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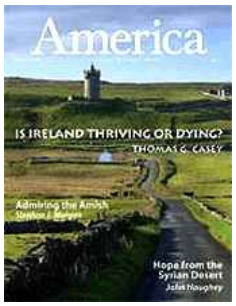
Money talks in the new Ireland, just like Australia

EDITORIAL

Published *27-Nov-2006*



Sometimes we need to look elsewhere to realise what is happening in our own backyard. Ireland is not Australia, but both countries have hit upon prosperity at a time of economic downturn for the economies of many other First World nations. Irish Jesuit Thomas Casey writes in the latest issue of *America* magazine of the "whirlwind of change" that has occurred as Ireland has taken its place at the cutting edge of the digital revolution.

Less than 20 years ago, Ireland was one of Europe's poorest countries. Now it is one of the most affluent. Work takes up more of the Irish people's time, and offers greater monetary rewards. Casey, who teaches at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, reflects that the Irish psyche is "shrinking from vast spiritual dimensions to a narrowly materialistic focus. Something beautiful is dying, and it is painful to watch." People are "shopping, spending, borrowing, eating, drinking and sleeping around as never before". For centuries, Ireland had resisted Britain's attempts to properly colonise it. Now Ireland is thoroughly "colonised by consumerism".

Back in the late '90s, Australia was looking at Third World economic status, as we became consumer rather than producer during the dot-com boom. Labelled an "old economy", we were on track to becoming the "banana republic" about which Keating had prophesied earlier in the decade. Then the mineral boom came along, and monied Australians suddenly rediscovered prosperity. This was accompanied by the erosion of values, symbolised by the Tampa incident and David Hicks' detention without trial. Like Ireland's spiritual imagination and resolute independence, our sense of the "fair go" was all but gone.

Last week, the media enjoyed reporting the public disagreement between the Costello brothers at the G20 world economic gathering in Melbourne. Federal Treasurer Peter said we're doing OK with our International Aid. World Vision CEO and Make Poverty History co-chair Tim said we trail most other developed countries. The clash reflected a widening chasm in Australian society between those who care and those who don't.

Later in the week, Sir Gerard Brennan gave a strident address at the launch of the Centre for an Ethical Society in Sydney. He argued that if we are not moved by the plight of the poor, the marginalised and the disabled, it will be reflected in a public policy that puts corporate aspiration before human good. He proposed the Good Samaritan as the model.

"The social isolation of many Aboriginal people, of many refugees, of many who are poorly educated and many who suffer from a mental illness erodes the sense of self-worth and deprives them of hope. Yet, like the Levite passing on the other side of the road, we oftentimes seem to ignore their plight or, worse, regard them as a threat to our own well-being."

Well-being in Australia, and in Ireland, has come to mean economic well-being.

Gold panner's large rewards from small discoveries

COLUMNS

Published *27-Nov-2006*

Max Muir, who worked on the Victorian Railways all his working life, says many railway employees have hobbies such as fishing or golf—pastimes that can be enjoyed either alone or in groups, and at odd hours if need be. In Muir's case, he developed the hobby of panning for gold. A life of shiftwork tends to rule out hobbies and interests that are geared towards consistent attendance at a certain time.

Occasionally, he searches for gemstones. Now 69 years of age and retired, he still likes panning and " gemstoning", as he calls it, and he has evidence of his finds all around his home in Ballarat, Australia's premier gold town.

During the interview for this article, Muir speaks in his slow and smiling manner with three small vials of gold specks before him on his kitchen table. The vials don't look like they would provide the basis for his retirement, but Muir is proud nonetheless. He does not sell the gold nuggets and gemstones that he has found while fossicking, nor does he do it for money.

When panning, he likes the way he loses himself in the motion of swishing dirt and water, as well as the joy of being outdoors. "You're totally absorbed by what you're doing," he says. "You're relaxed."

Muir first tried panning when he was a boy in Buninyong, a town just south of Ballarat. At that time, there were no such things as detectors. The search for gold was done with pans or sluices.

"It was remarkable how a little speck of gold in a pan would excite you," Muir says.

In recent decades, Muir has panned for gold all around Victoria, in waterways such as the Slater Creek and Misery Creek near Ballarat and the creek that runs through Spring Gully, at the back of Bendigo. He might use a pan or sluice, but never a detector. Any prospector's search for gold is aided by rains that flush out the tiny nuggets. For this reason, the best time to pan is just after a sodden winter. The current drought has precluded Muir from fossicking for gold for 12 months.

In years gone by, Muir, his wife Jane and their family of three children went on holidays in which Max would search for gemstones and Jane would try to add to her collection of teaspoons. In recent years, Jane has occasionally accompanied Max on day trips, but it's against her better judgement. "I'm scared of anything that might wriggle," she says.

When Max goes fossicking alone, Jane inquires about his success when he arrives home. If Max has found gold, Jane asks whether she needs a magnifying glass to see it. Max grins. If he's found nothing, it's been a good day. If he's found gold, then all the better.

"If you come home with colour, you're rapt," he says. "And if you don't get colour, you

come home quite content because you're relaxed."

In the Muirs' backyard, in the Ballarat suburb in which they live, Max opens the lid of a green Wheelie bin and shows me tins and tins full of gemstones. Queensland agates are in one tin and "yowies" in another. Max picks up some stones and cradles them in his leathery hands.

In his garage, Muir has a gemstone saw worth $2000 as well as a trim saw. A polishing machine is in a corner. Max takes jars of small stones out of drawers and off shelves and explains a little bit about each one. He uses few words, but it's clear that he has a wide appreciation of nature's gifts.

The opals that he found near White Cliffs, in the north-west corner of New South Wales, seem to interest him more than most. As with the landscape in that part of the country, his explanations are spare, but they provide fuel for imagination. The jars are held out for a photograph.

On my way out the front door, Max opens a drawer and fetches vials of small stones. On a shelf are pictures of his family. At 65, Max became a great-grandfather. The thought pleases him. As someone who searches for gold and gemstones, he knows the unpredictable nature of what can happen with the passage of time.

He puts a chunk of petrified wood in my hand and explains that it became fossilised over millions of years. He found the wood near Portland, in Victoria's south-west corner. "Use it as a paperweight," he says.

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Da Vinci, Christmas, Piss Christ and Gene therapy: a response

COLUMNS

Summa theologiae

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Throw out the baby, keep the bathwater

When first invited to respond to Scott Stephens' stimulating exploration of connections between faith and culture, I groaned. I had resolved to never again even think of *The Da Vinci Code*. But Scott's reflections on the cultural implications of the novel and of art are fresh and engaging. His reflections on the consequences for Christian attitudes to Christmas, and to the use of embryonic stem cells, also provoke thought, even though I was not finally persuaded by them.

For Scott, *The Da Vinci Code* appeals to a "sloppy, sentimental spirituality". He opposes sentimentality to faith and ethical rigour, detecting sentimentality in conventional Christian attitudes to Christmas and to the embryo. Sentimentality, of course, is a pejorative word: it is sentiment misused. I would describe sentimentality as feeling without deep connection. When our judgments are governed by sentimentality, our feelings are connected neither to ethical reflection, nor to concrete relationships, nor to commitment. Sentimentality can lead us, for example, to oppose capital punishment when it threatens an attractive Australian and to demand it for someone who kills Australians.

Not all sentiment, however, is sentimentality. We might empathise deeply with asylum seekers, for example, be deeply moved and angered by their plight, argue that it is immoral and inconsistent with a reasonable or Christian view of humanity, and resolve to have them treated more humanely. Our sentiment here complements ethical rigour and faith.

Scott is right to see the risk of sentimentality in Christmas piety. It can be a time for feeling good about babies, family and God, without attending to the meaning of Jesus Christ and to his claim on us. But for most Christians, the "babe in the manger" feeds the conviction that in Jesus, God is with us.

God's presence is mediated by the vulnerable reality of an ordinary human life, with all its messiness. The fact that God has taken human beings so seriously as to join them has ethical consequences. It marks each human being and all human relationships as precious and irreplaceable in God's sight. This closeness of God to ordinary human life and to each human life is the scandal of Christianity.

As Scott claims, it does entail the rejection of spiritualities amassed for security, but more fundamentally it entails the rejection of the security we find in keeping God at a safe distance. That is why "the babe in the manger" can be challenging. In one inner city church, they made a stable with the figures shaped out of cloths. Each morning they discovered a baby Jesus who had been beaten out of shape during the night. The intimacy of God was itself rejected, as it was also in the Cross.

When they accompany this kind of faith, feelings of affection and warmth at Christmas are proper—they can encourage us to believe that God is with us, and that all human beings are precious in God's eyes. I liked Scott's consideration of *Piss Christ*, which was so abusively treated when it came to Australia. The work is challenging because its beauty

cannot be dissociated from aspects of raw humanity that we find naturally repulsive. It confronts us with the messy bodiliness of the humanity of the Son of God.

But I would not oppose *Piss Christ*to Baroque paintings of the nativity. These represent other, more ceremonial and elaborate aspects of human life. They are complementary to the elemental qualities represented by Serrano, and form part of the humanity that God took on in Christ.

Perhaps this slight difference between Scott and myself discloses the roots of our divergence. He emphasises the naked, material core of humanity as the place where God is revealed to us. He wants to strip away the myths and taboos that encourage a sentimental view of human nature. These include the idea that there is a soul or an "I" independent of the physical reality with which the scientist deals. He believes that these illusions underlie arguments opposed to experimentation on embryos.

I see God revealed in humanity clothed in reflectiveness, love, community, creativity and culture. These qualities are mediated through our genetic structure, but need a language of selfhood to do justice to them. The thick description of humanity grounds the conviction that every human being is precious and that human dignity is to be protected. That leads to the ethical principle that we may not use one human life to benefit others, and, after considerable reflection, to the conclusion that the destruction of embryonic stem cells in research violates this principle.

My difficulty with what I take to be Scott's position is that if we treat concepts like the self or the "I" as illusions, and limit our account of humanity to what is empirically verifiable, it is difficult to see why we should not use human beings to achieve larger goals. Would anything but sentimentality hold us back from torture when expedient, killing the useless, and culling the superfluous? Would faith itself be more than another source of sentimentality? But I hope that these questions might be the starting point for another discussion.

Bodies and brains already merged with computer power

COLUMNS

Archimedes

Published *27-Nov-2006*

The animated family conversation was becoming louder, and Archimedes anxiously began to look for signs that it was disturbing the other passengers. He needn't have worried. On a Melbourne tram which was two-thirds full, almost all were staring into space, plugged into their iPods.

That was when it first struck Archimedes that a gap had opened between him and many of his fellow travellers in urban Australian society. While he still lived mainly on planet Earth, they seemed to be spending increasing amounts of time inhabiting an electronic world.

Not only were most of the people on the tram plugged into sound systems, so were many cyclists and joggers he could see from the window. In some of the passing cars, flickering screens displayed DVDs for the passengers. And then there were the people on the pavement yelling and gesticulating at someone totally invisible—on the other end of a mobile phone. What had happened to looking at scenery or the passing human parade, to listening to the city's hum or birds singing, and to thinking one's own thoughts uninterrupted?

This disappearance of people into an electronic world is starting to feed back into the "real" world in a big way, and not all the impacts are positive. A simple example; the sense of hearing presumably evolved in part as a system to warn of approaching danger. In urban traffic, blocking that sense with an iPod, as joggers and cyclists regularly do, could be a fatal mistake.

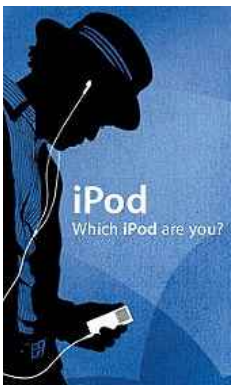
And in addition to the long-term concern about using mobile phones while driving, road safety researchers are now becoming increasingly worried over the distraction caused by the growing numbers of electronic gadgets in vehicles—satellite navigation devices, alarms to alert drivers to potential collisions or other emergencies, and screens displaying the position of other vehicles or the condition of the road or vehicle. All these compete for attention and tend to draw the driver's concentration away from the road ahead.

There are bizarre stories from the world of internet gaming. Multiplayer role-playing games, such as Second Life, Everquest and World of Warcraft, allow people to inhabit electronic worlds where they can live vicariously as characters far different from their everyday lives. There are reports of some who spend more time in these electronic fantasy worlds than they do in the real one.

The real-world trade in the electronic characters, skills and possessions acquired in these cyberworlds on the web has topped A$130 million, and ranks with the economy of some small countries, according to US economist Edward Castronova.

Then there's the exploding phenomenon of social networking—websites where you can contact and bare your soul to people worldwide in the form of biographies, pictures, blogs, videos or any other information you want to swap. MySpace, acquired by Rupert Murdoch in July, boasts more than 100 million members.

All this is beginning to make Archimedes uncomfortable. We live in a world facing serious and growing environmental and geopolitical problems—climate change, emerging diseases, terrorism, shortages of food and water. That's reality. In order to solve these problems, we will need access to the smartest electronic technology we can muster. But resolving the issues will also demand careful negotiation, and a common sense knowledge of how the world functions.



Take the simple issue of curbing water use as an example. Archimedes worries that adherence to restrictions may not be a priority to someone who spends much of their time in a flashy, oversimplified electronic world. In cyberspace, when you run out of something, you just find, fetch or buy some more.

Modern electronics has already changed the whole process of growing up and learning to make decisions independently. The mobile phone has fast become an electronic tether, tying young people to parents, family and friends—in the suburban mall, the city nightclub or even bushwalking—so they're never truly alone.

In a recent article on the future of human beings in the international science news weekly *New Scientist*, American bioethicist James Hughes suggests that within the next 50 years "our bodies and brains will be surrounded by and merged with computer power " . Perhaps before that happens we need to give some serious thought as to how best to integrate the human and electronic worlds.

Thorpie proves mortality is no vice

PERSONALITIES

Published *27-Nov-2006*

This website has been temporarily closed. However, there will be some exciting news shortly.

— Ian Thorpe website post, November 2006.


smh.com.au
The Sydney Morning Herald

Hollywood, television, the UN unknown

Last lap ... Ian Thorpe announces his retirement yesterday. Photo: Tim Clayton

IAN THORPE went straight to the top floor of his hastily booked suite at the Sofitel Wentworth, hugged his closest advisers.

It was a dramatic denouement. The press was waiting. Fellow swimmers were wondering. "It will be a huge announcement," one unnamed Australian swimming official told Associated Press. But on 21 November 2006, Ian Thorpe, arguably Australia's greatest swimmer, announced that he would "discontinue [his] professional career". Only two days prior, he had made a personal decision to avoid swimming in the forthcoming World Championships. Glandular fever and a general loss of motivation had exacted their toll.

This was the "exciting" news promised on Thorpe's own website; the realisation that he was only human. He would not be another addition to the pantheon of Australians who had overcome (admittedly more) serious conditions. His was an illness narrative with a negative ending. Kylie Minogue conquered cancer; Delta Goodrem fought back non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; and Thorpe's compatriot, long-distance swimmer Grant Hackett, returned from shoulder surgery.

His premature departure still leaves a striking record. Five Olympic gold medals; world champion at fifteen; named "World Swimmer of the Year" four times by *Swimming World Magazine*; winner of eleven world titles. Perhaps one of the finest middle-distance swimmers that ever graced the pool. But these records propelled Thorpe beyond the pool. Corporate fashion giants sought him: Armani made him their ambassador. He trafficked in the lucrative market of underwear, jewellery, glorified celluloid (many would prefer to forget the appalling *Undercover Angels*).

Beyond his swimming, Thorpe will be remembered as being a peculiarly different Australian sporting icon. Yes, he did what was expected of any Australian athlete. He broke records, brought home medals, abhorred failure. Yet he always seemed a touch too clean; not rugged despite his incredible strength; androgynous, even artificial in his space-age body suit. Unlike the coarser, less fluent Hackett, it all seemed so easy. Military, macho metaphors may have been used to label him (the "Thorpedo"), but he was never admitted to the cult of the

Australian male.

With such performing personalities as Thorpe, a new, slightly tortured word came into being: the metrosexual. *The Age* announced it in one its articles on 11 March 2003: "Macho man has bitten the dust." There was Thorpe; then there was David Beckham. Men could dress stylishly, be seen at catwalks, and not be stigmatised as homosexual. One could be fashionable and clean without batting for the other side. The pundits disagreed and the cult of the Australian male reasserted itself. Thorpe had to concede to being "a little bit different to what most people would consider being an Australian male".

Metrosexual or otherwise, Thorpe's success outside the pool revealed a commercial maturity. In this, he was already streets ahead of fellow sporting Australians. His personal attributes made him not merely marketable for one audience, but many. The Japanese swimmer Yumiko Nakagawa underlined this quality in July 2003. "He has a Western, non-Japanese look, but the way he behaves is very modest, very Asian I think."

A commercial tutelage encouraged him to learn other languages, an inconceivable idea to the monolingual sporting establishment in Australia. His contemporary sporting personalities often prefer (by choice or otherwise) niche markets. His rival, the American Michael Phelps, intended to target sullen skaters. Thorpe's countrymen attempt to corner more masculine markets (Shane Warne: hair-loss treatment), or they are dismissed as unruly, undiplomatic larrikins (Lleyton Hewitt).

At times, given the hazards of celebrity, we can dismiss attributes such as "humility" and "modesty" as shallow incantations, the refuse of mass marketing. Under the strain of the media eye, what can we trust, let alone verify? (Essayist Malcolm Muggeridge called the former the "fourth temptation", a mendacious medium to be avoided.) But the Thorpedo was nothing if not earnest. He was quite frankly a moralising boy scout, scolding FINA for inadequate drug-testing procedures and promoting good-eating regimes for children.

In this sense, Thorpe's appeal is truly global. So much so that Adidas, somewhat idiotically, wanted to partner Thorpe with soccer galactico Beckham in an advertising bonanza. It was a revelation: few Australian sporting personalities could attract 12 million Japanese television viewers to a swimming event, let alone induce two star-struck Japanese fans to travel to Palau Sant Jordi in Barcelona for a chance meeting.

He could be seen on billboard posters plastered with broken English ("Impossible is Nothing") in the Taiwanese city of Taichung in 2005, swimming-goggles glinting menacingly. Leaving aside the less than global appeal of cricket, Warne is hardly likely to be attracting a gaggle of hysterical Spanish girls to a training session. Hewitt's chances of being greeted by adoring

Argentinean fans is even more remote.

In the end, Thorpe was swimming against himself. There were rivals, the mercurial Pieter van den Hoogenband, the petulant Phelps. But there was nothing left, other than the treadmill of performances. The admission came in his last conference: “I needed a closing point.” There is reason for him to be proud. He admitted what many sports celebrities have been unable to: that mortality is no vice.

Protecting women from danger in Darfur

INTERNATIONAL

Published *27-Nov-2006*

"Protection" is a term often defined within the limits of personal responsibility—we mitigate circumstance, take precautions, use our better judgment to ensure our safety and well-being. The removal of these choices exposes the fragility of our fundamental human dignities and rights.

In Darfur, an environment where law and order often functions as the exception rather than the rule, these rights are regularly challenged and violated. For those denied this protection, each day plays out in a familiar way—seeking little, but risking all.

Internally displaced person (IDP) camps, temporary havens to which thousands of Darfuris have hastily fled, offer a modicum of safety and sustenance amidst spiralling levels of deprivation and insecurity. After the reflex movement of IDPs following the Janjaweed's genocidal offensives, these camps have been occupied by entire communities that have been victimised, and which are now wholly dependent on the succor of the international community.

Within the environs of the camp, routines are painfully regimented. The collection of water and food, verified by registration and ration cards, emphasises the hand-to-mouth subsistence of the IDP population. While the camps offer a refuge of sorts, they are not resistant to the extremities of the conflict. They are not protected by boundary fences, nor do they have patrolled entry or exit points, and though African Union soldiers maintain a physical presence in many of the camps, they have proven ineffective at countering infiltration and attacks.

One of the most serious consequences of this faltering security is the increased incidence of rape and physical assault upon women. The desperate nature of the situation was evidenced by an extraordinary joint statement made by more than 300 women in Kalma IDP camp, South Darfur, in early August, pleading for greater protection from the outside world to help ease their plight.

According to one investigation, "In addition to the sexual assaults, which include rapes, an additional 200 women and girls say they have been attacked in other ways in the last five weeks, including being beaten, punched, and kicked by assailants who lie in wait a few miles outside Kalma."

The predictability of the attacks has forced the AU to undertake firewood

patrols, in order to reduce the risk to women who go outside the camps to gather wood. According to a recent report on firewood collection in both Darfur and neighbouring Ethiopia, “difficult household decisions have been made that select the least-risk strategy—better to risk (a woman or girl) being raped than (a man or boy) being killed.”

Al Salaam IDP camp, a short drive from El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, holds a population in excess of 40,000 people. Of these, it is estimated that between 6,500 to 7,000 women are burdened with the daily responsibility of firewood collection outside the camp. Huddled close on their donkeys and shrouded conservatively in their traditional dress of *toab* and *fustar*, groups of women routinely travel many miles in search of firewood.

The women encounter the same problems on every journey; a landscape depleted of useable fuel, harassment and intimidation by landowners and, in not infrequent cases, physical violation. Some of the attacks take place only a few hundred metres from the camps. Though it is agreed that this gross exposure to danger is morally unacceptable, firewood collection remains predicated by need, not by choice.

While a consensus on strategies has proved elusive, some initiatives have made headway in reducing the dangers. A fuel-efficient stove project introduced in Al Salaam camp has tackled this problem from a holistic perspective. Constructed using only six to eight bricks made from organic materials (often animal dung, rice husks or nut shells mixed with water and clay), the new stoves have many advantages over traditional stone cooking stoves.

One advantage of the new stoves is that they require less fuel. Under a minimal fire, the organic material inside the bricks produces insulated combustion, providing heat directly to the cooking pot. With up to 70 per cent less firewood required, the frequency of firewood collection is significantly reduced—and thus the danger to women.

What is also heartening is that the women construct the stoves themselves. In a two-hour training workshop they are coached in the making, use and maintenance of the stoves. Often the stoves are gaily painted and fixed in the ground, assuming pride of place in the household plot.

The practical benefits of the fuel-efficient stove are complemented by its contribution to safety for women in the IDP camps. Although the lives of the internally displaced remain inextricably tied to the vagaries of conflict, the strengthening of protection components in humanitarian programming, recognising both physical security and human rights, is an important step towards better lives in the short term, before a meaningful context of peace can, it is hoped, be secured.

Becoming native to this large place

AUSTRALIA

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All around the countryside, growers of various nationalities have been working hard. Turkish, Italian, Somalian, Maltese, Vietnamese, Irish, and others, have weeded, fertilised, mulched, and staked. They have met each other queuing at nurseries. They have said to each other: “What are you putting in this year? I think I’ll try Romas ...”

While politicians and commentators have been aroused by the contradictions and simplicities of the fire-cracker Aussie values debate, these people have working at a much deeper study of how to be native.

Most discussion about Australian-ness is about fair go, mateship, humour, social values. But nationalism is only deeply healthy if is it grounded in being native in this place. A profound mateship grows from a joint love for this place we have been given. It makes sense that national values must be built upon our connectedness to this ground, to understanding the fertility, and limits of, this mandala of a continent.

LaTrobe University academic Freya Mathews defines being native as having one’s identity “shaped by the place to which one belongs”. She says one is a creature of its topography, its colours and textures, saps and juices, its moods, its ghosts and stories. As a native, “one has one’s taproot deep in a particular soil”.

Becoming native is a deep, slow organic process. In the linguistic inflections of the second and third generation Australians, you can hear little clicks and burrs which are remnants of the original rich languages, Italian, Greek, Dutch.

The Vietnamese gardeners I work beside at the foot of the highrise plant an emblem of Vietnam. They tidily plant lots of tiny plants, close together. They do not mulch, and they sometimes build second levels out of sticks so their creepers have space. Their gardening style seems to assume monsoonal quantities of rain.

Gardening is expressive of an inherited culture, it is imitative—a folk art. I wonder if the Vietnamese way of gardening is viable as our water supplies contract.

My garden is so untidy by comparison. I have put on heaps of good soil, then a layer of scavenged, impervious plane tree leaves, and then another layer of

mulch. I will poke little holes in these layers for the tomatoes I will put about 70cm apart. It is gardening for arid times, with layers to prevent respiration. It is a garden adapted for water shortages. My family has been here for 140 years, and in building my garden I feel these years of belonging to and loving this place.

Similarly white Australians are slow to invent a language which matches this continent. The word “drought” still carries shock-horror that something so unusual and unfair should happen to us.

According to Eric Rolls, we call 11 places in Australia deserts, but none of them meet any dictionary definition of that word, and on average they receive five times the rainfall of the centre of the Sahara. He quotes Ernest Giles who “discovered” the Simpson desert, as saying it had “the appearance of dry grassy downs; and as it is dotted here and there with casuarinas and blood wood trees, and small patches of desert shrubs, its general appearance is by no means displeasing to the eye”.

As an evolving people, I would argue that we should become like a native farmer described by the American poet and farmer Wendell Berry. We need to be gardeners of Australia, men and women whose hands reach into the ground and sprout. For whom this place, the soil, this country is a divine drug. With the seasons, we enter into death annually, and come back rejoicing with our harvest. We’ve seen the light lie down in the compost and rise again in the garden and paddock, the regenerated grasslands and forest. We will swallow the seeds of this place so that unending sentences of loving language flow out of our mouths like vines clinging in the sunlight, and like water descending in the dark over the Barfold Gorge.

Our obligation, as our season of growth passes, is to leave this place better than we found it. This is our responsibility, and one that should knit us together as a people. A healthy nativism means a healthy nationalism. Let us ignore the politicians and rejoice for this spring, this gathering of peoples, that will never end.

Gen Y free for anything except belonging

AUSTRALIA

Published *27-Nov-2006*

An article in the latest issue of *Time* magazine places Pope Benedict XVI in the centre of the "clash of civilisations". His trip to Turkey this week, it's argued, is part of the Pope's tougher stance in combating militant Islam, exemplified in the comments he made in his Regensburg address.

But if the Regensburg speech showed anything, it's that the Catholic Church doesn't seem as concerned with this cultural clash as it is with a battle for western civilisation itself. In recent meetings between the Pope and the heads of the Anglican Church and Eastern Churches, the Pope has spelled out that the biggest foe facing Christians around the world isn't Islam—it's secularism.

A recent survey in Australia, titled *The Spirit of Generation Y*, has highlighted some worrying trends concerning the faith of young people. Even among those young people calling themselves Catholic (around 18 per cent of Gen Y), faith is no longer directing people's lives the way it once did.

According to the survey, around 75 per cent of young Catholics believe it's OK to "pick and choose" beliefs without accepting the teachings of their religion as a whole, while 56 per cent believe morals are relative. Speaking recently at a Catholic education conference, Cardinal George Pell said that more and more young people "seem to believe that life offers a smorgasbord of options from which they choose items that best suit their passing fancies and their changing circumstances".

What's most telling, however, is that the report found Generation Y's beliefs differed only slightly from Generation X, and from the Boomers before them. It highlighted that what we're seeing is a gradual decline in faith that's been in progress since the '60s.

Redemptorist Fr Michael Mason, a researcher from Australian Catholic University (ACU) and one of the authors of the report, says "young people are what their elders have made them".

He says since the '60s, there seems to have been a concerted campaign to take authority away from institutions like the church, government, and the media. The Catholic faith-based traditions of previous generations have been replaced by a

skeptical, cynical and narrowly empirical view of life. The consequence is that young people don't trust anything that they can't verify through their own experience, or through "science" in an empirical sense.

The erosion of tradition means that many young people aren't having faith passed down from their parents. They are taught a moral code of how to live, but it's one that doesn't necessarily draw on any greater ethical structures. Where once Catholic faith played an important part in people's choices—from who they voted for, to where they went on a Saturday night—fewer and fewer people today are taking heed of that faith in even the most important aspects of their lives, like relationships and marriage.

It's difficult to imagine society reverting to an older, church-centric model. So, given the way things are, how can young people be encouraged to take the leap and embrace what faith can offer them?

Enrolment levels in Catholic schools remain strong, and in many ways these institutions have replaced parishes as the Church's front line. People involved in Catholic education, like Cardinal Pell and Sydney CEO head Br Kelvin Canavan, say schools can try and provide more spaces for young people to encounter God. They argue that traditional Catholic practices like prayer and devotion are less obvious now in Catholic parishes and schools, and so more opportunities need to be provided for young people to experience them.

Indeed, schools are already providing opportunities for students to undertake sacraments, and take part in liturgies, retreat experiences, and prayer groups. However, for the majority of young people who don't buy into traditional, institutionalised expressions of religion such as going to Mass, it's hard to encourage them to explore something so beyond their experience.

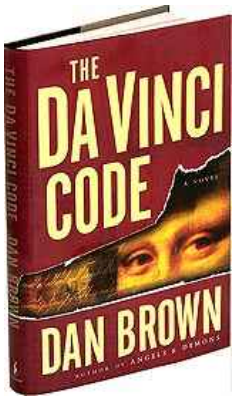
Pope Benedict's response to the dilemma of our times is to appeal to reason. Reason, not scientific empiricism, is what guides people to live a moral life. A person guided by reason can accept faith, God, and his vision for the world through Jesus, without needing empirical proof of God's existence. Reason, too, can ensure faith is something that is life-giving, rather than something that promotes violence and hate.

The task for the Catholic Church, then, is to encourage young people to ask questions about the world around them and their own place in it, and be guided by the reason that God gave them to search for the truth in communion with others.

Throw out the baby, keep the bathwater

SPIRITUALITY & WORSHIP

Published *27-Nov-2006*



I've often wondered: what chord, exactly, did *The Da Vinci Code*strike with so many people for it to sell more than 40 million copies? After all, it's not a very good book. The prose is tedious. The plot is ridiculous. The characters are stereotyped stick-figures. It contains page after page of strained dialogue about esoteric and nigh-on indecipherable symbolic analyses.

But—and this, no doubt, is the key to the book's appeal—it does offer a version of Christianity that confirms our deepest suspicions and conspiratorial fantasies.

As we all now know, the punch-line of the book is that Mary Magdalene is the lost Grail, the "absent cause" of Christianity, a kind of primordial sacrifice who must be forgotten for the Christian faith to exist. The fate of Mary Magdalene, for Brown, is thus a parable of the erasure of the sacred feminine from Western life, and his book stands as a testament to her quiet nobility against the habitual violence of monotheistic religions.

As the story goes, the sacred feminine has taken flight from the West and Middle East after centuries of persecution—from Mary's defamation at the hands of male-dominated Church Councils, to the imprisonment of Muslim women behind the hijab, to the maltreatment of Gaia, the Earth-Mother, by testosterone-fuelled multinational corporations—and must now be sought in the holistic, non-cerebral practices of Eastern spirituality.

The moral injunctions embedded in the narrative are clear: abandon the self-destructive scientific and military drive of the West (a drive it has inherited from its monotheistic past) and embrace the unfathomable mysteries of life; renounce the *can* of science in favour of the ineffable *should* of spirituality; reject the male compulsion to dominate and adopt the female willingness to nurture.

This dichotomy led me to consider the polarity of feminine/good versus masculine/bad in the context of the debate over embryonic stem-cell research. Is it too much to posit that fertilised embryos may be implanted in a woman's uterus, even though the process inevitably entails the disposal of excess embryos, but that those cold "male" scientists cannot be trusted with so precious a commodity, for fear that they will create all variety of chimeras, perverse human-beasts, that will erode human dignity and desecrate human life?

The basic division here is between what is innate (a kind of universally accessible spirituality, the inherent dignity of human nature, etc.) and what is imposed (organised or dogmatic religion, biogenetic experimentation, etc.)—and the former is a kind of endangered species due to the ravaging advances of the latter.

The point is that *The Da Vinci Code* presents an energetic rendition of this prevailing religious and moral sentiment, whose underlying logic is essentially conspiratorial. Our innate, immediate contact with the divine has been stolen away from us by the "back-room boys" and ecclesiastical power-brokers, in whose interest it is to keep such a universal spirituality secret.

But, there's a twist. Anyone familiar with conspiracies knows that it takes tremendous faith to sustain one's belief in such a plot. Indeed, it is the very suspicion that something has been stolen or hidden from us that generates the idea that there was something to steal in the first place.

Isn't it clear, then, how ill-advised it was for many church leaders to accuse Dan Brown of undermining faith. *The Da Vinci Code*, in fact, is a book of considerable belief. Its spontaneous popularity should have convinced church leaders once and for all to abandon their hackneyed diagnosis of the "real problem" today as being people's lack of faith, and our fixation on what we can see, touch and buy.

The determining factor of our cultural moment isn't rampant materialism—it's that sloppy, sentimental spirituality that we all tacitly acknowledge, but that fails to pose any real challenge to the way we live. The time of year is fast approaching when we throw out the bathwater of theological clarity and ethical stringency, and simply gather around to adore the "babe in the manger". What is then offered erstwhile church-goers is the opportunity to leave obscure ecclesiastical rituals behind and get back in touch with the heart of Christianity: the bare immediacy of "God-with-us". But this well ensconced practice distorts the Christian message almost beyond recognition.

At the beginning of Christianity, there's no moment of pure encounter with the divine, no wordless beatific vision. Instead, there is the skandalon, the stone that causes offence, the final rejection of all those obscene, idolatrous spiritualities that we amass for our own sense of security. In other words, the central problem of Christianity is Christ himself. And the history of the church is the story of so many failed, though sometimes heroic, attempts to come to grips with the scandal of its own beginnings.

I would even suggest that, instead of all those Baroque paintings of baby Jesus in arms, surrounded by the menagerie of on-lookers, perhaps the work of art that best captures the spirit of Christianity is one by Andres Serrano: *Piss Christ*. When one first looks at the image, the effect is uncanny. It seems to radiate, almost glow with a divine aura. And yet one can't help but feel affronted by its content, by one's knowledge of what the image in fact is.

Piss Christ grasps, simultaneously, the radical Christian identification of God with that which most repulses us. The paradoxical message of the photograph is, thus, *Ecce Deo*! Here is your god! And this sense of estrangement is perhaps closest to the affective core of the Christian message. There is no immediate recognition and confirmation of our innermost beliefs, but just the demand to renounce those idolatrous beliefs themselves.

(To return momentarily to my earlier aside on biotechnology, most readers will, no doubt, have observed the implications of what I am suggesting for a Christian perspective of the moral status of the genome and the threat of genetic intervention. It is, indeed, absurd to regard the mysterious depths of individual and corporate humanity as inviolable on the grounds that no one can fathom the soul.

Nor can we simply oppose the advances of biotechnology on the basis that such advances will alter human nature, as Francis Fukuyama and Senator Ursula Stephens, in her recent opinion piece for *Eureka Street*, have warned. The very fact that we can intervene at the level of the basic genetic line already changes our view of human nature. After all, this is the soul, demystified, reduced to its essential mechanics. What is shattered here is not human dignity as such, but the sacred illusion that sustains so much moral sentimentality.

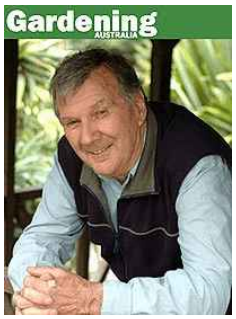
We should regard this as an opportunity to move forward in a theologically and ethically considered way, rather than blindly adhering to those myths and palliatives that have underpinned Western morality for too long. The sense of estrangement that I mentioned above is reduplicated when one encounters the formulaic bundle that constitutes the "I"—have we the ethical courage, when gazing at the eerie coldness of the genome, to say: *Ecce Homo*! Here is "the human"!)

If anything, this is the time of year to throw out the baby of unquestioning moral sentimentality, and own the bathwater of tough ethical and theological reflection. Seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ requires nothing less.

Migrants already know about loneliness

COMMUNITY

Published *27-Nov-2006*



Except for two periods of 18 months each, eight years apart, I have not lived in my country of birth, England, since the late '70s. My accent, though not as full-blooded as *Gardening Australia*'s Peter Cundall, is definitely from "oop North". While old school friends say I sound Aussie—it is that questioning lilt—English people here who I may be meeting for the first time will engage me in what I call Brit-to-Brits, conspiratorial conversations where it is assumed I will support England in the Ashes (I do not). Coffee shop owners at Circular Quay think I am a tourist, yet I am an Australian citizen of 14 years, a victim of what so many migrants know: you are neither 100 per cent one thing, nor 100 per cent the other.

The "where you come from" part of everyone's emotional history is truncated as a migrant. Even if most of your family and friends also emigrate here (mine did not), your life starts again in a new country. And in a country of migrants this happens a lot.

Federal Liberal Party backbencher Petro Georgiou wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*of the "Australian character that is fundamentally accepting of people trying to make a go of it, especially when we come to know them as individuals". Novelist Sophie Masson remembers her French migrant father enjoying the informality and anonymity of being in Australia where "you were free to be yourself".

Much as I would whole-heartedly endorse the openness and ready acceptance most Australians have for others, I have also found a surprising contrast, a closeness to family and sibling networks wherever this is physically possible by location.

I am an only child, and besides occasionally playing with a bevy of distant cousins around the same age, was usually the youngest in a world of great aunts and uncles, Germanic Ashkenazi Jews prone to high teas with *kuchen* and meringues. I have never since gravitated to big family gatherings. Nevertheless, in Australia I am continually struck, almost enviously, by the number of close-knit groups, either family or long-term friends who cut across class, race, gender, even length of time here because migrants often move en masse and end up in the same street.

There is a divide between people whose autobiography is split by geography—interstate and international—and those with ready-made cohorts built up gradually and jealously guarded, who remember that dreadful or amazing or dull or outrageous music or maths teacher. When I make friends it is often with people who are newcomers themselves, or who have travelled or been expatriates. I am not sure yet if this matters and, if so, why it matters. I am not sure who is the better off, the ones who enjoy close company but may also suffer from a tyranny of proximity, where duty, obligation and the highs and lows of family history intervene, or the ones reflecting the tyranny of distance, and resulting dislocation...

Social networks, how and when and with whom we socialise, are important. They underpin those casual salutations, “have a good weekend” or a “big night”, or the jabber of mobile phones or texting.

Yet, for all the technological developments and websites reuniting friends or introducing liaisons and potentially putting everyone in touch with each other, the Australia Institute’s 2005 report, *Mapping Loneliness in Australia*, found that many Australians feel lonely and isolated.

Mobility increasingly is the main game, whether for promotion, or telecommuting, or a new job entirely; divorce or separation or fresh love; financial loss or gain; or desire to travel at any age. No longer can we take socialising for granted. We need to assess whether we are looking for acceptance by others, or simply filling in time, to block out any gremlins that might lie dormant in our inner souls until fed by memory, analysis or empathy.

Sometimes, it really is easier to buy a takeaway and read, or watch TV or a DVD, play computer games or socialise virtually. But perhaps that is capitulating to pressures. Today’s lifestyles indicate that there will be fewer generations-long family and family friends staying in the same place. Migrants mostly know about this already, but perhaps for everybody there will be a greater need to build on the here and how without dwelling too much on the then, and of being able to adapt and find joy wherever—and with whomever—we can.

First Test thumping won't reverse ageing of Australian cricketers

SPORT

Cricket
Published *27-Nov-2006*


ABCsport cricket

Ponting dismisses Lillee's spray

The Australian cricket team is rallying behind captain Ricky Ponting in the wake of its Ashes series loss to England.

Facing criticism... Ricky Ponting at Sydney airport (Reuters)

The players began arriving home in Australia last night, with Ponting facing calls from former great Dennis Lillee for him to be sacked and replaced by Shane Warne.

Vice-captain Adam Gilchrist and opening batsman Justin Langer both said they had absolute confidence in Ponting's captaincy.

The recent imbroglio between Damien Martyn and Dennis Lillee raised a number of questions about the state of Australian cricket. The first test has been played out, and the Australians have romped to victory. Amid the back-slapping and salutations, however, the Australian team must not lose sight of some bigger questions still facing them.

This Australian team is one focused on the task at hand—the winning back of the Ashes from the "Auld enemy". It is also a team supposedly in the process of introducing new blood in an ordered fashion; a different team ready for the challenge of the Ashes-holding tourists. But is the transition to a younger generation actually occurring, and where will the Australian team be in three years?

Dennis Lillee's comments, about the Australians perhaps paying the price for having such an aged line up, were shouted down from just about all quarters. Damien Martyn was particularly strident, telling Lillee to shut up, and pointing out that as president of the WA Cricket Association he should mind his own business.

Martyn may have a point. The depth of experience in the Australian side, particularly in the batting line-up, is perhaps unparalleled in the history of cricket. On paper, the Australian team is formidable. Overlooked by many people, amidst the furor over Lillee's comments, was one salient point. The Australian team was reckoned to look just as formidable before the commencement of the last Ashes series in England. Glenn McGrath confidently predicted a whitewash—and even allowing for the usual mind games that "Pigeon" goes in for at the start of each series, the mood of the Australian team before the series began was bullish.

What has changed since then? Australian has won the first test of this Ashes series. For the first three days, they dominated proceedings. But the manner in which Ponting, as captain, chose to proceed tactically was illustrative of the side's weaknesses.

By not enforcing the follow-on, Ponting revealed two things. Firstly, the scars of Kolkata, in 2001, are still felt by this Australian team. The disaster of that follow-on will live long with the Australian team. Secondly, Ponting revealed the (unspoken) fears that he—and perhaps others in the team's "brain's trust"—have

about the longevity of McGrath and, to a lesser extent, Warne. The fact that McGrath damaged his heel, and was unable to bowl for a period, proves the point.

Since the last Ashes series, Hussey has come into the side, and looks like being around for a while. Katich is out. Watson would have played in the first test. Martyn was “gone” by the end of the last series, but is apparently now “back”, at the age of 35. Michael Clarke played in this game, but only because Watson did not. Jacques is on the fringes, still, though his form begs a place in the team.

What has the Australian team learned from the last Ashes series, one might well ask? A changing of the guard has not taken place, and while now the team, and management, can point to this comprehensive victory, things may not be as rosy as they appear.

Ironic as it may be, given how long Lillee, Marsh and Chappell played for, to the detriment of the next generation, the legendary fast bowler may have a point. Putting aside the self-interested protestations of Martyn and co., questions do need to be asked of the future of the Australian team.

Recent comments from Richie Richardson, to the effect that what will stop a replication of a West Indies-style decline is the standard of administrators, are only half right. Australia might have an excellent administrative base, but it is not introducing enough youngsters.

Ponting may have been shrewd, tactically, to rest his bowlers by not enforcing the follow on. Furthermore, Warne has proven, over a period of more than a decade, that bowling on the fifth day, and in the fourth innings, suits him down to the ground. But by having to tailor his tactics to suit aging bodies, Ponting also revealed a vulnerability in this team.

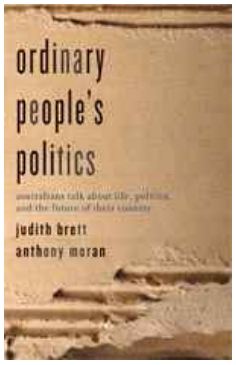
Dennis Lillee should perhaps have held his tongue, given his extended career, and his current position—but then again, perhaps he did have a point. Players such as Jacques, Clarke, and even Brad Hodge (a double century in his first five tests, and yet still not good enough apparently) are missing out.

Surely it is time for a player such as Martyn to be thanked, and sent back to the WA side. His form of late notwithstanding, the long term future of the Australian team is moving towards a tipping point. One could reasonably expect that in the next two years Martyn, Hayden, Langer, McGrath, Gilchrist, and possibly Warne, will all retire. An exodus on this scale will leave Australia with a bunch of talented, but inexperienced players. How far will our stocks slip as a result?

An alternative to the crude barometer of public opinion

BOOK REVIEW

Published *27-Nov-2006*



Judith Brett and Anthony Moran, *Ordinary People's Politics*, Pluto Press, Melbourne, 2006. RRP $32.95, ISBN 1 86403 257 X, website .

History is written from two perspectives: that of big people or that of little people. Political history in particular is mainly told about big people and large-scale events, broad sweeps, diplomatic chess playing and ideology on an epic scale.

This work is an anthropology or phenomenology of modern Australian political thought, and in this it would seem to be quite unusual. Phenomenologies abound in other areas of enquiry, but not so in politics (well not outside the academy anyway). It is history because the interviews on which the book is based started in 1986, with 20 subjects interviewed in all.

These were selected out of a total of 75, conducted by a group of political researchers from Melbourne University for a project called "Images of Australia" headed by Alan Davies and Graham Little, two prominent public intellectuals of that era. The interviews are mainly conducted in two phases: 1986-90 and 2002-4, with two additional portraits from interviews by Davies in the '50s.

As with all qualitative work, the authors acknowledge the pitfalls of generalising from such small numbers of stories, in this case also because all the subjects are Victorian. Davies used the term "political outlook" to describe the domain of his original enquiry, perhaps akin to the German term *weltanschauung*, ("world-view"), a broad and holistic conception of an individual's opinions and beliefs.

Most political studies are psephological, and poll driven. Crude barometer readings of public opinion have never been easier to get, and it seems that parties and governments commission them constantly and modify course accordingly. Qualitative data are far less likely to be available. Consequently there is relatively little known about the individual political experience, the personal political imagination. The most we tend to hear is of cynicism and disengagement.

In fact the authors comment that there are different ways of not being interested in politics. Many people will say that they are apolitical, and regard

politics as a bad business that ordinary hard-working people should avoid. This book goes a long way to countering this, by showing how the personal is indeed political, as it is based on long interviews that involve a good deal of looking in depth at peoples' lives as a general backdrop to the explicitly political nature of the project.

This is a difficult time for political parties, with all-time low levels of membership and accusations of branch stacking, and other dirty dealings that result in the exclusion of the rest of us. One ALP senator has jokingly pointed out that the Adelaide Crows have more members than his party does nationally!

This level of community disengagement is of course a dangerous thing if it allows political parties to be dominated by small cabals of professional activists (usually career "staffers" who replace their bosses in preselection), with the rest of us on the outer. One interviewee refers to parties as the "embodiment of fundamental social conflicts", somewhat realistically if a little negatively, and there is little evidence of ideological common purpose. On balance, these interviews confirm that even past apparently class-driven allegiances are waning. Some would say that the single issue NGO has captured public activism and imagination; "we cannot agree on much, let's really pull together on a narrow front". There is no great evidence for this in the book, which might date it a bit.

The interviews do pull out some major themes. The first is a strong sense of Australian identity, of the kind of values that John Howard believes and has radiated back to the country, with some degree of success, over the last decade. A number of respondents spoke of their pride in being Australian, and of fairness, freedom, and equality of opportunity being the hallmarks of this.

Secondly, self-reliance is almost universally agreed on as a major underpinning characteristic and value. Whilst Australians will differ as to the size and height of the safety net, it does seem that the baseline assumption is that overall expectations of the state are quite limited, and the state should be mainly for those in real need.

The book radiates a gentle optimism about diversity and freedom, tinged with a pang of the sorrow of loneliness. When so much in politics is superficial and power-driven, this profundity and reflection is welcome.

Jesuit schoolboys' story of love and AIDS death

ON STAGE

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Holding The Man

Tim Conigrave and John Caleo became lovers after they met while students at Xavier College, Melbourne, in the '70s. Their same-sex relationship lasted for the best part of 16 years until 1992, when John died of AIDS two years ahead of Tim. It was the focus of *Holding The Man*, Conigrave's posthumously-published memoir that won a United Nations Human Rights Award for Non-Fiction in 1995.

It was also listed as one of the "100 Favourite Australian Books" by the Australian Society of Authors in 2003. Earlier this month, Sydney's Griffin Theatre Company premiered Tommy Murphy's stage adaption, which has already broken box office records in its production directed by David Berthold. The already extended first season is sold out, and there is now a second season scheduled from 8 February to 3 March 2007.

Xavier was, and is, a Jesuit school, and mention of the Jesuits' tacit approval of the relationship features at an important moment in the dialogue of the play. It is contrasted with disapproval from some lay staff members. The book goes into more detail, with one of the Jesuits—Brenton Lewis—telling Tim: "Well, if it is respectful, I wish you the best." Another—Father Wallbridge—leaves them to their own devices when he sees the two in bed together while away on a school retreat.

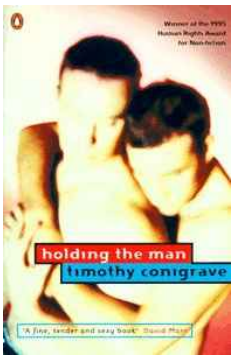
From the moment Brenton Lewis gives their relationship his blessing, the union evolves towards respect rather than lust. Official Church and other disapproval of homosexuality do not weigh on their consciences. Guilt features only when lust and the desire to experiment threaten to undermine the foundation of their love.

Conigrave becomes restless and wants to put the relationship on hold—or perhaps end it—so that he can pursue other men who offer a greater range of sexual pleasures. Caleo responds with a wimpering, but strident and piercing, "Why would you want to?". This comes across as a moral challenge, rather than an act of selfish possession. It is particularly evocative in the powerful interaction between actors Guy Edmonds and Matt Zeremes. The play is not polemical, but it is very moral, and protective of the integrity of the relationship.

The larger-than-life portrayal of the insensitivity of John's disapproving one-eyed Catholic father, Bob, as some kind of bogeyman, sticks out. He taunts Tim by staking a claim to John's possessions while they are sitting around John,

who is unconscious on his deathbed. The possessions don't matter to Tim; it's Bob's implied claim to ownership of John that hurts. Bob's choice of this moment and place for the discussion is grotesque, fitting with the prop used to depict John's emaciated body. If the pain for all concerned is meant to be, it is reminiscent of Christ's words at the Crucifixion: "It is accomplished." For Tim, *it* was in fact *accomplished*much earlier, after a particularly tender moment at the beginning of their relationship. It moved him to write in the book: "If this had been it, if I had died then, I would have said it was enough."

Bob was the beholder of the tragedy in the story (for the other main characters, it was about pain rather than tragedy). He was unable to comprehend that there had been completeness in John's short life, and that the source of the completeness had been the relationship with Tim. For him, life's purpose would have been achieved only after John had been rescued from Tim and "the homosexual thing".



The perceived approval by the Jesuits at Xavier had been instrumental in setting Tim and John on a path that quickly put in place their *respectful* relationship, and that led to the fulfillment of their lives, and their premature deaths. It was the "anything goes" decade of the '70s, when those in positions of responsibility felt free to trust their instincts. At another time, and certainly in many other Catholic schools, the tacit approval would have been not for a respectful same-sex relationship, but rather for gay-bashing school bullies. Intimidated students suppressed—and continue to suppress—their sexuality, and the consequent link with the incidence of sex abuse, is not difficult to fathom.

Holding the Man does not set out to attack the Church and those like Bob who consider themselves loyal to its teachings. Rather its purpose is to celebrate the respectful relationship of two gifted young men, as a model for others. The status of the book as a modern Australian classic has made it plain that the message has been well-received, and now the Griffin Theatre production has successfully brought their fearlessness, infectious energy and candid humour to the stage.

Tower of Babel

POETRY

Published *27-Nov-2006*

And the earth was of one tongue, and of the same speech.
—Genesis 11:1

Fugitive hands relay distance that feet and pride cannot scale, keys to happiness digitised. Over the hill from pick-up joints, night owls audition beginnings. Coy translations of interim moons wax at could-have-beens, reality dresses in piquant shadows. In this city of closed doors and energy-saving illuminations, statements of common need transmit age, sex, location, to domains of romance and security, thrifty exclamations of worth, body-mass index, a sliding scale of external truths. Fear of nothing more drives expeditions from the desert of Lean Cuisine and single flannelette sheets to the heaven of anywhere else. Born for higher things, a fair share of paradise beyond the pale of suburban confinement. Insert name from the address book to dislocate loneliness, cyber skate assumed identities and resolutions. Pleasure insinuates the screen with promises too bold for lips, rapid interface conjugates hope but tall orders undermine foundations. Handmaid anthropology auctions perfection to all-comers, faith in vendor's terms contracts eyes. Build me into your arms, into the forgetfulness of reflections. I can be virtually what you want me to be, backspace, edit, delete.