weak naked bulb hung from a long cord illuminating

just the central section of the table. At one end sat, or hovered, a young man who was occasionally visited and whispered to by other young men. I interrupted his laying out and hanging of vestments to buy some postcards. I asked for a receipt. He was surly and impatient. No, he couldn't do it. I looked at some books. The till rattled. '*Venga, venga,*' shouted the young man. I had no idea whether the command was directed at the till or at me. He threw a scrap of paper down the table towards me.

AN ELDERLY FRIAR appeared at the door, vested in a heavily embroidered Roman chasuble. My aesthete dropped his authority and slipped into place at the head of the procession of two, which made its way across the nave and into a chapel in the opposite transept—one enclosed and brilliantly lit. It was a beacon for visitors to the otherwise moribund church, and I too followed the procession. The service that began and was still in progress three quarters of an hour later is unknown to



congregations in Australia. No doubt to liturgists also. Yet the peoples of the world were dropping in to experience Catholic worship in this heartland of the tradition. There was Benediction of a sort. Or at least there was Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, and protracted use of the cope. There was also a prodigal burning of incense so that after half an hour a visitor could swoon in the hedonistic fug of the enclosed room. Hymns were sung but they were in the vernacular and the tunes were new to me. The priest bobbed about in a businesslike but possibly improvised way, for the shop assistant made an inept and flustered altar boy and the priest pointed and prodded him constantly. The rosary was recited, the priest standing at the edge of the sanctuary, in his cope, leading. He preached a sermon. The hundreds of candles blazed on.

THE FOLLOWING SUNDAY I heard three sermons. All took as their starting point, rather than their text, 'You are the salt of the earth'. In the Duomo the celebrant gave us moderate words on the secular nature of the world and the need to oppose its tendencies. Then, during the Offertory, a white-haired aquiline priest played a Bach fugue with a riveted passion that transformed it into the most thrilling *liebestod*. I could not speak; I didn't have the words. But this was a *missa cantata* and I could sing; the old Gregorian melodies soared out of me when most around were silent.

That afternoon I walked up the steep deserted slope to the Benedictine church of San Miniato al Monte. In sharp pure lines across the vault of the sacristy Aretino Spinello has recorded the miracles of Saint Benedict. Most idiosyncratically, least predictably, the saint is reviving a young monk who has been crushed to death by a wall and the demons are hot-footing it from the scene. Below, in the crowded undercrypt, Mass was beginning. A dozen monks, most of them young, sat by the friable, millennium-old bricks and listened to perhaps their abbot, certainly the oldest monk there, preach passionately against abortion. He didn't want to offend anyone there who was not a Catholic—and there was much drifting and milling about at the tail of the congregation, though not near the front—but, but ... the preacher waved his hands and covered his face and repeated, '*uccisi, uccisi,*' and shook his head and was so distracted and affected and unstoppable that I was moved to sympathy with his own suffering.

Later, walking out to dinner, I was stopped by a disturbance sounding through the open door of a small church, Santa Maria de Ricci. I went in. This time the priest stood in the aisle, and it was immediately obvious he was a performer. In the style of a clown at a children's party. He held the large Mass missal in one hand and leant in towards one side of his congregation and threw them a smiling rhetorical question, and then beat the crown of his head and swayed towards the other side. Members of the congregation stood up and left by the side aisles. Then an elderly couple moved from their seats into the centre aisle. The priest questioned them. There was an exchange. They bowed and left. The priest swung around across his congregation and asked them some question about *la messe*.

'*Si, si,*' they chorused.

He gave a cheerful shrug and returned to the altar, still talking. He spread his arms. '*Preghiamo,*' he began finally and with some reluctance.

I left and found the couple who had broken up the sermon. 'Excuse me,' I asked, 'but why did you leave?'

The man was mild. 'We have an appointment. The mass has lasted an hour already and he is still preaching.'

'What was he saying?' I asked.

The man was supportive. 'Oh, good things,' he said.

His wife's eyes twinkled gently. '*Un po' fuso,*' she elaborated, moving her fingers circularly near her head.

AFTER DINNER I sat down in a bar of the Piazza di Duomo and warmed myself with chocolate. A couple in their twenties sat next to me, and addressed me in English straight away. They were from North Carolina. They had just arrived in Florence. They were loving it. They had done some shopping, they had seen the David. She did all the talking. He was quiet, even impassive. An electrical engineer. She talked about America and the way it was going. Once or twice he frowned gently at some extreme in what she was saying. She withdrew it, admonished herself, paid tribute to him as the brains and support of the family, and stretched across to kiss him accurately, and loudly, on the lips.

'What is Australia like?' she asked. She was interested.

'It's a tolerant, low-key, helpful sort of place,' I suggested. 'Its religiousness, for example,' I said, waving towards Florence by way of comparison, 'comes out best in things like the Saint Vincent

de Paul Society.' I explained that phenomenon.

'So, good works?' she said.

'Yes, essentially.'

'Do they believe?'

I sensed their doubts. 'Well, yes. The works are a manifestation of it. As it should be.' I knew I was getting defensive, or perhaps argumentative. 'It's what Christ says—the crunch will be. Feeding the sick, clothing the naked etc.'

The Americans were not to be deflected. 'But do Australians believe in their hearts in the Lord Jesus?'

'I really don't know.'

The husband spoke. '“A man is justified by faith.” Romans 3, 28.'

Ah, I thought, I see. 'I'm blown if I know whether other people really have faith,' I said. 'It's hard enough knowing about myself.'

'I believe in my heart,' the woman said. Her leg moved in a constant nervous kick. 'So I know I am saved.' She was not smug.

'You can't know,' I said. 'That's presumption. As much a sin as despair. You know what Saint Augustine says,' I added, quoting Samuel Beckett, 'Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.'

'Because he was chosen for damnation,' shot in the man, rolling out an extended index finger.

'What do you mean?' I said. 'No one is chosen for damnation. God wills the salvation of every person he creates. Or at least wishes it.'

'Ah no,' said the man, and he edged his chair closer. 'Judas. “None of them has been lost but the son of perdition.” John 17, 12.'

'Is this the God who so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son?'

'Predestination is a very hard one,' admitted the engineer with a reluctant shake of his head. 'But the words are there.'

'Yes, but how are they to be interpreted?'

'That's the trouble. Once you interpret one problem away, where's it all end?'

For two hours we refought the Reformation. The bar closed on us. The woman extended her hand, 'So good to meet you.' 'Yes,' I said, vigorously. What do you make of all this? I wondered, waving again at Florence.

ON MY LAST NIGHT IN THE CITY, when I went out to dinner, I was put at a table with an Italian man in his twenties and two Frenchwomen, companions, in their late forties. He spoke fair French, they spoke only French. I lurched unsystematically between French and Italian. He was a regular in the restaurant, and was detached. The women were civil servants from Paris, short-cropped and polite in their friendliness. The woman beside me asked permission to light her cigarette, and then turned to me and asked, '*Quels sont vos sentiments de Florence?*'

I told her I thought it was *merviglioso*. I told her how I had seen Fra Angelico on my first day. But after him, I added, a lot was *troppo*. I felt, *aussi, triste, tres triste*.'

The Frenchwoman raised her eyebrows.

So much was *ruine*. Everywhere was *ruine*. I asked did they know the Irish poet Yeats. No they didn't. I said he'd restored a tower, a Norman tower, for his wife, but the lines he wrote to be inscribed on it ended—and I did a rushed recitation:

And may these characters remain
When all is ruin once again.

I gave a translation.

*Et restent ces paroles
Quand tout est ruine encore une fois.*

I didn't have the French optative up my sleeve, so Yeats's wish got turned into a statement of fact. The Frenchwomen nodded slowly, politely. The Italian restorer stared impassively into the middle distance, then nodded for his bill. ■

Gerard Windsor visited Italy in February this year. *Encounters with religious Italy: Lombriasco* will appear in the May issue of *Eureka Street*.

New York state of mind

PEOPLE OF MY GENERATION have virtual childhoods. That is to say, in addition to the memories from our immediate physical pasts we have a kind of alter-childhood which dwells inside the images of American television. So when I travelled to New York for the first time recently, I was lured, along with the conventional desire for a holiday, by the intriguing possibility of visiting, once again, my virtual childhood.

I arrived at Kennedy Airport close to midnight and caught the bus into central Manhattan with a troop of timid strangers from gentler worlds. As I watched the blazing Manhattan skyline loom closer and closer, I wondered whether there could be anything inside me big enough to contend with the magnitude of this city.

'The President is coming' announced the young man behind the desk at the Waldorf to me and my travelling companion as we handed over our accommodation vouchers. He narrowed his eyes at the computer screen and with a polite but unapologetic smile declared 'I'm afraid we don't have any rooms at your level vacant. The United Nations 50th is happening in the city this week and the hotel is fully booked. We'll have to upgrade you for one night to Room 1104 and then move you on to your appropriate room level in the morning.'

We were dispatched to our upgraded room courtesy of a gold magnetic key which opened a security lift leading exclusively to something called the Astoria Towers—the deluxe wing of the hotel. 'Deluxe' in *Astoria* speak translated to a spectacular view of the Chrysler building, a larger than average bath-

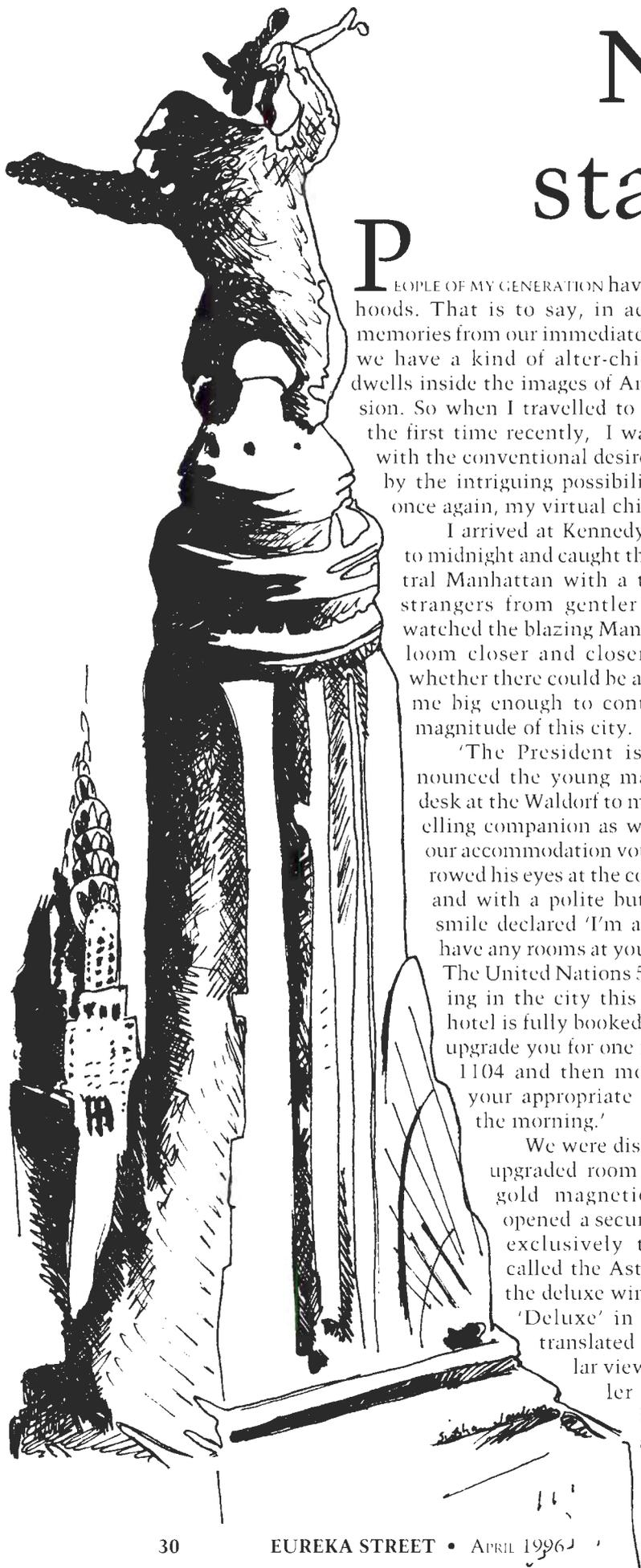
room and an abundance of white velvety towels. The sight of this enormous tower plunging into my room made me feel that at any moment the paw of King Kong might reach in and swoop me up, screaming across the skyline.

I had read with a mixture of amusement and scepticism in my tourist guide that the Waldorf Astoria was the hotel in which all the United States Presidents had stayed and that if I was lucky I might bump into one in the lift. Of course, it never occurred to me that I would. So, the following morning, stepping out of the benign claustrophobia of Room 1104 it came as quite a shock to me to find myself wall to wall in security guards, some of whom were carrying machine guns. I peered out of the window in the corridor and saw police marksmen pacing like urban tigers on the roofs of surrounding low-rise buildings. I travelled down in the lift with two of the biggest men I had ever seen wearing dark suits and sunglasses and murmuring into walkie-talkies. They looked at me. I looked at them. The expression in their eyes was not sustained or focused enough to rise to a stare.

Outside the swinging doors of the hotel foyer I found myself once again five feet deep in scrutiny. Grabbing a copy of the *New York Times*, I read that Yasser Arafat and over 200 heads of state had arrived in central Manhattan. 12,000 police had been summoned from the wider area of New York to be on patrol (mostly in the four streets surrounding my hotel it seemed) and the city was on something called 'a full gridlock alert'. The President was indeed coming, not just to Manhattan but to my hotel.

And it wasn't only the Secret Service, the FBI, the White House, the State Department, the New York City Police Department and the New York City Fire Brigades who would be called upon to rise to the occasion. A gala banquet hosted by Mayor Rudolf Giuliani in honour of the anniversary was tagged the largest gathering of international leaders for a dinner party in the history of the world.

And there were political questions of a more subtle nature to be considered. As a matter of strict international diplomacy, for instance, all world leaders must be served at exactly the same time. Two hundred and forty five waiters had been hired for the occasion. Not to mention the prudent planning of culturally sensitive menus by politically conscious caterers and, of course, the mandatory poison tasters.



As for seating arrangements, *The New Yorker* commented wryly, 'the best seats will go to heads of state who can prove that somebody wants to kill them'.

Despite what appeared to me to be the most spectacular upheaval, I sensed that New Yorkers were kind of used to it. There seems to be a type of permanent New York facial expression which settles somewhere between energetic, aspirational envy and a grudging toleration of a state of permanent inconvenience. It is as if the whole city is engaged in a relentless, suited conga-line through revolving glass doors, in restaurants and alleyways, in cabs and subways, up and down escalators, even at points of play and reflection like Central Park ... on and on they go, conga-ing in one long, gruelling sequence throughout the metropolis. The 200

Heads of State merely slow the rhythm down a bit. But everyone keeps dancing.

BAUDRILLARD ONCE OBSERVED that New Yorkers often eat alone and that no other creature in the kingdom consumes its food in isolation. There is something achingly true about this. The defining quality of the city seems to be this strange fusion of exhilaration and loneliness. To be in New York is to feel weak and insignificant and terrified but it is also to feel active and anonymous inside something much bigger than yourself. New York offers a kind of odd urban kinship—like belonging to a colossal neon-lit orphanage. Of course the visitor to New York is one step removed from all this. He or she floats just above the city like a whimsical character in a Chagall painting.

And amazingly enough, it was this same mixture of exhilaration and loneliness which I remembered feeling so keenly inside my virtual childhood. The program *Family Affair* screened in Australia in the '70s, followed the adventures of three children who are brought to New York by their executive uncle after their parents are killed in a car accident somewhere in middle-America. Already installed in his deluxe Manhattan apartment is an austere English valet who is forced to become a kind of *defacto* nanny for the children. The program revolved around loss and the subdued acceptance of a culture which trades the human and the familiar for a gruelling, spectacular urge for 'more'. The enduring, melancholic tone of the series was expressed mainly through the experiences of the orphaned children negotiating their new life, but also through the day to day disappointments of the defeated executive, married to the corporation

with a string of well dressed, indifferent dinner partners as his only adult companions. Supervising this small community of despair was the English valet, struggling to live as an Englishman in New York.

The grief of these characters was so fierce it was as if the whole series had been filmed under the weight of the crushed velvet sky of its opening titles.

It is an inspired folly, I suppose, for someone staying only a few weeks in a city to hope to achieve some kind of spiritual consummation with a place: so I resigned myself to the ghostly status of a free-floating Chagall character until one particular incident took place towards the end of my stay. I was strolling through the

hotel foyer when the Japanese Prime Minister and entourage passed through the revolving doors (by this stage I had become blasé about brushing shoulders with world leaders). Suddenly a security guard swept me off my feet (actually, physically, picked me up off the ground) and speedily and soundlessly shifted me out of the path of the official party.

Now, under normal circumstances I would have been alarmed by this step, perhaps even a little indignant. But, I wasn't. I felt relieved, even elated—like a child who'd finally been shown some attention after persistent tantrums. I had materialised into something that had the power to be in the way. I was an obstacle! A modest but genuine impediment, I had (for one brief moment) been tugged down from the sky to join the conga line. ■

Rosie Golds is a freelance writer.

Product of the Month

From the Sharper Image Catalogue: the pool patrol battleship. It comes complete with deck-mounted squirt guns and paddle propulsion.



Having a go

BLACK DAY though it was for students when Montaigne invented the essay, it was a bright day for humanity. This new game, played on a small white paper field, involved moving in two directions: outwards to the world of whatever took the mind's eye, and inwards to one's own appraising, responsive self. Not a treatise, a journal, a letter, a confession or a lyric, though on good terms with all of these, it gave any reflective mind at all a chance to show whether it was worth its salt.

'Essay' means 'having a go', and that is what the thirty pieces in Helen Garner's *True Stories* do. They have to do with life—her own, that of others—at home and abroad. Most are immediately identifiable as journalism, a capacious form which can accommodate some of the greatest shorter pieces of prose ever written as well as fragments which are at best like the manna, tasty for a day and worthless after that. I found nothing in *True Stories* which is not good for another reading, and probably another.

It is hard to have an appetite for life unless you have a taste for variety, which Garner does have. Ocean Grove, the cello, Patrick White as Holy Monster, dreams, Germaine Greer and the menopause, morgues, murder, cruising on the *Mikhail Sholokhov*, Fitzroy Baths, day-trips from Melbourne, beggary in New York, marriage, a crematorium, a labour ward—they are all here. If Montaigne had a hat, he would take it off to Garner.

It has been said that many would rather have their story heard than their request granted: for Garner, the telling of the story is itself a request for understanding. Her pieces are as much probes towards comprehension as they are reports on experience—not the first time we have seen this on her pages. At the beginning of 'Three Acres, More or Less', she writes,

Should the eagles cruising on lofty air train their stern eye-beams down this way, they would see a puppet jerking pointlessly, trotting here and there, always on the move. This is me on my land ... Walking is easy. The hard thing is sitting still.

The essay—it was written in 1990—unfolds as memory, as reverie, as speculation, but there is no paragraph in it, short or long, which does not re-grip the palpable. However much other things have changed in Helen Garner's writing, this has always been her gift, to keep the camera's eye and the eye of

True Stories: Selected Non-Fiction, Helen Garner,
Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1996.
ISBN 1-875847-24-3 RRP \$19.95

Double Take: Six Incorrect Essays, Peter Coleman (ed.),
Mandarin/Reed, Melbourne, 1996.
ISBN 1-86330-516-5 RRP \$14.95

the mind concerted. And her working assumption seems to be that although much can be formulated (sometimes as question) there will still be a much greater press of being than can be named at any moment. In her house of words, the doors and windows matter at least as much as the roof and the walls.

Of course, the great window or door onto amplitude is comedy, which goes on saying to us, as the knife-salesmen do on television, 'but there's more!' This too is Garner country. On the cruise-ship, she halts at a fruit machine by an acquaintance 'so phlegmatic that I can't tell whether she's winning or losing. Coins start to rattle and slide wildly inside the machine. "Are you winning, or is it?" "It's the boat starting to roll," she says without looking up.' In 'Sunday at the Gun Show',

Round the next corner, in the Ultimate Arms stand, hovered two young women dressed in blacktie, and caked with make-up, blusher and vivid lipstick. Their sparkling smiles, as they referred inquiries about the importing of weapons to their less attractive male colleague (also in evening dress) came as a shock in this cavern of grimness. Closer in, we saw that under their swallowtail jackets the girls were wearing black leotards and towering heels. The counter was exactly low enough to reveal them from the crutch up. Around this stand ran a hectic little frisson — but only in the movements of eyes. Faces remained frigid.

Shuffle, shuffle.

By this time we are getting away from Montaigne's sunlit chateau and into Swift's cabin of mordancy, but the spirit of farce is alive and well. Garner says of an applauded custodian of the Fitzroy Baths, 'Hilarity is OK with Decis, as long as it's disciplined hilarity. No one drowns at his pool, and no one gets hurt', but she knows very well that all the disciplining of hilarity in the world will not stop us all getting hurt, all drowning, and she has a high tolerance for the mind's rampancy, whether or not this takes comic forms.

THE DEVIL AND ALL of leaving the doors and windows open, though, is that the gentleman in black may stroll in. On page 1, the second paragraph begins, 'I left school and never saw her again. Naturally, she died.' Sometimes, as when a piece begins with the words, 'What sort of a man would beat a little



double

boy to death?', or when another begins, 'With a burial, what you see is what you get', we are face to face with what Zorba the Greek called, of something else, 'the whole catastrophe'. At other times, as in the 1994 piece 'Beggars in New York', it is mortality in slow motion that catches her eye—as when a resented and largely-ignored importuner in the subway comes out with, 'Well, I guess this must be my day to *die*.' For all the book's intellectual and imaginative esprit, it is never far from the shadow.

That we can, or do, or will 'prevail' as human beings is a notion dear to American rhetoric. William Faulkner used it in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, but then so, I once noticed wanly, does G. Gordon Liddy, Watergate explorer and celebrant of ruthlessness. In effect, Helen Garner's concern is with what it can mean to 'prevail' in modestly admirable ways, in Australia, now, for a few years. Whatever good writing can do on its behalf, she seems willing and able to do.

I AM TOLD THAT, IN ANCIENT CHINA, one method of committing suicide was to eat a pound of salt. I thought of this from time to time when reading Peter Coleman's collection of essays by half a dozen Australian authors. *Double Take: Six Incorrect Essays* is rich in tang and astringency, but only very pure souls would ask for nothing apart from these in life, including the life of the mind. Fortunately, there is more to be had here.

'Political Correctness' is a belief-system which, like others, is rich in the range of its adherents, but is only occasionally ecumenical either internally or beyond its borders. The Swift who made hay of the notion of Polite Conversation may even now, in one of the more competitive parts of Heaven, be working

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to keep the camera's eye and the eye
of the mind concerted. And her working
assumption seems to be that although much
can be formulated (sometimes as question)
there will still be a much greater
press of being than can be named
at any moment.

In her house of words, the doors
and windows matter at least
as much as the roof and the walls.

on Political Correctness. But the fact that something is mockable does not mean that it is not significant, for everything is mockable, and many things are significant.

Coleman has assembled essays by David Williamson, Jamie Grant, Les Murray, Beatrice Faust, Christopher Pearson, and Frank Moorhouse. Each of these writers has long been a prominent presence when it came to the lucid expression of tenaciously-held views, usually about matters public. As Coleman remarks in his introduction, '*Double Take* is a seminar not a manifesto ... The six essayists do not always agree with each other, or with me. But all share the idea that it is time for a reconsideration—and some repositioning.'

The 'reconsideration' in question is of a social and intellectual disposition which the writers find gratuitous at best, destructive at worst. Their concerns range from Jamie Grant's with the misfortunes of Australian sport, through Beatrice Faust's with authentic and inauthentic feminisms, to Frank Moorhouse's conjecture that it is time to quit the United Nations. As tends to happen when contentious matters are pursued with energy and intelligence, there is a good deal of personal anecdote and personal attestation, and there is a frequent crispness of expression. Faust's 'the hard-boiled has given way to the half-baked', Murray's plea for 'a modest sufficiency, to buy us time for the dark wrestling and the radiant trances', Grant's rueing the reduction of Test cricketers to 'supernumeraries and clowns, like the candidly phony exhibitionists who appear on the television show *Gladiators*'—read these, and read on. ■

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Traces of hell

Konin, A Quest, Theo Richmond, Jonathan Cape, London, 1995. ISBN 0 224 03890 7 \$39.95
I Rest My Case, Mark Verstandig, Saga Press, Melbourne, 1995. ISBN 0 646 25103 1 RRP \$16.95

MARK VERSTANDIG is a Jew from Cracow, or thereabouts, born in 1912 under the Old Empire, old enough to remember, as a six-year-old, the collapse of that Empire in November 1918, and the coming of the new independent Poland. His parents asked the Jewish maid to take down the pictures of the Royal Family and store them, for they might be needed in the future. Two days later he saw the first pogrom, as the peasants came in to loot the

Theo Richmond is an English Jew, born and reared in England, who is a writer of television documentaries, and married to an English Jewess, who is a novelist. The only thing Richmond and Verstandig have in common is their Jewishness and their family histories from Poland. Richmond, whose family name was Ryczki, wants to return to the hometown of Konin, and reconstruct its past: rediscover traces of his lost relatives and friends. He takes seven

produced by Jonathan Cape, whereas Verstandig had to publish his privately. Louis Waller, Sam Lipski and Harry Shukman provide handsome tributes on the back cover, but of course after the event. And yet Lipski is right—it is 'a major work of sociological and historical significance ... [which] transcends the academic to become memorable journalism and literature.' And Lipski's comparisons with Sholem Aleichem, the brothers Singer, and even, the Russians Gogol, Gorky and Isaac Babel are not all that fanciful. Yet another non-triumph for Australian mainstream publishing, (we are starting to generate our own *samizdat*?) not to mention a non-supportive local community. Maybe Verstandig is politically incorrect—certainly he comes over hard and eloquent and calling a spade a spade. I would like to see other examples of his writing.

One theme common to both books is the deplorable influence of the Polish Catholic Church in not simply condoning but fomenting anti-Semitism, and their remarkable process of separation from what the Germans were doing to Poland's Jews. It was less dangerous for the Church to speak out than for anyone else in Poland. For the others, dissent,

any sign of opposition to the Germans, let alone helping or concealing Jews, was punishable by death.

Many Polish Jews saw Marshal Pilsudski, the founder of the Polish Socialist Party, as a protector—rather as Franz Josef had been for the Habsburg Jews. But the comparison was overdrawn. Pilsudski made things difficult for the Jewish



Beginning of the end of shtetl life: a Nazi firing squad takes aim at its first victims in Konin, a Christian and a Jew.

Jewish shops and houses of his small town. The Jews, and not only the Jews of Habsburg Poland, had lost their protector. His story then takes us through life as a Jew in Poland until the War, the German occupation, the Holocaust, via the DP camps of Germany, a spell in France and them emigration to Australia, where he now lives.

years preparing for the journey. Verstandig needs to do none of this—he just has to set down his memories, almost by free association, for they are already there, inside, and will never leave him. So the books and the authors are very different.

One difference—perhaps trivial, perhaps not—is that Richmond's story of Konin is handsomely

Bundists from the start; they were Russophiles, and leaning towards communism. The Polish Secret Police were always busy setting up, and often imprisoning the Left. Pilsudski's solution for the Jews, and the others who made up the 35 per cent non-Poles in the new State, was assimilation. After his return to power in 1926, the Marshal started to give support to the idea, originally put forward in *Völkischer Beobachter*, (the official organ of the German Nazi Party) that the Jews be settled in Madagascar. So the idea of making Poland *judenrein* (free of Jews) was not a Nazi copyright.

PILSUDSKI WAS NOT HIMSELF an anti-Semite, but he did give in to rising pressures, which came not only from the peasants and the army, but many of the intelligentsia and professional classes—lawyers especially. (These last groups were among the first to embrace overt anti-Semitism in Germany.) In this vein, Pilsudski made a treaty with Hitler in 1934, after which time Nazi and neo-Fascist tendencies steadily took over. The Great Depression had added considerably to the savagery of the fight for bread and *Lebensraum* (living space).

As to the Polish army, under General Haller it had conducted widespread pogroms in East Galicia in 1919; in the same year Polish forces took part in a big pogrom in the course of taking Vilna. During Pilsudski's attack on the new Soviet State, which took him near to Kiev, there were numerous pogroms, and when Tuchachevsky and Budenny counter-attacked, the Red army being stopped only at the gates of Warsaw, pogroms again broke out on the way back. Any social breakdown or change of rulers provided a chance to vent organised, violent, anti-Semitism. The Church appears to have just watched.

Of course World War II changed much, but it did not alter the Polish-Jewish antagonism. Even when the SS were rounding up and killing the Polish intelligentsia, and treating Poles generally with utter brutality, the sufferers did not make common cause. Early in the war many Poles helped Jews, but as the years passed relations got worse and worse.



Mark Verstandig, left, in his ID photo taken in Mielic after the liberation in 1944

Verstandig attributes this firstly to the brutalising example of the Germans, and the lifting of certain moral taboos, and secondly to the propaganda and instructions being sent to the underground from the London Committee—the Polish Government in Exile. This body seemed to base its philosophy on the National Democratic Party—very influential and deeply anti-Semitic—which had been behind many of the pogroms and the discriminatory laws that set out to ruin Jewish businesses and professionals, and to quota Jews out of universities.

It was, of course, deeply religious, terribly patriotic, and wanted Poland *judenfrei*. And, thinks Verstandig, so did the London Committee. Few escaped Jews were helped. More and more, including children, were turned in to the Gestapo, or killed, as the Russians approached.

In addition to the Polish Blue Police, who actively worked for the Germans, and fled with them, there was the *Armia Krajowa* (home army)—the underground movement. Verstandig, who managed to avoid capture right through, is not an admirer of the AK. He thought they killed far more Jews than Germans,

for whom they posed few problems. In the interregnum between the German departure, the rapid exit of the Russians driving up to Berlin, and the imposition of the rule of the Lublin Communist Government, life for surviving Jews, in many places, remained as dangerous as it had ever been.

THEREFORE, VERSTANDIG delivers a different and doubtless unpopular verdict on the Warsaw Rising, and the refusal of the Red Army to cross the Vistula and help the Poles. He sees that resistance force as controlled by the AK and including many of its members, and dedicated to deny Warsaw and the rest of Poland to the communists. Members of the London Committee were ready to fly in to announce a government for all the Poles. This he thinks could have precipitated the major rift between Russia and her Western allies which was delayed until war's end. And the Poland envisaged by the Committee and the AK was pre-war Poland: reactionary, Church-dominated, and *judenfrei*. So Verstandig won't criticise the Red Army, and notes how little fuss and pressure came from the West while the uprising was being put down.

Well, Poland is almost *judenfrei*. Richmond, in his pilgrimage through Poland to Konin, visits town after town, village after village, where his family contacts had lived and where old and often large Jewish communities had been. Now there are none there, except for one or two old Jews, bewildered, as if in a dream. The majority had been killed, the survivors fled—to Israel, or America or Australia, as from a plague spot. There are many synagogues and Jewish houses restored. But they are museums. No Jews.

Along Richmond's journey, even the cemeteries had disappeared, and when he got to Konin, he had to search before finding a little stone memorial, deep in the forest, put up by a few people, near the mass graves. There is a detailed account of the Konin massacre, given by a Polish vet, who was forced to observe it and dispose of the bodies. I think it is the most terrible thing I have ever read.

I went to Cracow in 1990 with a friend, whose home town it had been. Cracow in '39 had 200,000 people, with perhaps 70,000 Jews. Now there are 800,00 inhabitants—in from the country—and 500 Jews. Synagogues, cemeteries and the Jewish quarter were being restored but for American tourists. Along Richmond's journey, even the cemeteries had disappeared, and when he got to Konin, where every Jew there and thereabouts had been murdered, he had to search before finding a little stone memorial, deep in the forest, put up by a few people, near the mass graves. There is a detailed account in this book of the Konin massacre, given by a Polish vet, who was forced, along with a few others, to observe it and dispose of the bodies. I think it is the most terrible thing I have ever read.

But to restart, at Verstandig's childhood. He gives a simultaneously delightful yet sombre account of growing up in a *shtetl*, and the boring nature of the religious and secular education he received—all rote learning and the cane. There were the family politics and the marriage market, with the family the eco-

nomic institution that Marx thought it was. Class and status distinctions were alive and well—one didn't recognise poor relatives. The stories of the *schnorrer* (beggar) with a place at the end of the rich man's table were true, but hardly a picture of the harsh economic and social realities of Jewish Poland. Verstandig estimates as many as 90 per cent of the *shtetl* youth as being unemployed. So people went around singing 'If I were a Rothschild, diddle diddle diddle dum'. Fans of *Fiddler on the Roof* please note. Young Verstandig, trained as a lawyer, had lots of *chutzpa*, which hasn't deserted him, and was doing well, until the roof fell in and the world stopped. His chronicle at this point is enthralling and frightening.

In contrast, Richmond builds block by block, by endless stories of peoples' lives and the deaths

of villages and towns, whole families, a whole people. Both writers tell of numerous rescuers and kindnesses, and great bravery by Polish people—often quite unexpected and very often by the simple and the simply religious. Richmond, whose book is adorned with photographs of families long since gone and scenes long swept away, found some of the Polish friends and protectors who were astonished to hear of people whom they hadn't known since the war—along with their subsequent fates. It is all desperately sad, and one of the low points in human history.

VERSTANDIG RAISES SOME interesting queries about the Allies and Auschwitz. At one point, when in hiding, near what was becoming the front line as the Red Army advanced, his group noticed the flights of four-engined bombers pounding the German lines in support of the Russians. These they eventually identified as American bombers operating from a base in Ukraine. They were working on a long line north-south in Poland. On this line was Auschwitz. Yet we are still told that that camp and even

its railway lines were too far for planes to get at. It might have been from the West—but the East?

The author is scornful of the Allies' practical indifference to the fate of Europe's Jews, an indifference shared by the Jewish World Congress based in America. He asserts that this indifference continued after the war with the displaced persons, of whom he was one in Germany, still neglected and starving long after war's end. The great sums raised in America just melted away, the DPs on the spot getting little. Some of my friends say it was similar in Poland. Scams from top to bottom.

Verstandig threw himself into communal politics here, but after 1972 decided that they were irrelevant to the present day, that they were still preoccupied with old issues and divisions, and leadership changes were altering the whole character of what was, in any case, ceasing to be a community. So he withdrew and moved over to charitable work.

RICHMOND'S BOOK is not political in the same way. He lets his interviewees tell their own stories, so you get a broader perspective on a world that is gone, leaving a strange pall hanging over the landscape, while the people below go about their business as though nothing has ever happened. But of course life must go on, must renew itself. A condition of permanent mourning, which I see in many people, is living death. But you can't always choose your mental state.

Richmond finishes:

From the beginning I had known I would have to come here. Now the journey was done. To say I felt regret at leaving this place would be false and sentimental. I felt no emotion, maybe it was spent. Or maybe the town was releasing me from its grip, for I knew now that it was not the place that held meaning for me but the people who once lived here. Their Konin would stay with me always, a persistent echo.

Mark Verstandig would say Amen to that. ■

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Natures and creatures

AT NOON ONE DAY a friend who rarely beat about the bush proposed that we lunch at a certain spot, 'and see if the creatures have turned into people.' It may not have been the height of charity, but it did touch on one recurring preoccupation of human beings—the figure we cut in either the natural or the social world.

The conclusions we come to may be serene and steadfast, or quite the opposite. Sometimes, the upflung palms of comedy may be the best we can manage. It was said of one indecisive official that it was only by the mercy of God that he was not a monkey, for had he been one, he would have spent all night trying to decide into which leg of his trousers to put his tail—an analysis whose provenance is at least six hundred years old. Some foreign creature peeps out through the eyes of each of us.

With differing accents, and differing nuances, this state of affairs has exercised the editors of both *The Oxford Book of Nature Writing* and *The Oxford Book of Creatures*. Each lends itself to that now arcane practice, a musing reading-aloud, which can have the double benefit of 'estranging' the words on the page from their being merely the semiotic canapés which you, Reader, are ingesting at the moment: and of 'uttering' or 'outring' observations every one of which, in these books, does have to do with processes to which we are quite incidental.

To respond to these collections only with something along the lines of either, 'I told you so' or 'I didn't know that' would be to miss most of their point. The collators really are interested less in our stormy romance with our own subjectivities than in nature, and in the creatures.

Which is not to say that they are indifferent to the games psyches play.

The Oxford Book of Nature Writing,
Richard Mabey (ed),
Oxford University Press, Oxford,
1995. ISBN 0 19 214172 4 RRP \$45.00
The Oxford Book of Creatures, Fleur
Adcock & Jacqueline Simms (eds),
Oxford University Press, Oxford,
1995. ISBN 0 19 214226 7 RRP \$44.95

Consider, as early as page 13 of Richard Mabey's book, 'A Tenth-Century Chinese Classification of the Animal World':

- (1) Those belonging to the Emperor;
- (2) Embalmed;
- (3) Tame;
- (4) Suckling Pigs;
- (5) Sirens;
- (6) Fabulous;
- (7) Stray Dogs;
- (8) Included in the Present Classification;
- (9) Frenzied;
- (10) Innumerable;
- (11) Drawn with a

Very Fine Camel-hair Brush;- (12) *Et Cetera*;
- (13) Having Just Broken the Water Pitcher;
- (14) That From a Long Way Off Look Like Flies.

A collection which makes room for such a sample of esoteric brio—it is lodged between Albert the Great on the oak and Henry Lee (1887) on 'The Vegetable Lamb of Tartary'—is not indifferent to the courses of our consciousness. And Mabey can, with a few editorial touches, sketch in the thought-provoking—as when, of Anton van Leeuwenhoek (fl. 1677), he remarks that he

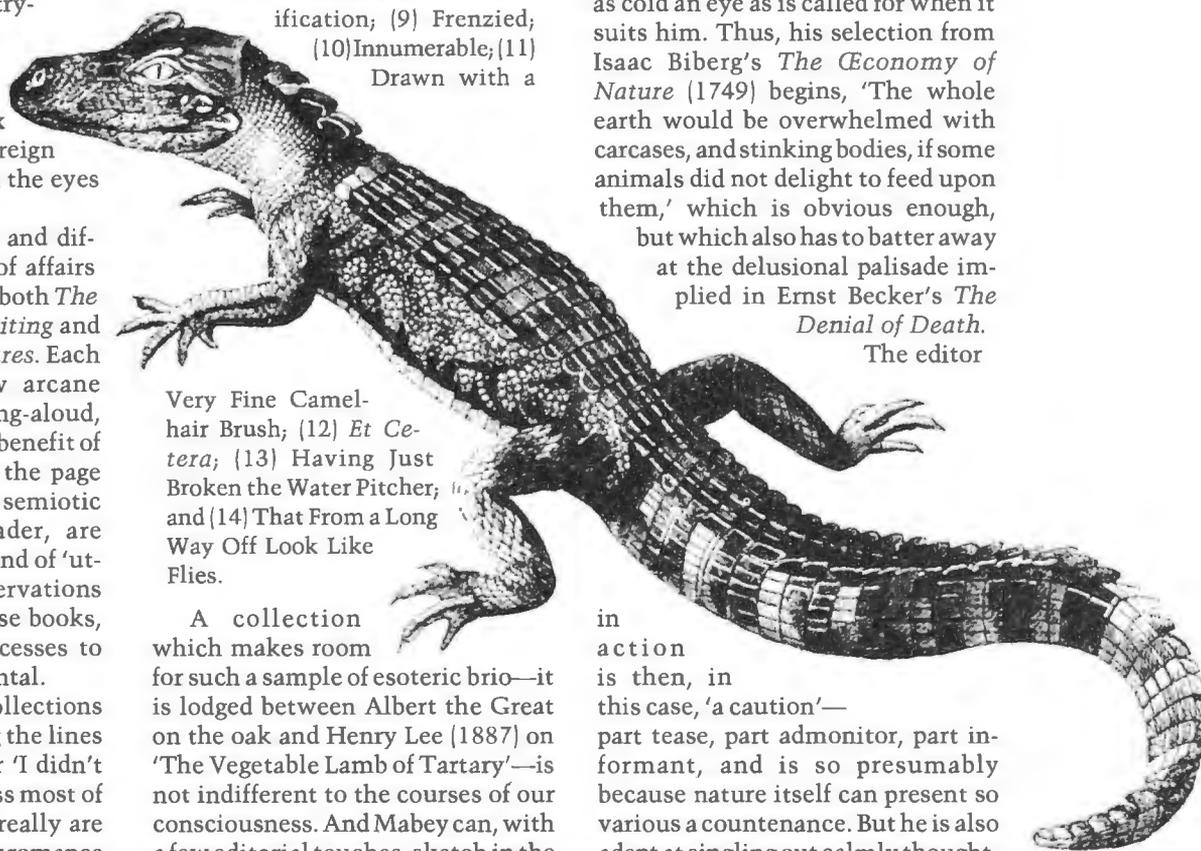
... was a minor public official in

the Dutch city of Delft, but spent most of his time developing the microscope. His proof of the existence of creatures too small to be seen by the naked eye in that most universal of mediums, water, was a revelation, and had a profound effect on contemporary natural philosophy. His papers to the Royal Society were originally contributed as letters written in Old Dutch (he had no English) and were translated by a sympathetic but unknown member of the Society.

In such a case, 'the creatures' are being brought on by a mute inglorious Orpheus. But Mabey has as cold an eye as is called for when it suits him. Thus, his selection from Isaac Biberg's *The Economy of Nature* (1749) begins, 'The whole earth would be overwhelmed with carcases, and stinking bodies, if some animals did not delight to feed upon them,' which is obvious enough, but which also has to batter away at the delusional palisade implied in Ernst Becker's *The Denial of Death*.

The editor

in action is then, in this case, 'a caution'—part tease, part admonitor, part informant, and is so presumably because nature itself can present so various a countenance. But he is also adept at singling out calmly thoughtful passages, 'popularly scientific', though certainly in no limiting sense of that expression. Here, for instance, is J. B. S. Haldane, writing in 1965



'On Being the Right Size:'

All warm-blooded animals at rest lose the same amount of heat from a unit area of skin, for which purpose they need a food-supply proportional to their surface and not to their weight. Five thousand mice weigh as much as a man. Their combined surface and food or oxygen consumption are about seventeen times a man's. In fact a mouse eats about one quarter its own weight of food every day, which is mainly used in keeping it warm. For the same reason small animals cannot live in cold countries... The small birds fly away in the winter, while the insects die, though their eggs can survive six months or more of frost.

This serviceable prose, and the understanding which it mediates, has an additional interest and eloquence when it is orchestrated into an ensemble as various as the one Mabey has put together. That becomes the more obvious when, in the later part of his book, he samples generously from those concerned with the beings he calls, simply, 'Fellow Creatures'—a term which would have been good enough for Francis of Assisi, though there has been a lot of blood under the bridge since his time.

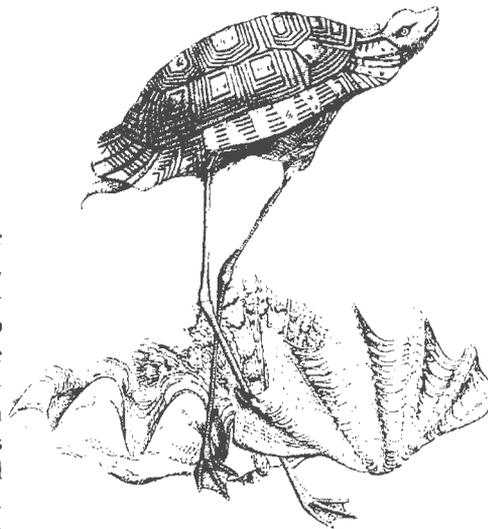
A couple of cases in point would be the following. First, from *The Lives of a Cell*, by Lewis Thomas (1974):

Viewed from the distance of the moon, the astonishing thing about the earth, catching the breath, is that it is alive. The photographs show the dry, pounded surface of the moon in the foreground, dead as an old bone. Aloft, floating free beneath the moist, gleaming membrane of bright blue sky, is the rising earth, the only exuberant thing in this part of the cosmos. If you could look long enough, you would see the swirling of the great drifts of white cloud, covering and uncovering the half-hidden masses of land. If you had been looking for a very long, geologic time, you could have seen the continents themselves in motion, drifting apart on their crustal plates, held afloat by the fire beneath. It has the

organized, self-contained look of a live creature, full of information, marvelously skilled in handling the sun.

And secondly, from *The Lost Notebooks of Loren Eiseley*, edited in 1987,

Note for essay: If men could only disintegrate like autumn leaves, fret away, dropping their substance like chlorophyll, would not our attitude



toward death be different? Suppose we saw ourselves burning like maples in a golden autumn.

Both passages trade in visions of solidarity between ourselves and our natural milieu, Thomas' buoyantly, Eiseley's with his characteristic dying fall. Both entertain hypotheses—'If you had been looking ... If men could only ...'—which must remain no more than that, with the result that the reader's imagination is drawn into an uncompleted drama. Both pull clear, very quickly, of the pragmatic and the customary. And each, the first in its 144 words and the second in its 37, offers to replace the probable ensemble of one's whole experience so far with the natural equivalent of a New World. Either would be striking in its own right: that they should both occur within this carefully-structured section of the book gives each an additional, provocative force.

Much as this book is to my liking, I like *The Oxford Book of Creatures* better still. A personal bias may be in

play here, since Fleur Adcock is a poet of uncommon distinction, while Jacqueline Simms has fostered much of the poetry published by this Press, with the result that their book—which designates as a 'creature', 'a living being, real or imaginary, belonging to the animal kingdom'—has a generous array of whole poems as well as excerpts from others. Of these, more in a moment; but consider first the span of attention in the following prose passages.

FROM ELIAS CANETTI, 'Do animals have less fear because they live without words?' From the journals of Beatrix Potter, 'A boy went into a graveyard and shot a white owl. Then, seized with alarm, he rushed home in the greatest excitement screaming 'I've shot a cherubim.' From a diary entry of T.H. White, 'Good Friday. A magpie flies like a frying-pan.' From Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*,

At these non-human hours they could get quite close to the water-fowl. Herons came, with a great bold noise as of opening doors and shutters, out of the boughs of a plantation which they frequented at the side of the mead; or, if already on the spot, hardily maintained their standing in the water as the pair walked by, watching them by moving their heads round in a slow, horizontal, passionless wheel, like the turn of puppets by clockwork.

From Darwin on worms,

Worms do not possess any sense of hearing. They took not the least notice of the shrill notes from a metal whistle, which was repeatedly sounded near them; nor did they of the deepest and loudest tones of a bassoon. They were indifferent to shouts, if care was taken that the breath did not strike them. When placed on a table close to the keys of a piano, which was played as loudly as possible, they remained perfectly quiet.

From Elizabeth David, in her *Italian Food*,

Another market with its own very characteristic flavour is that of Cagliari, in the island of Sardinia.

Spread out in flat baskets large as cartwheels are all the varieties of fish which go into *ziminu*, the Sardinian version of fish soup: fat, scaly little silver fish streaked with lime green; enormous octopus, blue, sepia, mauve, and turquoise, curled and coiled and petalled like some heavily embroidered marine flower; the *pescatrice* again, that ugly hooked angler fish; cold stony little clams, here called *arselle*: *tartufi di mare*: silvery slippery sardines; rose-red mullets in every possible size, some small as sprats, like doll's-house fish; the fine lobsters for which Sardinia is famous.

Since the *Zeitgeist* never wrote a book and never will, what we have here is an array of mediated personalities, each engaged with 'the creatures' in their vividness, and making the best of an engrossing task by the use now of a juxtaposition (magpie and frying-pan, cattle and puppets), now of an illustration, an abruption, a question. So although Adcock and Simms have deliberately eschewed the handling of the trickiest of creatures, the human voice-print and mind-print are all over the place. Adam and Eve go on naming the animals, so long after the Fall.

HERE IS ALSO the matter of differences of 'pitch' in these fragments, some coming from writings which face the reader frontally, as Darwin's and David's do, and some from consciousnesses which, as with Canetti's and White's, are half turned away, in-furled for private cogitation. Enthusiasts for one posture or other often proclaim that only this one or that will serve an understanding of 'the creatures' very well; but surely, with them as with ourselves, the mind needs as large a repertoire as it can get. Human portraiture is endlessly mysterious, eluding as it does any accounting for in terms of devices: the portraying of what might be called the hauntingly inhuman—*les autres*, with four legs or four dozen—is not a game which should lean to austerity.

I think, too, that the whole mercurial affair of *time* is always to the point when we attend to our alien comrades. Edwin Muir, in a splendid poem called 'The Animals', begins it by saying, 'They do not live in the world,/ And not in time and space.' This is manifestly, though perplexingly, true.

Leaving space out of it, our being keyed to temporality is one of our great defining dimensions. When we try to have 'the creatures' impinge upon us as more than the machines for which Descartes took them, we find ourselves together in a partly-barred concourse. And all speaking of them which steeps them in our temporality—which Darwin's passage does as truly as the others do—has an innate pathos, in that it underlines our own radical 'creatureliness', our inability ever to command the condition in which we are immersed. If the past is another country, we have no name for the 'present' country of dog, horse, or jaguar.

'Jaguar' makes its leap here because it does so evocatively at several points in the *OBC*. One of these is in a South American fire myth relayed in 1964 by Claude Lévi-Strauss, in



which, after an array of violent encounters, Indians take fire from its sole possessor, the jaguar. The fire is a boon to them:

The jaguar on the other hand became their enemy for ever. Ever since men stole his weapon and his fire he has used only his claws for hunting, he rends his prey with his teeth as soon as he has caught it, eats it raw just as it is; and the only fire that remains to him is the fire that shines reflected in his eyes.

Whatever of all that, 'the

creatures' have been, from Aesop's hour at least until our own, the bearers of that fiery meaning which we call myth. This, surely, is one of the animating principles behind a volume like the present one—the justified hunch that the beasts are not just mobilised sticks and stones, but carry significances for us, as, in the tale, the inarticulate St Christopher had the world's embodied meaning slung on his shoulder.

That 'their' country and ours abut on each other is a persuasion which goes on being reworked. Sometimes (as with the jaguar) the sense is that the border is fraught with tension. Sometimes, while extravagance is kept to a minimum, the dividing membrane is pierced—as when Sylvia Townsend Warner says in a letter,

Last night I heard a screech-owl in the garden, taking her little owls for a moonlight flit. Her maternal voice was extraordinarily gentle and solicitous, and they expressed themselves in brief tinny exclamations, very much as if they were striking small cheap triangles.

And sometimes, as in Warner's account of T.H. White's 'manning' a goshawk, we are into a terrain where relationship is being revised:

The old method of 'watching' the bird is based on the fact that birds, like men, sleep by night. White, standing in the barn with Gos on his fist, patiently replacing him when he bated,

whistling to him or repeating poems or stroking his talons with a feather or offering a bit of freshly-killed rabbit, always attentive to him yet always scrupulously aloof, patiently and unyieldingly and sleeplessly keeping him awake for three nights running until the wild bird abdicated from its feral state and fell asleep on the gloved hand, was as much a figure out of the past as the ghost of a ballad falconer would have been.

'The ghost of a ballad falconer' finds other work nowadays, as

sponsor of modern balladry. The *OBC* gives house-room to creatures great and small in various poems, from the warhorse and the whale of *Job* to Andrew Marvell's glow-worms and Elizabeth Bishop's sandpiper. Poetry itself can be, like those creatures, both obvious and runic; if it is, often, humanity's first word (in chants and lullabies), it may as well be their last word here. First, there is half of Anthony Hecht's 'Giant Tortoise':

I am related to stones
The slow accretion of moss
where dirt is wedged
Long waxy hair that can split
boulders.
Events are not important....

There is nothing worth
remembering
But the silver glint in the muck
The thickening of great trees
The hard crust getting harder.

And finally, the whole of Alasdair MacLean's 'The Buzzard':
The buzzard turns a circle
in the sky,
making its ends meet.
When it completes the figure
a round blue segment drops out of
the air,
leaving a black hole
through which the souls of many
little birds
fly up to heaven. ■

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POETRY

ALAN WEARNE

Getting it together

New and Selected Poems, Robert Gray, William Heinenmann
Australia, Melbourne, 1995. ISBN 0 85561 6660 RRP \$16.95

Collected Poems, Dorothy Hewett, Fremantle Arts Centre Press,
Fremantle, 1995. ISBN 1 86368 114 0 RRP \$19.95

TO AN OUTSIDER it may seem obligatory at times for Australian poets with a certain track record to assemble a *Selected*, a *New and Selected*, or a *Collected*. Sometimes there is a certain amount of cheating done and an old *Selected* is re-assembled as a brand-new volume.

If this ritual has a touch of the predominantly middle-aged about it, it is also a ritual that knows no ideological bounds: Ken Bolton one day, Kevin Hart the next. And certainly if a poet's work has been confined, in the main, to slim volumes with small print runs from non-mainstream presses, a *Selected* will be quite valuable in assessing or

re-assessing their career. (Let's have a *Selected Gig Ryan*, a *Selected Eric Beach*!) Of course with the Australia Council now finding itself unable to fund selections or collections, all this ritual may wind-down dramatically.

Though I'm not a great believer in them I give you some instant statistics: of the 24 poets who appear in Tranter's *The New Australian Poetry* (1979), 10 have made it into the *Collected/Selected* listings, with Laurie Duggan due next August. (Had he not bedded down with the epic muse this reviewer may, too, have made the grade.) Such figures are, I'd guess, quite likely in what I'd very

loosely term The Tribe of Les: Murray, Lehmann, Gray, Page, McMaster, O'Connor and Gould springing to mind. Then there is J. S. Harry who refuses any instant categorisation.

Gray's *New and Selected Poems* is his second attempt at a selection and, as I prowled about the book I admired and felt niggled, by turns: one word slotted-in so aptly after the previous one, their author rarely putting a foot wrong. And it was there where both the admiration and annoyance commenced: for although it seems to be a very lush verse (and let's have more lush verse please) it could also be a very chilled verse, containing much that is possible in our craft except, rarely, that additive to drive it: all-out humanity. And yet I could go for page after page and find individual poems to enjoy greatly (and individual phrases of which I'd be most envious).

Those attending poetry-writing classes could do worse than be given this book and told: learn from him. From experience I know the task facing teachers confronted with adolescent and post-adolescent word-bingeing. Having seen someone start the subject with reams of angst-rhapsody, and end the year with a dozen snappy haiku, though, now that can give one heart! Not being able to write anything remotely haiku (yet knowing how infectious concocting such short pieces can be) I would propel plenty of would-be's in the Gray direction: not to write like him of course, but to see what he can do and how well at times he can do to. After mastering the shorter form, then might be the time to go longer-lined, more rhapsodic. Here again Gray would be ideal —at his best he's lean, tight, without a hint of 'splurge'; and yet as I have noted, lush.

There is a precision that must be admired, one which (as an example) compares the folding of a pelican's wings to a Swiss army knife; not my idea of wit exactly, but an image of such confidence you feel certain that no-one else has presented that comparison before.

OF COURSE WHEN the same sensibility applies itself to humanity —oh boy! This is where the chill commences: what we get are the poet's

moral-issues aphorisms, those kinds of lecturettes George Eliot so loved to scatter through her work. You might learn something from them but it sure won't be poetry!

Regular reissues of, say, the *Collected Les Murray* are to be expected; the *Collected Dorothy Hewett*, however has crept up on this reviewer and, I'm certain, much of literary Australia. Over 50 years in its on-off construction, the end result exceeds 400 pages. Yes there's so much and yes it's too much, absolutely; but there's always been too much poetry; too much Chaucer, too much Tennyson, too much Pound. She's in great company.

Hers is a mid-to-late 20th Century Woman's 'Song of Myself': ranting and keening, hectoring and bemoaning, wallowing and reflecting, but above all loving and singing her body and mind and soul and heart electric. There is a wonderful Victorian era sprawl to her work, not just because she has Tennyson, Lewis Carroll (and their creations) as reference points, much in the way that Gray has the cultures of China and Japan for his. Is Hewett a *better* poet than Gray? I doubt it. A greater one? Absolutely.

HAS ANYONE IN Australian verse delivered quite such a document? A *Collected Beaver* might be a contender, in a decade or two a *Collected Adamson* ditto; while the *Collected Webb* and the *Collected McAuley* would certainly be worthwhile comparisons. But the one reasonably contemporary poet from this part of the globe whose complete work does, for me, the closest to what Hewett does, is (or rather was) from over the Tasman. James K. Baxter, who died 23 years ago, aged 46, has recently had both his *Collected and Selected* re-issued (alas in hardback). An over-reacher like Hewett, his total verse swept in the under-done, the done, the well-done and the over-done. Like Hewett he could write great poems, but also like her, consistency for him was of secondary importance. No-one writes bad poems quite as badly as a great poet and Baxter (particularly towards the end of his life) wrote some whopper-baddies.

I have never exactly been a fan of

the *I, me, mine, myself* mode, the poet forever parading him/herself dead centre of the work, without any of the self-mocking irony of, for instance, a Frank O'Hara. Well, Baxter did it, and Hewett does it often enough. The good thing is that they as often as not get away with it: the verse actually transcends its maker. Of the two how is the greater poet? Baxter, but I wouldn't worry: no Australian ever *has* been as great as the New Zealander.

At her best Hewett seems to know that the personal needn't be

the confessional; and, even better, that you certainly must keep your audience firmly in mind when you set about constructing your verse. All poets, students and the rest of us, could learn greatly from this approach. Of more importance though, it should earn her wider public respect. By this time next year I trust that at least one of our seemingly countless awards will have come her way for this collection. ■

Allan Wearne is a poet and author of the verse novel *The Nightmarkets*.

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The Janáček case

The Makropulos Secret. The Australian Opera, directed by Neil Armfield, designed by Carl Friedrich Oberle, lighting by Nigel Levings, with Marilyn Richardson as Elina Makropulos.

IN THE YEARS SINCE it staged *Jenůfa* in 1974, one of its early successes at the Sydney Opera House, the Australian Opera has mounted three further works of the Czech composer Leoš Janáček.

In 1976 it unveiled a short-lived but striking production by Jonathan Miller of *The Cunning Little Vixen*, a strange, at times ravishing musical fable in which human beings and the animal world merge and dissolve into each other. Four years later, in 1980, the company staged a notable production of *Katya Kabanova*, Janáček's intense, compressed setting of a famous Russian play of adulterous passion, Ostrovsky's *The Storm*. Last year the company staged a new production by Neil Armfield of *Katya Kabanova*, in many ways the most conventionally 'operatic' of Janáček's stage-works.

For its 1996 Sydney summer season the Australian Opera added to its repertoire *The Makropulos Secret*, Janáček's penultimate work and (together with *From the House of the Dead*) the distillation of the quiet operatic revolution the diffident, often neglected and essentially provincial composer from Brno achieved in the opening decades of the century.

It seems therefore that Janáček's operas have found receptive soil far away from his native Moravia. He is the best-represented twentieth century composer in the Australian Opera's repertoire. Of his mature works only his last opera, *From the House of the Dead*, remains unstaged in this country. The rather unsatisfactory *The Adventures of Mr Brouček* was performed at an Adelaide Festival of the 1980s; his one artistic failure in opera, *Fate*, has been rarely performed anywhere.

That a special affinity exists between Janáček and Australian singers and musicians is undeniable.

Much of Janáček's international success since the 1960s is due to the passion Charles Mackerras discovered in the years just after the end of the Second World War for the works of a then largely neglected composer who had written a series of peculiar works which seemed to offer none of the ingredients thought essential for success in the fickle world of opera. It is beyond doubt, therefore, that Mackerras's intermittent though influential involvement in opera-giving in this country obviously had some effect on the willingness to perform Janáček in a place far removed from the sites of Central European cultural life.

As Milan Kundera acknowledges in his most recent book, *Testaments Betrayed*, Mackerras did more than rescue Janáček from the particular ghetto in which artists working in a small, isolated culture (such as the Czechoslovakia of the 1920s or Australia of the recent past) are likely to be confined. He also saved Janáček from his compatriots, all those improvers intent on altering a detail here and phrase there in order to make the operas noble and grand enough to represent what they saw as the glorious cultural heritage of the Czech people.

JANÁČEK'S WORKS are noble, even grand, though not in the way that the late-romantic nationalist zeal of his time regarded nobility and grandeur. His mature operas are distinguished by an ironic and fundamentally cosmopolitan spirit—despite the 'folksiness' of *Jenůfa* and *The Cunning Little Vixen*—which may have been one of the reasons why the operas have proved congenial to other cultures. That characteristic is more evident perhaps in the textures of Janáček's music than in his choice of subjects which seem at times more conven-

tionally 'Czech' or at least Slavonic. Nevertheless, by the time he came to write the peerless *The Makropulos Secret* (first performed in Brno in 1926), he had discovered a subject which matched his music's astringent clarity, a quality already evident in *Jenůfa* (1904), a work which could have succumbed only too easily to the nauseating mania for folk-art that swept the various realms of the Habsburg world around the turn of the century.

There is no opportunity in *The Makropulos Secret* for peasants to dance or lament, for mill-wheels to turn or for any of the trappings of Mitteleuropa folksiness that colour the libretto, though not the music, of *Jenůfa*. The setting is twentieth-century Prague: there are telephones and taxis, and the action hinges on a complicated lawsuit concerning the estate of an intestate nobleman.

The central character is the 337-year-old Elina Makropulos, daughter of the sixteenth-century Habsburg emperor Rudolf II's Greek physician. Makropulos *pere* had concocted a potion to allow the emperor to live in a state of perpetual youth for 300 years. Not unreasonably, perhaps, Rudolf demanded that the elixir be tried out on the physician's daughter. The results were not auspicious: the child fell into a deep swoon from which she did not emerge until after the emperor had cancelled the experiment and confined the hapless physician to a deep dungeon.

These startling facts emerge at the end of Janáček's opera, after 337-year-old Elina Makropulos (now Emilia Marty, the celebrated diva) decides not to take another dose of the potion. She has just managed to retrieve the recipe from the papers of one of her understandably numerous lovers, the nineteenth-century nobleman whose estate is the subject of the prolonged lawsuit that stands

Marilyn Richardson, facing page, as the 337 year-old Elina Makropulos in her final manifestation as the diva, Emilia Marty.

Photograph:
Lynn McColl



at the heart of Janáček's bizarre tale. Elina in her last incarnation may be a great operatic diva, a purveyor of high-decibel passions, but as far as *The Makropulos Secret* is concerned, she discards all romance, all passion and bombast once she leaves the stage, takes off her costumes and wipes the makeup from her face. The heroine of this opera falls asleep and begins to snore while an ardent lover makes passionate advances to her; she gets drunk; she demands scrambled eggs when the suicide of one of her admirers is announced. Tosca, the great diva who is the centre of another short, intense opera, finds herself caught up in a quintessentially operatic intrigue; Emilia Marty, by contrast, lives in a mundane world, even where it provides the stuff of operatic melodrama—frustrated love, sexual blackmail, suicide.

There is, of course, a certain debunking element in all this; it was superbly captured by Marilyn Richardson in the Sydney performances. But *The Makropulos Secret* is more complex, and in the final count much more moving than mere satire or debunking. Janáček drew on a literary source of impeccable credentials, a play by Karel Capek known in Czech as *Vec Makropulos*, where 'vec' (literally 'thing') carries various connotation, as revealed by the opera's several English titles: *The Makropulos Affair*, *The Makropulos Case*, though not (as far as I know) *The Makropulos Thing*. Capek is hardly remembered nowadays, though not too many decades ago his *Insect Play* (written in collaboration with his brother Jiri) was much beloved by amateur dramatic societies. In his time, though, he has considered among the leading spirits of modernity—the word 'robot' is the legacy of his *RUR*.

At the time of the original performances of his play about a woman who rejects the prospect of another 300 years of life, Capek's influence had spread far beyond Czechoslova-

kia. In the English-speaking world the play was often regraded as an answer to Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*. In his choice of operatic subject-matter, therefore, the ageing Janáček (who had less than a year to live at the time of the opera's première) was still engaging with some of the fundamental issues of



Barry Mora as Kolenaty, above right, getting a lift from Carl Friedrich Oberle's splendid set design for *The Makropulos Secret*.

Photograph:
Lynn McColl

European modernism, concerns far removed from the folksy nationalism or uplifting idealism considered mandatory for a Czech artist to purvey by both his critics and admirers. And he put his own, in many ways individual mark on the material he found in Capek's play. Perhaps in a way that only music-theatre may achieve, Janáček teased out of Capek's philosophical or at least speculative dramatic tract the disturbing but fascinating implications of Elina Makropulos's long life and many loves.

JANÁČEK'S HEROINE, who has lived so long and loved so often that she is beyond love, beyond feeling, is revealed as another in the long line of *femmes fatales* which exerted such fascination on the imagination of

the late nineteenth century. Her cousins are Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, transported by Richard Strauss to the operatic stage with monstrous vulgarity in 1905, and Frank Wedekind's *Pandora* or *Lulu*, the *Earth Spirit*, which was to become, ten years or so after *The Makropulos Secret*, the centre of Alban Berg's last, perhaps greatest work *Lulu*—another of the Australian Opera's notable incursions into the twentieth century repertoire in recent years. There is nevertheless a world of difference between Elina Makropulos, or rather Emilia Marty, and those neurotic, blood-sucking and blood-curdling perversions of Goethe's 'Eternal Feminine'. The difference resides in Janáček's cool (though by no means unemotional) irony. The libretto, with its snoring and drunk diva, provides some indication of the bracing originality informing the work of the most exceptional composer of opera in our century. It is, however, in his music that Janáček contrived to rescue his idiosyncratic vision of the *femme fatale* from the hot-house fug of Freud's consulting room that hangs over both the S&M excesses of Strauss's *Salomé* and Berg's more acerbic, but equally neurotic *Lulu*.

The music of *The Makropulos Secret*, as of the late Janáček in general, is a marvel. It is impossible to listen to the opening measures of the surprisingly extended overture he wrote (complete with a weird off-stage band) for what is a very short opera, without being struck by its individuality, a freshness that remains vital even after seventy years. Once the action begins, with a law clerk fussing with the musty files of 'causa Gregor Prus' the reason becomes clear why the international success of Janáček's operas should have surprised many of his compatriots—who seem to number Milan Kundera himself.

Janáček's score is fluid, with constantly shifting emotional overtones.

It rarely if ever rises above the conversational, avoiding bombast, grandiloquence, that often cloying rhetoric of grand opera. Even where it explores profound emotional depths—as in the closing moments of the piece, where Elina, now rapidly ageing, refuses the spurious immortality of her father's potion—it is largely left to the wonderfully athletic sonorities of the orchestral writing to underscore, interpret or comment on the unemphatic, at times even banal, text. Perhaps nowhere else in twentieth century opera has the ancient adage *'prima le parole, dopò la musica'* been so closely observed. And there, precisely, rests the reason why Janáček should not, perhaps, have enjoyed beyond the Czech-speaking world the esteem which eluded him even in his homeland.

In *Testaments Betrayed* Kundera mentions Janáček's lifelong habit of taking down in musical notation snatches of conversations overheard on street corners, in trams, pubs and markets. That preoccupation with capturing the exact nuance of a phrase, laying bare the emotional charge or the force of personality behind the most ordinary of utterances, was directly transferred to his vocal music. Listening to the excellent performance of *The Makropulos Secret* recorded by Mackerras in 1978 with the bilingual libretto supplied with the set of CDs only serves to remind the non-Czech speaker of how much must inevitably be lost in translation—much more than those cries of ecstatic love or unending hatred that fuel passions of Italian grand opera.

AND YET A GREAT DEAL does survive. The audience at the Sydney performances, in English, of *The Makropulos Secret* had the benefit of largely redundant surtitles. They seemed unnecessary because for the large part the cast, and especially Richardson, with her beautifully judged performance mingling the hard-edged with the despairing, were near-exemplary in their enunciation of the English text. You could just tell, on the rare occasion, that the accentuation of English failed to follow precisely the well-nigh perfect

marriage of music and text in the original version. Nevertheless, despite such occasional sources of irritation, those performances of *The Makropulos Secret* confirmed a suggestion that absorbs much of Milan Kundera's attention throughout *Testaments Betrayed*.

The essays in that curious and unclassifiable book, which behaves as though it were a novel without betraying the least trace of the fictional or of narrative, are dedicated to one, overarching and currently somewhat unfashionable concern: the incompatibility of art and ideology. Kundera traces that concern through a remarkable array of phenomena—political, religious and sexual, through music as much as through literature, in contemporary art as well as in the music of the middle ages and the prose of the Renaissance. From the perspective of his twenty-year-long exile (lately self-imposed) from Prague he is able to observe with particular poignancy the ideological constraints of all sorts which have been placed on writers of our own time. What struck me more vividly, though, and brought Kundera's book to mind after I saw *The Makropulos Secret*, was the way in which benign, even perhaps ennobling ideologies may constrain and indeed pervert the integrity of great art.

One such ideology is nationalism. Nowadays—and with good reason—thoughtful people are suspicious of nationalistic fervour. In the years just after the end of the First World War, and in the wake of the disintegration of the Habsburg world, there was every reason for Czechs and Slovaks, for Hungarians and Romanians to articulate their new-found (and as things turned out pathetically brief) freedom in terms of the unique attributes of their cultures. Yet even such unexceptionable forms of nationalism are inimical to the integrity of art, as the fortunes of Janáček sadly revealed. He was never able to overcome his compatriots' conviction that he should have been following in the footsteps of Smetana, the great embodiment of Czech nationalism in music—much more so than the cosmopolitan Dvořák—emulating what many regarded as Smetana's nobility

and idealism. In order to subjugate the curmudgeonly Janáček (whose great creativity came late in life) to what had become by the 1920s outmoded romantic models *à la Smetana*, his contemporaries neglected and ridiculed him, and worse, they altered his carefully judged scores to make them conform a little closer to their image of the kind of music a Czech composer should have written.

KUNDERA PAYS GENEROUS homage in *Testaments Betrayed* to Mackerras's efforts not merely to bring Janáček's operas to the international opera stage, but also to ensure that they were performed in the composer's original versions, not in those altered scores which had been adjusted to suit the aspirations and beliefs and Janáček's compatriots. It was Mackerras who rid the final moments of *From the House of the Dead*, an extraordinary operatic transformation of Dostoyevsky's bleak account of a Siberian prison-camp, of the spurious, 'uplifting' expression of hope—where the original score suggests nothing other than resignation and endurance.

The fine spirits who insisted that *From the House of the Dead* should end on a suitably optimistic note no doubt found equally objectionable the 337-year-old Elina Makropulos's insistence (accompanied by the exhilarating spikiness that characterises of much of Janáček's orchestral writing) that when you have lived as long as she has, life and death, love and hatred retain little meaning. The end of *The Makropulos Secret* is, nevertheless, one of the great moments of transfiguration in opera. Elina accepts death, not with the supercharged emotionalism of Wagner's Isolde, but quizzically, when she sings the words *'Pater hemon'* ('Our father' in Greek) as though it were a question, rather than imploringly or as an assertion of faith. In Neil Armfield's production that moment (as a white-clad Elina detached herself from her quivering, emaciated bodily form) caught the aching, but clear-eyed beauty of a great work of art that is great precisely because it refuses the posturing and bombast that Janáček's contemporaries seemed to demand



L Safety Net

LIFE ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB recently took on a darker aspect—literally. Responding to American Congress' passing of the *Communications Decency Act*, many sites on the Web turned their pages black for 48 hours. Part of the new legislation prohibits transmission, via the Internet, of sexually explicit materials to minors. Many people have previously argued against any form of regulation of the Internet.

What concern them principally are the rights of the individual to freedom of speech and to privacy. The Internet is often hailed as a brave new frontier, the developed world's icon of exploration into unexplored techno-territory, a sphere without regulatory boundaries. Because users are both consumers and producers of information, diverse tastes have hitherto been catered for (and pandered to).

The Australian Broadcasting Authority is conducting an investigation into on-line services, with a view to legislation. A law making it an offence to transmit 'objectionable material' to minors was recently passed in Victoria. Governments, perhaps realising that the Internet will remain an important social forum, are beginning to make some attempt to curb the groundswell of illicit information.

Over-regulation is not the desirable outcome. And it is what many fear could happen. A spokesperson for the American Civil Liberties Union, referring to the new legislation, has stated that 'This is the first case that is really going to define free speech rules for the 21st century.' Propagators of sexually explicit material will now be liable under law; Civil libertarians have asked 'what next?' Foreseeably, the Internet could be over-controlled, run by groups analogous to Big Brother and the Thought Police. But without some level of control, the Net provides a haven for clearly dangerous or objectionable information. *The Terrorist's Handbook* and paedophilic images are two examples of inappropriate information currently in circulation on the Internet.

'The Net interprets censorship as damage, and routes around it.' This quote from John Gilmore, a founding member of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, is often cited. But specialised software programs that screen the Net are now being marketed. Should this be the way business, family and personal computers are safeguarded? Many people argue for self-regulation of the Internet; software like *Surfwatch* and *Cybersitter* make censorship a personal, or parental choice.

The Internet's use by pornographers, criminals, terrorists and other predators has been well documented. The fact that the Internet is a new medium should not exclude it from legislation. And even if it is true that it opens out a fascinating cross-cultural mosaic, it is also true that much of the material contained on it is of a lurid and licentious nature, and it shares the neighbourhood with other sites. This proximity is precisely the cause—given that, currently, *anyone* can access information on the Internet—for legislators' furrowed brows.

There is a need for regulation. But whether it should operate at the point of entrance to the 'Net (so that responsibility lies with service-providing companies that conduct an on-ramp to the Internet), or on individuals (either those who upload material onto the Internet or those who download that information) remains to be seen. The American experience, as a rubric for other communities, will be worth monitoring. ■

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of their candidate to receive the mantle of the great Czech composer. And the wonder is that that peerless moment should have been born in a place remote from the soil that seemed to nurture and shape Janáček's imagination, and a place moreover where many still regard opera as a strange and not entirely salubrious import, largely because half a century or so ago a young Australian became fascinated by the work of a then little-known and rather eccentric composer who spent most of his days in a city with the forbidding name of Brno.

Testaments Betrayed is Kundera's eloquent defence of the universality of great art in the face of all those attempts in twentieth century Europe to contain it with ideological and nationalistic fetters which seem to be as vigorous now, after the collapse of the Soviet empire, as they were earlier in the century. His greatest scorn is reserved for the Max Brod, a well-meaning though (in Kundera's opinion) destructive Czech nationalist—even though he was German-speaking.

BROD BECAME THE CHAMPION of two near-contemporary figures: Franz Kafka and Leoš Janáček. With each, Brod sought (and largely succeeded) to convert unconventional, even perhaps anarchic spirits, who took the culture of their time by the scruff of the neck and shook it into new shapes, into noble representatives of their national culture.

It took many years, according to Kundera, for those barriers around Kafka to be demolished. With Janáček, *Testaments Betrayed* seems to imply, they are still in place. That may be true of contemporary Europe, but as I was leaving the performance of *Vec Makropulos* which had been staged, and staged with such success, in a place far away from the sites of Kundera's cultural preoccupations, it struck me how far Kundera, that champion of cosmopolitanism, is himself trapped in his own, cosy conviction that little beyond Europe is of much significance. ■

Andrew Riemer is a freelance writer and critic, and a consulting editor to *Eureka Street*.



Spin doctors

Casino, dir. Martin Scorsese (Village cinemas). 'Scorseseland' is an inellegant word, so it is unlikely to gain the same currency in Scorsese's work that 'Greenland' did in relation to Graham Greene's. The lack of an appropriate epithet is unfortunate, however, for just as the moral world inhabited by the characters of *The Heart of the Matter* and *The End of The Affair* is almost palpably real, so too is the world of all those characters we have known since *Mean Streets*.

With *Casino* Scorsese has abandoned his flirtation with the Protestant, ruling-class America of *The Age of Innocence* and returned to the low-life Catholic and Jewish gangsters who are his stock-in-trade. Also back on the scene is the director's long-standing collaborator, Robert de Niro, as the casino boss and Mob flunkey, Sam Rothstein—yet another version of the hard man who has, with a fair degree of success, spent most of his life suppressing temptations to do the right thing. Rothstein's nemesis in the Mafia, Nicky Santorino, is played by Joe Pesci with all the sadistic verve that marked Pesci's character in *Goodfellas*.

So that's the good(-ish) bad guy and the bad bad guy. What about the moll who'll bring them both down? Sharon Stone, as an alcohol-and-cocaine-addicted hooker, may well continue the long tradition of underrated female actors who have won Academy and other awards after appearing in one of Scorsese's films. (Scorsese himself continues the tra-

dition of Hollywood's truly great: so far he is Oscarless.) It is easily Stone's best performance to date, and should silence those scoffers, sometimes still heard, who maintain that her chief dramatic talent is an ability to make tough policemen weep by crossing and uncrossing her legs.

So the characters are vintage Scorsese, though the locale is not. The eponymous casino is found not on the streets of New York but in Las Vegas, that temple to greed built by the mob in the Nevada desert. In an interview for the 7.30 *Report* Scorsese called the city a metaphor for the American dream; the film's opening credits, with its images of bodies hurtling through flames, make clear that the dream is a dream of hell.

Which brings me back to Scorseseland. Since the retirement of Krzysztof Kieslowski two years ago (Kieslowski died in March), Scorsese and Ken Loach have been almost the only major contemporary film directors who in their work strive *consciously* to articulate a moral vision of the human world. There are others (Abel Ferrara, Quentin Tarantino) who dabble in moral ambiguities, often also through the medium of the gangster movie. But to present characters who make real choices about good and evil requires a kind of artistic courage that is unfashionable, and which is sometimes mocked by the shallow as naïve.

That sounds bleak enough, but I shall end on an even bleaker note. If the familiar contours of Scorseseland can be traced through *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *Cape Fear*, *Goodfellas* and *Casino*, how does this latest film differ from its

predecessors? The grand Augustinian themes of sin and redemption echo through all of them, but since *Goodfellas* (1990) and now emphatically in *Casino*, the redemptive strain has weakened to the point where it can barely be heard.

—Ray Cassin

The Neverlands

Antonia's Line dir. Marleen Gorris (independent cinemas). This film is bounded by two deaths, that of Antonia and her mad mother. In between, a whole world is given life and nurtured by Antonia in the house and village where she herself was born. People and events come to settle with her family as randomly as rainfall, yet Antonia accepts their coming with equanimity and compassion—to her it's all part of the rhythm of life. What Gorris has produced is a story which constantly prods you to look for the significant that lies behind the simple.

EUREKA STREET FILM COMPETITION

There have been many bizarre and twisted films made over the years and this 1941 B-movie shocker must rate amongst them.

If you can give us a plot description of *The Monster and The Girl* that tickles our funny bone we'll send you \$30.00 to spend on the schlock film of your choice.

The winner of the Jan/Feb competition was Don Bennett of Hawthorn, VIC who correctly named the actors to have played James Bond as Sean Connery, George Lazenby, Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, Pierce Brosnan, and David Niven in *Casino Royale* in which Woody Allen plays his nephew Jimmy Bond.



Following World War II, Antonia returns to the family home to bury her mother and begins what promises to be an ignominious life of farming. Initially, her only help comes from her daughter Daniëlle and a slow-witted local by the name of Loony Lips. Her resourcefulness and strong will win respect—as well as the love of her neighbour, Farmer Bas—and she establishes herself as the defacto matriarch of the village.

Her progeny develop eccentricities and talents under her care. Daniëlle paints her religious visions

and has a child with an anonymous partner. It is soon apparent that her daughter, Thérèse, is a genius and she is taken to heart by Antonia's childhood friend and man of letters, Crooked Finger. As time marches on tragedy and joy enters their lives in equal

measure. Antonia remembers all these people and events on the day she chooses to die, and passes the baton on to Sarah, her great-grandchild and story-teller.

The joy of this funny and melancholic film is the toast it makes to life. At times its existential musings leans too much towards the obvious but on the whole this Dutch offering gives the viewer a lot more than tulips, clogs and windmills as the stuff of life.

—Jon Greenaway

Simian cinema

12 Monkeys, dir. Terry Gilliam (Hoyts, Village and independent cinemas)

R. D. Laing once asked how much of a threat is that man, certified insane, who thinks he has an atom bomb inside him, compared with one who is certified sane enough to press the red button in the missile silo if ordered to do so?

12 Monkeys illuminates these questions in ways that give the familiar something of a twist. There

has been a rash (sorry!) of films and tele-movies like *Outbreak* and *The Stand*, dealing with anxiety about apocalyptic plagues, the End of Civilisation As We Know It, and so on. *12 Monkeys* is far better than these. It has something of a *Bladerunner* feel, enhanced by Gilliam's unique ability to see a cityscape as both threatening and comfortable, fearsome and hilarious.

Visually it entrances: a real lion where you'd normally see a stone one; giraffes in a stately canter high on the freeway flyover, looking not a whit out of place; skyscrapers seen as canyons and mesas, full of caves and peril. The image of the zoo animals is welded neatly into one of the many satisfying plot-twists.

Bruce Willis, the time-travelling Everyman, does a splendid job as the battle-scarred, puzzled rogue male, dangerous yet good at heart—far better than Schwarzenegger's more simplistic treatments of this same theme. Arnie's territory is zap-comic, whereas Willis' at its best, approaches Jung; at its least, *manga*. Brad Pitt is impressive, ranting splendidly, like *Godot's* Lucky on coke. A slight tendency towards self-indulgence in his first few minutes (don't actors just *love* to play lunatics!) somehow deepens into the kind of *gravitas* and commentary remembered in *Marat/Sade* and *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. All these images are available to the audience of *12 Monkeys*: Gilliam's is an art replete with rich allusion and power.

—Juliette Hughes

Flicky Dicky

Nixon (Village cinemas) dir. Oliver Stone. From the man who gave us *JFK* we now have *Nixon*. Oliver Stone is back with his version of what drove one of this century's more fascinating American presidents. And Stone has brought with him an all-star cast. Headed by Anthony Hopkins, it includes Joan Allen, Ed Harris, Bob Hoskins, James Woods and Mary Steenburgen.

The film belongs to Hopkins and Stone, and to a lesser extent, Allen. Richard Milhous Nixon was a complex man, capable of behaving in seemingly contradictory and

inconsistent ways. One problem with *Nixon*, the film, is that it is excessively complex. If your knowledge of the Watergate drama is hazy before you view this, it won't be any clearer after.

And then there is the look of the film. Those who saw *JFK* know how well Stone can use black and white cinematography to create the sense that we are watching 'actual history', and how adeptly he achieves a grainy, hand-held camera look, to give the viewer the impression of being intimately involved in the events on screen.

Stone tries it here again, often. Too often. In the end, it becomes tiresome rather than clever.

Regular flashbacks—to Nixon's childhood, to his college days, to his early days in politics—are used to explain the President's behaviour. Stone's hypothesis about Nixon seems, however, to be pushed way too far.

Nixon's paranoia (as Stone presents it) is rooted in his upbringing. It was his Quaker mother's faith, his hardworking father, the family's poverty, the death of two of his brothers that shaped his character, leadership style and politics; in the end it all seems a bit far-fetched.

For those who are interested in the Nixon story, indeed in modern political history, there remains much to intrigue. And on a purely cinematic level, there is the surprising spectacle of Hopkins playing one of modern history's most recognisable characters. Although he acts exceptionally in certain scenes, for the most part there is a lack of believability about his portrayal. It is Hopkins we see, not Nixon.

The compelling acting comes from Joan Allen. Her depiction of Nixon's wife, Pat, is excellent. Woods' role as H.R. Haldeman, is another stand-out performance.

Regrettably, these strong points will not counteract the negatives, and two hours into its three, many people will be wondering how much longer it's going to last. Ultimately, it disappoints, and whether it can cross over to a wider viewing audience than America is doubtful.

Ironically, like the man himself, the potential was not realised.

—Brad Halse



GAMBLING EXPOSED

Loony tunes

Così dir. Mark Joffe (Village cinemas) A stage hit and now, one hopes, a cinema hit. In fact, *Così* has the potential to be the 1996 entry in the eccentric and quirky comedy tradition that entertains at home and travels well—though what must they all think of us overseas after *Ballroom*, *Priscilla* and *Muriel*?

Mark Joffe's version of Louis Nowra's adaptation of his play is a gleeful and gentle Australian contribution to the tradition of truth being told by characters who are 'fools'. The title refers to Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte*, rehearsed and performed by an unlikely ensemble—as therapy, as a modern-day mental health funding project and as a celebration of joy and beauty of worlds that have been lost or, more than probably, never existed.

Some of the characterisations, especially Barry Otto's star turn, are also theatrical. But Joffe is able to highlight his character's eccentricities, letting each tell a sad and traumatising story (we can laugh with them) rather than spotlight gorgesqueries (which could make us laugh at them).

Lewis (played by Ben Mendelsohn with a warm ingenuousness that carries the film) takes the audience with him in his journey from happy-go-lucky, chancy interview for the play-directing job to an authentic, life-affirming respect for troubled people.

In fact, it is the sane people, Rachel Griffith's legal student, Lucy, and Aden Young's narcissistic director as well as the management who display touches of the grotesque. David Wenham's firebug, Doug, is the closest to the grotesque (apart from the funny initial auditions and guest star cameos), with cat-burning tales, crass monologues and genuinely dangerous threats to Lewis. He keeps us from romanticising the inmates, as do Barry Ott's manic depressive, Roy, with his theatrical highs and lows and Pamela Rabe's Ruth with her meticulous obsessiveness.

While there is entertainment, there is also a deeper strain, perhaps symbolised by Tony Collette's

improvised rendition of 'Stand by Me' at a precarious moment in the performance. *Così* has its raucous moments but it is also gentle and wise.

—Peter Malone MSC

Clapboard jungle

Jumanji dir. Joe Johnston (Hoyts cinemas) One of the problems faced by film animators post-*Jurassic Park* is to reach the standards viewers now expect. The punters are no longer content with the mere presence of beasties: they want them crashing through walls, pancaking cars and being more human than humans. *Jumanji* tries to cater to these tastes and tell a nice little tale to boot.

In 1969 a boy discovers a board game hidden in a chest excavated from underneath his father's shoe factory. Alan and his friend Sarah sit down to play what they assume is an exotic form of Monopoly. However Judy is chased out of the house by a roost of bats and Alan disappears into the game in a cloud of dust. And disappeared he stays—presumed by the residents of his small New Hampshire town to have been murdered—until 1995 when two children and their Aunt move into his old home. The sound of drums draws the kids to the attic where they find the *Jumanji* board carpeted with dust. What ensues is some classic fantasy as Alan returns from the game's jungle along with monkeys, elephants, vines and a Great White Hunter.

The special effects are not in the *Jurassic Park* league, which is initially disappointing, but after a while the crisis of expectation wears off; they are certainly not poor by any standard.

The story presents us with a choice between escaping or facing life's challenges and, as you'd expect, it favours the latter. However, as a lesson for the youngsters it has its problems because all the good bits happen when Robin Williams, as the adult Alan, is busy running away. Since all movies are in some part a form of escape, *Jumanji* can't be criticised too much on this account. Perhaps they should have chosen another another subject to allegorise, such as the importance of keeping your travel insurance up to date.

—Jon Greenaway

Wholesome works

Mr Holland's Opus (Village cinemas) dir. Stephen Herek. Glenn Holland (Richard Dreyfuss) becomes a music teacher when all else fails. He really wants to be a composer but he also has to eat. His career in the classroom begins in 1964 with him dragging himself to school less willingly than his teenage students. Principal Jacobs (Olympia Dukakis) takes him to task and tells him that the students need more than knowledge. They need a compass.

The film charts the turnaround whereby, over 30 years, Mr Holland finds contentment in his unchosen career and becomes a small-town legend. He teaches a girl from a family of high achievers to play the clarinet feelingly and the school's champion boxer to keep the beat on a drum. The girl goes on to become state governor; the boy is killed in Vietnam. In 1980, he discovers a remarkable talent in a young student called Rowena and fights the temptation to abandon his wife, Iris (Glenn Headley), run away with Rowena to New York and pick up the threads of his first career. Yet his greatest battle is to communicate with his son, Cole. Cole is born deaf. Holland treats him with coolness, if not hostility, until the death of John Lennon brings things to a head between them. Cole comes to share his father's love of music.

Holland is forced into retirement when the new principal, Mr Wolters (W.H.Macy), Holland's life long antagonist, cuts back the music program. Wolters claims it is more important to teach students to read and write. Holland says they'll be left with nothing to write about.

Holland is so much equal to all life's challenges that his successes become monotonous. Adversity comes in 20 minute cycles throughout *Mr Holland's Opus*, leading to sickly-sweet resolutions. I would like to have been in his class myself. He would never have got a note out of me. As in all feel-good movies, I didn't feel much for long.

—Michael McGirr SJ

WATCHING
BRIEF



A towel for Mr Darcy

THemes give important clues to intentions. The ABC has some terrific little station identifiers at the moment. 'All walks of life' loses its cliché status

when you're treated to these diverse vignettes of sight and sound. Some talented producer is spending our eight cents a day very well.

Pride and Prejudice's theme tune disquieted me from the start. If you close your eyes and miss the credits, it could easily be mistaken for that of *All Creatures Great and Small*. Andrew Davies, who adapted *Middlemarch*, is the scriptwriter. There have been others: Aldous Huxley, partly responsible for the so-bad-it's-funny Greer Garson/Laurence Olivier film of 1940; Faye Weldon, adaptor of the 1993 BBC version. It's been traditional to think of the BBC as the benchmark of quality adaptations of 'the classics', but a recent look at their 1985 *Sense and Sensibility* has made me forgive most, if not all, of Emma Thompson's film.

The big difficulty, when one really loves a book, is to enjoy the inevitable cutting and pasting that is dramatic adaptation. In the flood of Austen-drama that has washed onto big and small screen (with plenty more to come, too—*three* separate versions of *Emma* promised for the near future) I forgive the textual cuts. But I still feel ill at most of the additions. Did we need to have Lydia prancing around the landing in her chemise, precisely so that the script could have her bump into Mr Collins? Was it necessary to make up some last words to give Mr and Mrs Bennet?

Mrs Bennet (waving off the newly-wed Bingleys and Darcys after a long, non-Austen wedding ceremony full of dearly beloveds etc.): Oh, Mr Bennet, God has been very good to us.

Mr Bennet: Yes. So it would seem.

Then it's cut to Darcy and Elizabeth, leaning forward to kiss, much in the style of that uncomfortable public kiss at the wedding of the Prince and Princess of Wales. Roll the credits, play *All Creatures Great and Small*—another Austen bites the dust.

Why the last words of the show couldn't have belonged to Austen herself is a mystery to me. This sudden birth of religious fervour in Mrs Bennet after the show's lingering detour to the Book of Common Prayer was perhaps understandable, and even edifying to viewers for whom *Austen's* brand of religion may be entirely too uncharismatic, but it wasn't anything to do with *Pride and Prejudice*. The sledgehammer symbolism given each of the rolling phrases of the marriage ceremony preamble would never have

found its way into Austen. 'Not to be entered into lightly'—the camera rests on Mr and Mrs Bennet, the former looking rueful; '...for the purposes of avoiding sin and fornication'—flashback to Lydia and Wickham in a squalid bedroom; '...for the mutual help and consolation, etc'—pan the two virtuously happy couples. There's more but you wouldn't want to hear.

The strange thing is, that it can be tremendous fun to pastiche Austen's prose style. A different sensibility takes over—more precise, yet lively and, yes, ironic. But that is only the vector; to *invent* a balance of plot, character, structure, dialogue and dance them all like angels on the point of a pin ... Just try it.

And that is the crux of my discontent with the Andrew Davies adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. I forgive him for leaving out chunks of dialogue, but not for taking blocks of that dialogue, shuffling them like a deck of cards, and changing the whole rhythm and meaning of the conversations they were in.

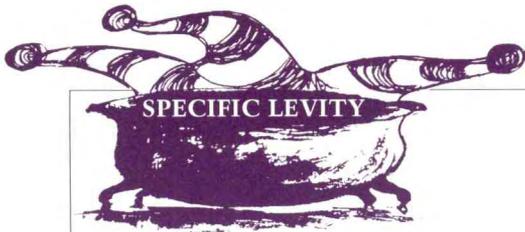
I can praise some of the devices he uses to make letters come to life, being read over in the sender's voice, with the scenes referred to in silent show. But I have to wonder why he keeps Darcy so wet. It reassures a hygiene-crazed audience, I suppose. We see him in a bath at Netherfield, then gazing smoulderingly out his window in his dressing gown. He washes again, we are relieved to note, before delivering Elizabeth his long letter of explanation. And, ever mindful of the value of a cold dip after a long journey, he partially disrobes and dives into the ornamental lake at Pemberley before happening on Elizabeth.

there. This chap may be proud, you can hear the producers saying, but boy, is he clean.

SOME SCENES ARE VERY GOOD. The Netherfield ball is suitably mortifying; Mr Collins is done well and the clothes, the scenery, in fact most of the production values, are of a high standard. (But why is Mrs Bennet made up like a Regency version of Tammy Fay Bakker?) In fact the biggest disappointment is Mrs Bennet. More like Widow Twanky than anyone real, Alison Steadman screeches and squawks her way through the part. Of course she needed to be garrulous and insensitive, but it doesn't take quite so much to discomfit your average Austen heroine—*this* mother would embarrass Courtney Love.

Elizabeth Ehle and Colin Firth do a decent job of Elizabeth and Darcy, but I wasn't excited: I'm going to go away and read the book *again*. ■

Juliette Hughes is a freelance writer and reviewer.



Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 42, April 1996

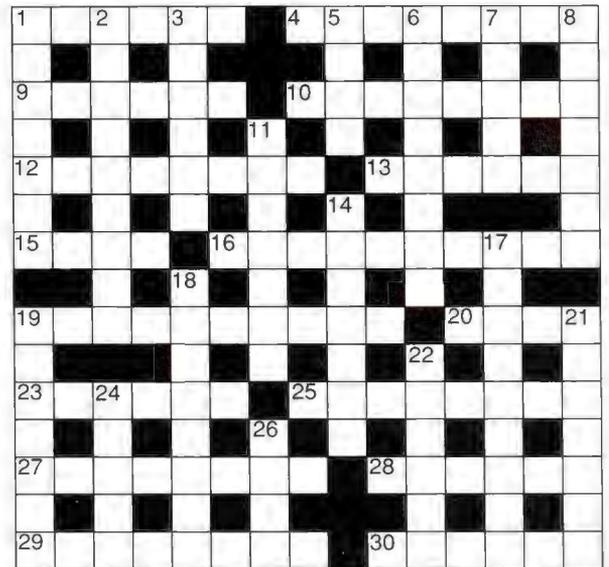
Devised by Joan Nowotny IBVM

ACROSS

- 1 & 4 Could it be Harry weaving a spell to captivate hearts? (6, 8)
 9 Boy on the ocean? Or an old salt at this time of year? (6)
 10 He's sure gone nuts to be so open-handed! (8)
 12 Messy doily has shady oil patches. I'll wash it when I get some free time. (8)
 13 Am back on the rocky Alps where I once received this fluid after an accident. (6)
 15 Ate some delectable apple on 29 February this year. (4)
 16 Feeling frightfully faint, he took her temperature on an old-style thermometer. (10)
 19 Rearrange, edit and reset a page about this 9-across of the Church's year. (10)
 20 Some eat omelette in great quantity, others cannot stomach even the minutest part. (4)
 23 The harbour, encompassing the capital of Essex, looks like paradise. (6)
 25 About the 3rd March, the ship appeared with flag flying! (8)
 27 Tom pulls a cart shakily. Oh, what a fall was that! (8)
 28 Leander's beloved in charge? How brave in the face of danger! (6)
 29 Capital S, we hear, stands for the Spirit of generosity? (8)
 30 Short of the Greek city, 'e stopped to worship the goddess. (5)

DOWN

- 1 Deliriously claps the first and last hosanna on the day of the Passover. (7)
 2 Was Lily an eccentric? Absolutely! (2,3,4)
 3 About the start of day blackbirds gather in masses. (6)
 5 Lew, the tennis player, we hear, used to dig up the garden. (4)
 6 Somehow rise above the heather to find the wine. (8)
 7 Strange sonic boom produces images of beauty. (5)
 8 Mirage of stag let the whole perceptual pattern appear. (7)
 11 Some trendy, nasty remarks about the House of Windsor, perhaps. (7)
 14 As a Bachelor of Arts, for example, I change imperceptibly without you, it seems. (7)
 17 Somewhat inebriated, Peer met ox and made a speech on the spot! (2,7)
 18 Practise a retrial on the South-East wing. (8)
 19 Resort chalet I take over! But is it moral to do so? (7)
 21 Though a bit confused, I'm clear at least that something extraordinary happened. (7)
 22 Concerning old coin: the interest in it is quite fresh. (6)
 24 Not yet! Change later! (5)
 26 Book of Deeds? (4)



Solution to Crossword no. 41, March 1996



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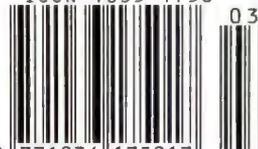


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