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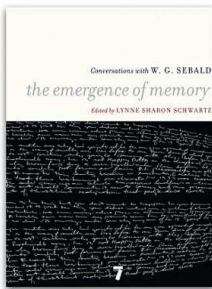
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## German author wed lucidity to mystery

### BOOK REVIEW

*Peter Steele*

***The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald.* Schwartz, Lynne Sharon (Ed.). Seven Stories Press, New York, 2007. ISBN 978-1-58322-785-5. RRP \$44**



Joseph Brodsky, praised for his poems, used to say they had all been waiting to be found there, in the Russian language. W. G. Sebald might, in the same spirit, have said that all of his prose was waiting to be found in the German language.

Had he done so, it would have been appropriate, in that his writing displays something in common with Brodsky's, namely a highly distinctive, and paradoxical, wedding of lucidity and mystery. In his novel *Vertigo*, he remarks at one point, 'in reality, as we know, everything is always quite different', which sounds at once commonplace and baffling; it is the way things go very often in his work.

To minds both confident and benumbed (for example, those which are instinctively political) it is obvious how the world is, and how accordingly it is to be dealt with. To all such, Sebald's writing will be an affront. For him, the prose is indeed 'waiting' in a more than lexical sense: it is waiting because the world it might characterise is not amenable to spontaneous description or appraisal.

His writing is that of somebody who seems to be evolving a new sensory capacity or a new vein of intellectual attention as he goes along, but in no way does it seem laggard or immature. It is as if he has found a unique pacing of attentiveness.

This takes place (as something analogous does in Brodsky) in a milieu dense with the particular and the palpable. The pictures which abound in his books are there in their own right, but they are also in effect tokens or emblems of Sebald's exposure to the world's self-presenting, item by item, instance by instance.

Which is not to say that he is one of those writers who invest in the material energies which they cannot bring to construal. For all his deferentiality towards the constantly renewed, he is as assiduous an interpreter as Beckett or Borges.

*The Emergence of Memory* will serve well both readers familiar with Sebald's work and those coming at him for the first time. It offers five interviews with the writer and four essays on him. The writing is skilful and the tone is enthusiastic for the most part, with the exception of a piece by Michael Hofmann, whose title, 'A Chilly Extravagance', signals what is to come.

It is true to say that for Sebald, at least as he presents himself in this book, life is a grave affair, and often a grim one. At one point he says:

It is a characteristic of our species, in evolutionary terms, that we are a species in despair, for a number of reasons. Because we have created an environment for us which isn't what it should be. And we're out of our depth all the time. We're living exactly on the borderline between the natural world from which we are being driven out, or we're driving ourselves out of it, and that other world which is generated by our brain cells.

And so clearly that fault line runs right through our physical and emotional makeup. And probably where these tectonic plates rub against each other is where the sources of pain are.

But few people will read Sebald at all extensively without realising that he also knows where some of the sources of joy exist, a joy one of whose modes is the brio of his writing.

## Conflicting narratives converge on Israel anniversary

### POLITICS

*Philip Mendes*

The 60th anniversary of Israel is an occasion for celebration by Jews throughout the world. The international community supported the establishment of Israel in 1948 as atonement for the horrendous persecution that Jews both East and West had experienced culminating in the Nazi Holocaust, and to provide an ongoing sanctuary for Jews fleeing anti-Semitism.



For Jews, the formation of Israel gave them a renewed sense of hope in what had appeared to be a brutally unjust world. Today most view identification with Israel as a central component of their Jewish life and identity, and feel an enormous sense of pride in the Jewish state's achievements.

But conversely we also need to recognise that most Palestinians see 1948 as a time of mourning due to their experience of the al-Nakba (the 'Catastrophe'). These conflicting narratives of hope versus suffering are also reflected within the Australian context.

In late March the Australian Parliament passed a motion celebrating and commending the achievements of the State of Israel over 60 years. The motion specifically noted the democratic tradition shared by Australia and Israel as reflected in a common commitment to civil and human rights and cultural diversity.

The motion was widely welcomed by Australia's Jewish community on two counts. First, Australian Jews view Australia's friendship with Israel as a barometer of Australia's traditionally tolerant and positive approach to its Jewish citizens. Second, most Australian Jews have close friendship and family ties with Israel. For example, my maternal grandfather was born in the ancient city of Safed early in the 20th century, and my aunt and uncle and their many children and grandchildren all live in Israel.

Australian Jews are proud of Israel's survival despite 60 years of ongoing political and military conflict with the Palestinians and much of the Arab world. They admire Israel's successful integration of Jews from all over the world ranging from Holocaust survivors to the mass of refugees from Arab countries in the 1950s to more recent arrivals from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union.

They appreciate Israel's ability to provide a decent home for all its citizens relatively free of the religious fundamentalism, political oppression, misogyny and everyday violence that afflicts much of the Middle East. And they laugh about the huge political, social and religious diversity of Israeli society including everything from ultra-orthodox 'black hats' to gay rights

marchers.

In contrast, most Australian Palestinians continue to regret the establishment of Israel. In March, they placed a full-page advertisement in *The Australian* newspaper condemning the Australian Parliamentary motion, and describing Israel's existence as a 'triumph of racism and ethnic cleansing'. They argued that the 'Israeli people and its leaders' were responsible for the dispossession and ongoing suffering of the Palestinians.

As a left-wing Jew who has long advocated a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I can't help but empathise with the suffering of the 700,000 Palestinian refugees and their descendants. But I also believe the non-creation of Israel would have been a greater injustice for the Jews in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, than the relative injustice the creation of Israel imposed upon the Palestinians.

It is also simplistic to blame the Israelis in isolation for the creation of the Palestinian refugee tragedy without reference to the broader political and military context.

As noted by the seminal Israeli historian Benny Morris, the exile of the Palestinians occurred during a brutal war in which the Palestinian leaders and the Arab states openly threatened to destroy the newly founded State of Israel and massacre its population. This was a zero-sum conflict which the Israelis won and the Palestinians lost. The 'notorious' Plan Dalet was not an Israeli master plan to expel the Arab population, but rather a series of military measures to defend the borders against invading Arab armies.

It is also easy to forget that this war took place only three years after the Holocaust, and almost 6000 Israelis — that is nearly one per cent of the entire Jewish population of Israel — died in the conflict.

I personally believe the Palestinians should be at least partially compensated for the events of 1948 by securing a state of their own alongside Israel in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But I would also prefer that local Palestinians mount their legitimate case for Palestinian dignity and independence without negating the rights and achievements of Israel.

I want to hear more about Palestine as a neighbour of Israel rather than Palestine instead of Israel. Hopefully in 10 years time we can celebrate not only Israel's 70th anniversary, but also the existence of an independent Palestinian State based on peace and reconciliation with Israel.

## Making money for the Nazis

### FILM REVIEW

*Tim Kroenert*

***The Counterfeiters*: 98 minutes. Rated: MA. Director: Stefan Ruzowitzky. Starring: Karl Markovics, August Diehl, Devid Striesow, Sebastian Urzendowsky**



Accounts of World War II concentration camps are invariably horror stories. The horror experienced by the Jewish prisoners at the heart of *The Counterfeiters* is not so much a horror of the physical world as it is a horror of their own consciences.

*The Counterfeiters* is based on the true account of Operation Bernhard, where Jewish prisoners with artistic skills or printing experience were put to work by the Nazis to forge British and American currency.

The purpose of the operation was to weaken the US and UK economies by flooding them with the counterfeit currency. Whether or not the bills were also intended to purchase war material is historically debatable. What is clear is that the Jews who worked on Operation Bernhard lived in relative luxury compared with the other prisoners of Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

It is this fact, as much as the prisoners' feeling of complicity in the Nazi war effort, that presents the daily ethical dilemma faced by the characters of *The Counterfeiters*. That's particularly true of those who had previously experienced Auschwitz — they have escaped the reality of that horror, but not the knowledge that other Jews continued to suffer.

At the heart of the drama is Salomon 'Sally' Sorowitsch (Markovics), a professional counterfeiter whose expertise makes him a pivotal player in the Nazis' counterfeiting operation. Sally is somewhat of an antihero — for the most part he avoids making waves and does his captors' bidding in the name of self-preservation.

It's not that his motives are selfish, per se. More than once he puts his neck on the line in order to protect his fellow prisoners, notably vulnerable young Kolya (Urzendowsky), whom he takes under his wing. It's just that his behaviour is based solely upon their immediate circumstances, rather than any 'bigger picture' principles.

The egalitarian end of the spectrum is upheld by subversive Adolf Burger (Diehl), who survived Auschwitz by playing worker ant for the Nazis but is now beyond such game-playing. He recognises the disruption the participants in Operation Bernhard could cause, if they can set aside concern for self-preservation.

Ironically, Burger comes across as the more selfish character compared with the quietly

dignified Sally. That he's willing to risk not only his own life but also those of his unwilling peers in the name of the greater good hardly seems heroic. Still, under the circumstances, heroism is certainly a nebulous concept.

When it comes to sabotaging the operation, the key difference between Burger and Sally is that Burger's role is active, and Sally's is, ultimately, passive. But both prove to be equally pivotal.

This Austrian production is the latest in a string of Central European films that seek to tell the untold stories of the region's troubled recent history. Like forerunners such as *Downfall*, *Black Book* and *The Lives of Others* it finds simple humanity amid emotionally and ethically complex situations. Sally, portrayed by Markovics with dignity and restrained power, may be an anti-hero, but it's impossible not to empathise with his every move.



## Fresh insights in old books

### SPIRITUALITY

*Andrew Hamilton*

Literary festivals introduce us to new writing. They rarely celebrate the old, for nothing is older than an old book. We instinctively assume that our fresh insights will have superseded such wisdom that any old tome might impart.



We judge books partly by their content but even more by their voice. Writers of another age speak oddly. They stop to reflect on what we slip lightly past, acquiesce in what we find outrageous.

Of early Christian writers St Augustine has suffered most from superficial reading. He is articulate and argumentative. But he has a mordant view of human nature and displays attitudes to religious coercion and to women that most people now would protest against.

But just as you have come to this conclusion Augustine surprises you with passages whose voice is sharp and contemporary. A Richard Dawkins among the flock, we might think.

In his *Confessions* (book 5), Augustine reflects on science and faith. He explains why he joined the Manichees for some nine years. He was attracted to their view of evil as a force in the world for which neither God nor human beings are responsible. To Augustine, a sensitive young man, this theory gave breathing space. Buttressing it was an elaborate astrology that related human destiny to celestial phenomena.

Augustine's wide reading in science led him to question the Manichees' account of the world, and so to be sceptical of their religious theories. He set their account against the consensus that he found in the works of mathematics and astronomy that he had read. In contrast with Manichaeic theories, scientists offered an explanation of celestial phenomena. He explains:

I saw that their calculations were borne out by mathematics, the regular succession of the seasons and the visible evidence of the stars. I compared these with the teaching of Manes. In his writings I could find no explanations of the solstices and the equinoxes or of eclipses or of similar phenomena such as I had read about in books written by secular scientists.

Augustine concluded that if Manichaeic theories of the natural world displayed such

ignorance and pretension, their religious views must also be suspect. He went on to reflect more broadly on the relationship between scientific knowledge and Christian faith.

Characteristically, he does not consider it abstractly, but from the perspective of how confusion between the two might affect the Christian believer.

Whenever I hear a brother Christian talk in such a way as to show that he is ignorant of these scientific matters, and confuses one thing with another, I listen with patience to his theories and think it is no harm to him that he does not know the true facts about material things ... The danger lies in thinking that such knowledge is part and parcel of what he must believe to save his soul and in presuming to make obstinate declarations about things of which he knows nothing.

Augustine's intellectual style is characteristically modern in its hard-headedness. When he compares different explanations of natural phenomena he reads the best science available to him. He then asks which of the alternative explanations is best supported by mathematical calculation and best predicts the phenomena it claims to explain.

When he reflects on faith — 'what we must believe to save our soul' — he carefully distinguishes it from scientific knowledge. Christians can afford to be mistaken about scientific explanations. Such error is without cost to their faith. But they run the risk of confusing their scientific theories with faith, and so of incorporating badly understood science into the things that must be believed. This distorts Christian faith and imposes unjustified burdens of belief on other Christians.

Augustine's argument is sharp and clear. His distinction between the businesses of science and faith is particularly unfussy and confident. It may even be ahead of our contemporary game. Augustine certainly cuts through the often confused debate about the origins of the world. His argument suggests that it would be dangerous to support on religious grounds theories of creationism and intelligent design. This would be to confuse the areas of faith and science to the detriment of faith.

But Augustine remains a man of his own century and is the more interesting for doing so. After carefully summarising the conclusions of the non-Christian scientists, he gives them a serve: they might have been right, but they were motivated by pride. In the 21st century we certainly wouldn't bag people we disagree with, would we?

## Baptism by fire

FICTION

*Brett McBean*



### Unborn lives

‘Why are they doing this? We didn’t do anything wrong!’

You agree, but you wish the woman would shut up. Also, her breath reeks of stale cigarettes, which you should be used to, but it sickens you more than the fetid air wafting in through the tiny holes dotting the darkness.

All you know is that you’re in a forest somewhere, lying facedown in a box. There are no animal noises, only the occasional chanting from the unseen masses outside, and the frequent yammering of the stranger beside you, whose name you asked a little while ago, and whose response was: ‘What does a name matter at a time like this?’

How you got here is a mystery. You can’t remember what you were doing at the time of your kidnapping, but you can remember everything else: you were born in Melbourne, Australia; you have a wife and two kids; and you work at a computer software company — although you now feel as though you haven’t really lived your life, merely viewed it like a movie on fast-forward.

With a jolt, the box starts to move; a gradual ascent, like a roller coaster beginning its climb to the top of the rise.

The woman screams once, loud and piercing. ‘OhmyGodwhat’s happening?’

You hear her trying to break free, but you know that’s not possible. The box doesn’t allow for much movement.

The woman soon gives up trying. She goes back to sobbing and uttering familiar phrases such as: ‘Why are they doing this?’ and, ‘I haven’t done anything wrong.’ But this time she adds, ‘...have I?’

Is this punishment? you wonder.

But you haven’t done anything wrong, either.

Nothing you can remember, anyway.

And then a strange voice says:

*You won’t do anything wrong. Not now.*

You look out the nearest hole; see the forest moving by slowly and then you glimpse dark figures below.

There's about fifty, all wearing dark clothing, and chanting. You can't see their faces and although their voices are many and echo through the dense forest, you can't understand what they're saying.

The woman sobs: 'I have a husband. I'm only thirty-eight. I haven't even lived. Christ I need a smoke.'

She's the same age as you, and this fact scares you, though you're not sure why, and like her, you too ache for a cigarette.

The compartment becomes hotter and as the trunks of the pine trees become the tops, you lose sight of the figures below, though not before one of them looks up and you glimpse a white skeletal face, grinning.

The image stays with you, even when you close your eyes; you can't rid your mind of the face — it's eerily familiar — and when light pushes through your world, you open your eyes to a luminous orange pulsating through the holes, and the woman turns and looks at you, tears glinting off her milky-white cheeks. 'There's a fire,' she says flatly. She doesn't blink. 'A huge furnace. We're heading straight towards it.'

'What did we do?' you cry. 'Why are they doing this to us? We've done nothing wrong!'

*But you would have,* the voice intones. *That's why we're stopping you before you could do the damage.*

There's a jolt. You feel the box turning.

You dare to look outside.

What shocks you the most is the sheer number of boxes following yours up the conveyor belt; a seemingly endless sea of smooth brown crates, all punched with tiny holes, so they resemble chocolate Swiss cheese, all, presumably, containing bodies within.

As the flames get nearer and the heat more intense, you notice, stamped in bold red on the side of the box closest to yours — *24, fire, accidental, number of deaths: 5*. On the box behind — *17, fire, deliberate, number of deaths: 16*.

And underneath, the one common bit of writing, printed in smaller letters — 'by order of the Death Prevention Agency, sanctioned by the World Peace Organisation'.

*What in Christ's name is the World Peace Organisation?* you wonder.

And whose deaths are they preventing?

Certainly not yours.

Your vision expands to see other conveyor belts — hundreds of them all over the land, crisscrossing each other over and between the statuesque pine trees. There are thousands of boxes rolling through the forest and these are the signs you can make out: Serial Killers; Motor Vehicle ‘Accidents’; Gang-related Shootings. You watch with a sickening punch to the stomach as the boxes in their respective groups are: sliced with over-sized swords; rammed into each other with powerful hydraulic arms; and shot at with all types of guns.

You turn away from the ghoulish sight. Catch a glimpse of a large sign over your section just before your vision fills with orange. It reads — Fire-related Deaths: Accidental & Deliberate.

The woman lets out a soul-shattering scream. You’ve never smelt human flesh cooking before (you never got the chance), and it’s worse than anything you’ve ever (would have) smelt.

You close your eyes, hoping to shut your mind off from the horror, but you see the spectre of the grinning skeleton, only now it’s surrounded by a red glow which infuses its eyes with demonic glee and the only sound coming from the woman now is her sizzling flesh.

The skeleton smiles, says without moving its rotted mouth:

*Two by two, just like on the Ark.*

The punishment fits the crime.

*What crime?* you scream in your head.

*The crime you would have committed. Had you been born.*

*But I remember my life — my wife, my job!*

*Future events that were projected into your mind. We wanted to show you what would have been, the life you would have lived. You deserve at least that much.*

When you feel the sting of fire, you hazard a guess as to what your box reads: ‘38, fire, accidental (surely not deliberate), number of deaths: 4’.

You think you’ll miss your wife and kids.

But you’ll never get the chance to find out.

## Trade partnerships no ticket out of poverty

### POLITICS

*Dan Read*

Over the past few months, the European Union has cast an increasingly eager eye over the markets of the African, Caribbean and Pacific group (ACP) of nations.

At what is hoped will be the end of five years of negotiations, varying Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are due to be implemented in a number of compliant states. Their purpose, according to the trade commission, is to establish 'new trading arrangements removing progressively barriers of trade between EU and ACP countries', and to create 'sustainable development and contribute to poverty eradication in the ACP countries'.



The EPAs will replace the Cotonou Agreement on mutual export and import legislation between the EU and ACP. Older legislation has been condemned as 'too limited', which has prompted sweeping new measures in order to establish additional free trade zones.

According to a special briefing paper, the trade commission sees the EPAs as taking a 'new, more comprehensive approach (that will) tackle all barriers to trade, mostly through re-enforcing regional integration and addressing supply-side constraints, and form secure, WTO-compatible trade arrangements'.

There is a large amount of scepticism regarding the new agreements. Many countries, in particular NGOs and the charity sector, have expressed fears that the EPAs will lead to the devastation of their respective markets. They fear a mutual lowering of tariff barriers could allow for the EU to wedge open foreign markets for its own produce, while having little to fear from the much smaller competitive power of the ACP.

Groups such as the International Peasants Movement (small-holding rural farming is prevalent in ACP nations) have been particularly vocal, stating that 'the EPAs will open up ACP markets to devastating competition from EU exports'. They believe further measures will only 'lead to increased social inequality and poverty through the destruction of local industries and small-scale agriculture, damaging employment and livelihoods'.

Countries such as South Africa — who represent the more financially robust African nations — have also refused to sign. South Africa appears to prefer its own Trade and Development Cooperation Agreement (TDCA), which has been in force in one form or another since 2000.

The EU subsequently moved to combat such opposition by threatening to impose additional tariff barriers on ACP produce entering the European market if an agreement was

not reached by 2008.

This caused a veritable outcry in the targeted countries, who felt they were being bullied into acceptance. Speaking after the EU-Africa summit last December, Senegal's President Wade stated that 'it was said several times during the plenary session and it was said again this morning. Africa states reject the EPAs.'

As of the end of 2007 only 35 out of the 79 ACP states were alleged to have signed up. Those that still resist may now have to endure a change in trade relations that is far from favourable. As part of its routine charity work in combating global poverty, War on Want has taken a particular interest in the issue. In recent correspondence, their Director of Campaigns and Policy, John Hilary, stated that:

The EU is specifically saying that ACP countries which don't sign up to EPAs (at least in a framework state) by the end of 2007 will go back to the normal access which developing countries have to the EU market under GSP rules, which includes facing tariffs on many goods.

However, this does not apply to the substantial number of ACP countries which are 'Least Developed Countries' (LDCs), since they already qualify for duty-free access to EU markets under the Everything But Arms initiative. Key sectors which will be affected include Kenya's flower exports, which is one reason why the Kenyans have agreed to be the first to sign.

Unfortunately, given the resistance still being offered by multiple states, things have not changed for the better. According to groups like the Overseas Development Institute, while import barriers have been removed from EPA signatories, 'higher, less preferential duties' have been imposed 'on those non-LDC ACP states that have not initialled EPAs'.

Therefore, despite the most optimistic declarations from the EU, it seems the EPAs may not be the world's long awaited ticket out of poverty.

## **The message reads dry bones**

POETRY

*Helen Hagemann*

### **Drought**

Somewhere in the southern universe  
rain has disappeared.  
Even the palest flowers have flown.  
This river can't move through the bright fields,  
can't dampen a platypus's young.  
Boughs have fallen in, along with currawongs.  
And the message reads dry bones of a dung-heap.  
You hear the river cry in the darkness.  
It takes a breath over trickling stones,  
over endless white cracks, where even the lilies  
are ornaments in mud.  
Insects work in the darkness,  
so the owl is not alone.  
Every year, now ten, the geese return  
to the dung-heap,  
to the bog's soft heart,  
to the cold stones  
that run forever.

### **Two Versions of Rain**

i.

Rain taps a tin-roof telegram of young hopes.



You slumber deep when it rains.

A kind of music surrounds, opens the sky  
to let you soak in its rhythms.

You remember lying awake at night,  
listening to a yard of leaves, summer baking  
gutters on the roof, creature noises;  
frogs in locomotion percussing you to sleep.

In autumn, windows opened to sliced sheets  
of rain, trains tooting down the drainpipe track,  
an invisible meander ready to take off, or the quiet  
drip, drip, drip, of a quarter-turned faucet.

The night sprouted temple songs, Christmas beetles  
ticking inventory, cicadas rustling up a prayer,  
crickets never subtle, never whispering,  
hiding in the roof like contraband.

Rain. Rain on the roof, shouting libretto  
or teasing out a silence of its own.

ii.

You're curiously wide awake when it rains,  
in a trance of language, a verbal art.  
The sky rumbles overhead, unleashes its mission  
to swallow veranda, porch and fernery whole.

You grope in the dark for the alphabetic order  
of bed-lamp, door latch, raincoat, umbrella;  
yellow cord to unravel canvas awnings.

You're more versatile than an insomniac.

Feeling lucid, you're looking for that allusive word

— imagination!

Awake and soaked in night's vision,

gumboots squeak on concrete path;

a lexicon louder than the illuminated sky.

You go through all the motions, conscious

that the family are bodies under thick sheets.

The rain is heavier than the weight on your eyelids.

You've reached that point when you hallucinate,

bed covers strangling neck, legs and feet.

The situation can be decoded in one, rapid eye

movement, in one disappearing act through drains,

that final trickle to a sizzled morning heat,

and last turn of the author's tap.

## Mining the heartache of lead contamination

### COMMUNITY

*Margaret Rice*



Mt Isa in Queensland is currently experiencing 'lead-alert'. Children are being exposed to excessive lead levels. Having previously lived the lead contamination story with small children, I know the heartache and frustration it causes.

Lead's incompatibility with human physiology was first observed in 200BC. Children are most affected. Absorption by developing brains and nervous systems can lead to hyperactivity, lack of concentration and loss of IQ.

The effects are subtle, and it's this nerve-racking subtlety that causes nightmares for families. Do we move away? Do we stay? Often enough, one parent wants to go and the other sees the problem in less dramatic terms, so it strains parental relationships.

There's usually dissembling when the spotlight lands on a lead mining town. Mt Isa is no exception. Since 2003, Swiss based Xstrata has owned the mines in question. According to an article in *The Australian* (December 2006) 290 tonnes of lead were released into the air in Mt Isa in 2004-2005. Queensland's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said politics had prevented air quality monitoring at Mt Isa's two smelters.

On 20 March 2007 ABC News quoted Xstrata's Ed Turley: 'There's already extensive natural sources of heavy metals in Mount Isa due to the levels of natural mineralisation.'

And Mt Isa Mayor, Ron McCullough, said in the same report: 'I don't think it is a major problem.'

It wasn't a view shared by the EPA, and these laissez-faire reactions weren't good PR. The next day the company announced a public meeting when, according to ABC News, data was released showing soil lead samples from the area are up to 33 times above federal health guidelines.

Several public meetings followed and, alongside them, guidelines for parents on protecting their children — among these, Queensland Health's advice on the importance of washing children's faces and hands. Such advice is all well and good as long as it is not sold as the solution.

At a public meeting I attended 20 years ago similar ideas came up, including frenzied cleaning, scrubbing vegetables in salt, ensuring children never played outside and getting them to wash vigorously before and after inside play. The more obsessive you were, the better.

It's clever. It turns a public health issue into an internalised housekeeping one. It's

impossible to maintain the cleaning schedule and paid work. And the endless housecleaning doesn't involve developing a relationship with a child, but one with an industrial strength vacuum cleaner and bone gnawing cleaning agents.

In Mt Isa last year Xstrata commissioned a new study. When involved in a lead action group at the time of our crisis, we learnt this was a popular strategy with mining companies. This distraction takes a lot of time, makes the company look earnest and tells us nothing new.

Professor Michael Moore, from Queensland University's National Research Centre for Environmental Toxicology, told the ABC on 2 April that he believes it is already clear where the Mt Isa problem lies: 'There's evidence, immediately, that the cover and the barriers are not adequate.'

*Eureka Street* spoke to Professor Moore's colleague Professor Jack Ng.

'The factors which contribute are historic mining practices, geological factors and current mining practices such as smelting techniques,' he said.

'With geographical factors you can't really do anything to make it safe for small children, with historic issues there is a real challenge. But you can do something about current smelting practices.'

Improving its PR, last month Xstrata said lead is part of life in a mining town, although it had committed to improving its environmental performance. It also identified all the steps it has put in place since 2003 to ensure that its lead emissions drop in the future.

But the trouble is, the historic lead load of Mt Isa is enough to cause serious risk to children because the lead is already in the soil. And this historic load needs considerable financial investment to fix.

'Xstrata and Mt Isa have to play catch up,' Professor Ng explained.

Inevitably, the families who are better off will move, leaving the most vulnerable to stay and live with the problem. This includes the Aboriginal communities whose children are over-represented among the Mt Isa children with high lead levels.

*Eureka Street* asked Xstrata's chief operating officer Steve de Kruijff, though their community relations advisor, if the historic links between lead and risks to small children are communicated to job applicants on recruitment. He was too busy to comment.

If lead mining companies want to argue that lead poisoning goes hand in hand with lead mining, they need to spell this out when they recruit. Too often, those in the loop know the risks with lead. But the first time most parents find out is when they are holding their child's blood lead level test results in their hands.

## Rough diamonds can hurt people

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

WA Opposition Leader Troy Buswell was publicly humiliated after admitting inappropriate behaviour in 2005 towards a female staff member in his staff. The reported incident, and the emotion he displayed at last week's media conference, has become a media plaything that has paradoxically turned Buswell himself into a victim.



There have been a number of attempts at damage control since the media conference. It is unfortunate that they have been directed more towards the electibility of the party than the damage to the dignity of the human beings involved.

At the time of the media conference, it was not clear where the incident was going. It seems some even thought the admission might give Buswell and the WA Liberals some degree of political traction ahead of the state election expected later this year. There were dissenters, but party members appeared steadfast in their loyalty to the leader. Deputy Kim Hames described Buswell as a 'rough diamond with a robust sense of humour'.

It left the party open to public speculation that they were revelling in the fresh turn of events that had perversely made their leader the stuff of popular legend, at least among other *rough diamonds* in the electorate.

It was not far-fetched to compare Buswell with fellow newsmaker Cory Worthington Delaney, whose irresponsible party boy antics won him star status earlier this year. There is no turning back for Worthington, with his much-heralded gatecrashing of Channel Ten's *Big Brother* household taking place last night. The public lauding of Delaney has given acceptability to gatecrashing parties and, by extension, the invasion of people's private space.

But for Buswell, it's turning out to be a different story. He was roundly condemned by radio talkback callers late last week. As late as Friday, he was still arguing that he was the best person to lead the party to the election. But the consensus in his party was shifting quickly, and he is likely to lose the leadership in a spill today or tomorrow.

It has become clear that Buswell is no longer the appropriate person to lead the WA Liberals. But what is most unfortunate about the succession of events is that the party appears to have been prompted to act only when it became obvious that its electibility was at stake. The issue of Buswell's actions was secondary.

*Eureka Street* will soon publish an article on workplace bullying, written by former Victorian Equal Opportunity Commissioner Moira Rayner. She is critical of a culture that tolerates workplace bullying which, alongside sexual harassment, was an important dimension of

Buswell's reported conduct:

'Bullying is a massive problem in working life throughout Australia. People get hurt when they are publicly humiliated and offended. It is especially serious when perpetrated by a leader, and even in 2005 that is what Mr Buswell was.'

Troy Buswell's days as WA Liberal leader may be numbered, but it seems there is work to be done before the human rights and dignity of individual citizens is put ahead of other prizes such as electibility and stardom.

## Waking up from the housing nightmare

### COMMUNITY

*Colin Long*



Let's face it: the Australian housing sector is a mess, with no easy solutions. The affordability crisis is entirely of our own making, but fixing it will require much more than the policies currently on offer from both state and federal governments — more land releases and subsidisation of infrastructure provision.

The problem is that real estate in all its aspects — from speculative construction of new houses to negative gearing, from renovations to the national sport of sitting back and watching the house go up in value by 10 per cent a year — implicates such a large proportion of the population that few governments have the courage to do anything that will either cool off, let alone reduce, house price inflation or call into question the national obsession with houses and what to put in them.

The fundamental issue is that real estate development, both commercial and residential, is now one of the driving forces of the Australian economy.

To a certain extent this has always been the case. But in the past — with the possible exception of the 1870s and 1880s in Melbourne, which ended in 1890s depression — the construction of houses, shops, offices and factories was one element of relatively balanced economic development, with the parallel growth of the agricultural and industrial sectors. Large scale private and public investment went primarily into the development of the country's productive capacity, while real estate represented a secondary circuit of capital, dominated, especially in residential construction, by small scale investment by owners or small builders.

Since the onset of global economic restructuring in the 1970s, Australia has witnessed a pattern of declining industrialisation, with occasional but short-lived revivals. In order to fend off economic decline prompted by changes in the global system of industrial production, which have affected Australia's old industrial cities in particular — chiefly Melbourne, Adelaide and, to a lesser extent, Sydney — state governments have encouraged the growth of the real estate sector as a means of economic development in its own right.

Hence state governments have liberalised planning laws, abolished the old planning agencies like the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, sold land on the cheap, facilitated big, controversial developments and so on.

Australians have been encouraged by Federal Government policy to borrow more and more to finance ever greater investment in housing. This has, in turn, stimulated the further disproportionate growth of the finance industry. The recent experience of the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the US should alert us to the risks of allowing that industry to become too powerful.

Australia has little public sector debt because we stopped spending public money on necessary public infrastructure. But private debt has spiralled out of control as we've been encouraged to invest more and more in housing. Negative gearing and burgeoning superannuation payouts have encouraged the purchase of rental and 'investment' properties, adding to demand while supply can't keep up. Tax cuts, interest rate decreases (now reversing) and easy credit encouraged higher borrowing, allowing the bidding up of prices.

A substantial amount of the Australian economy now relies entirely on the ever-increasing expansion of household debt — and on house size. Larger houses have to be filled with more goods. The technology sector dutifully plays its part, producing new consumer talismans like plasma screen TVs, which also grow ever larger. Thus the building materials and consumer goods sectors grow apace, providing jobs and circulating money through the economy.

But notice another trend — the state of Australia's current account. Most of those consumer goods come from overseas — China mainly — so our obsession with housing is helping to drive us further into deficit with the rest of the world. This consumer splurge is also destroying our environment and pumping more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere both here and in China.

We can now get some idea of the extent of the problem. It is not just Joe and Jo Suburbia that have a lot riding on real estate. Successive state and federal governments have built Australia's prosperity on debt-fuelled investment in real estate and in housing-related consumption. Taking the heat out of house price inflation is extremely difficult, because the whole system is based on the expansion of credit and consumption that house price inflation allows.

The solution to the housing affordability crisis includes a massive increase in not-for-profit affordable housing through state housing agencies and, more substantially, housing cooperatives, as well as improved metropolitan-wide planning processes that increase densities in ways that are acceptable to local communities (and some local communities may have to change their attitudes to acceptable densities).

Governments at all levels will have to take a more active role in metropolitan planning and development, rather than leaving it all up to the private sector. Governments must stop encouraging speculation in house price growth, through changes to tax policy. We need a moratorium on big commercial developments in the suburbs — how many more hardware, electrical goods and car accessory monster stores do we need? Instead these sites should be



considered for residential development.

Above all else, what is needed to overcome Australia's housing crisis is the development of a mature, diversified and sustainable economy, one that isn't reliant on digging stuff up and selling it overseas so that it can be used to produce things that can be sold back to us on tick, to fill our ever bigger, ever more expensive houses.

## Modern feminist dialogue wears ladylike veneer

### BOOK REVIEW

*Frances Devlin-Glass*

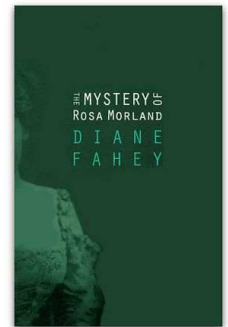
**Fahey, Diane: *The Mystery of Rosa Morland*, Melbourne: Clouds of Magellan, 2008, ISBN: 978 -0-9802983-3-8, RRP: \$24.95**

This verse novel is different from Diane Fahey's earlier work, but the continuities are striking. What Fahey does best is immerse herself in a world and dialogue with it. This time the world is turn-of-the-century Britain, refracted through a genre — detective fiction — much-loved by the poet.

It will be difficult for bookshops to house the book as its genre is wonderfully hybrid: crime fiction/poetry. The work has some of the trappings of a classic of the genre, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. As in Christie, a part of the charm in Fahey's verse-novel is its surface, a veneer only, of ladylikeness.

That it is a veneer only becomes obvious when the other participants of the carriage don't act like the usual assemblage of falsely accused suspects. Something else is afoot, and this is where this new addition to Diane Fahey's corpus has links with her past writing. It's a feminist dialogue about confinement in marriages that plainly don't work, best symbolised by Dolores, the Amazonian macaw, who is one of the most engaging characters in the verse-novel:

Mulch carpet, and chandeliers of leaves  
hanging from hot blue — I played the distances  
between them, my scarlet and yellow cries  
filled the rainforest's dripping voice-box.  
I was kidnapped, taken to live inside  
a closed collective mind — among porcelain  
sylphs and swains, stuffed owls, aspidistras.  
The eyes of peacock feathers gleamed by altars  
of heaped rubies, and died with them: transposed,  
like myself, to paraphernalia.  
an exiled Amazon queen, I gazed through  
gilt bars, the gift of speech my only joy.



It is delicious when symbols, for instance, Dolores who is a prisoner of an overstuffed Victorian treasure-house, do double-service as characters and contributors to the argument. The verse novel articulates a very modern feminist take on sexual and actual violence within marriage and shows a number of steely women taking the action necessary to escape abuse.

However, it is not for the plot that one reads such a work. It is the texture of the pastiche, the understated poetry, the elegantly handled argument, the exotic characterisation and the refractions of particular characters through other characters' perspectives.

I relished the submerged plots about the vengeful third wife and her villainous, chilling spouse, and the invented works by Rosa Moreland which are another way of splintering and refracting the concerns of the work. These pastiche passages, from different novels, are parodic, gems in their own right, wonderfully overheated in the manner of pulp fiction of the era, but doing double service as metafiction:

She heard the wind in the yew tree, a raven's jagged cry. The hinges of the crypt door creaked again ... Footsteps coming closer; a discordant tune being sung. Then a heavy sack thumped down onto her chest, followed by a thick rain of earth, covering both her and ... what could it be but poor, dead Tabitha [her cat]? Was she about to be buried alive?

Is the lady novelist writing her gothic fictions as a form of therapy, or do the fictions (and her readers) require her to take risks in real life in order to fuel the fiction writing? Is oppression a bit exciting and over-stimulating for its victims? Dangerously erotic? Life imitates art which imitates life.

Another continuity. The work exemplifies stylistic metamorphoses in each of its dozens of sections, without compromising integrity at all. And the plots which are not quite tied up (why is Mario in the narrative? Is he the alter-ego of someone else?) are splendidly teasing postmodern touches.

I enjoy too the architectonics of the work — the way it introduces you to characters and the *mise-en-scene* before the *dramatis personae* and their histories beyond the scope of the narrative are presented. The latter are accomplished in a style that would have done a Victorian novelist proud. An unusual and deft way to tie threads together. Almost like an appendix.

'A study in grey-garbed propriety', it's cunning, subversive work, not unlike Diane Fahey's public persona: sweet, self-erasing and ladylike to all appearances, but laughing, subversive non-conformist, and passionate on the other side of her face. Her free spirit is most fully encountered in her poetry.

## Arab disunity on road from Damascus

### POLITICS

*Shahram Akbarzadeh*



The Arab League Summit in Damascus earlier this year put on display the deep rift between Arab states. Rather than a show of unity, the Summit revealed the political disarray that fractures the Arab world.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two of the most reliable Arab states for the United States, and the two power houses in the region, snubbed the Summit in protest against Syria's links with Hizbullah in Lebanon. Lebanon, Jordan and Yemen also refused to send senior level representation.

This was an effective boycott and meant that the Arab Summit was not in a position to deal with critical issues of political stalemate in Lebanon and ongoing sectarian violence in Iraq.

These states blame Syria for the political deadlock in Lebanon, which has left the country without a president since November last year. They also accuse Syria of destabilising the region by siding with Iran. King Abdullah of Jordan articulated this sentiment last year when he warned about an emerging Shia's crescent in the Middle East, which includes Hizbullah in Lebanon, the Allawid political elite in Syria, the Shia dominated government in Iraq and the Iranian Islamic Republic.

The growing assertiveness of Iran in the post-Taliban/post-Saddam period and growing links between Iran and Iraq are major sources of concern for Arab regimes. The fall of Saddam has seriously changed the geo-strategic balance of power as Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, had invested heavily in Saddam's Iraq as a bulwark against the revolutionary zeal of Iran. Saddam's fall and the rise of a Shia political elite with established ties with Iran have removed the strategic constraints that kept Iran in check.

The Israeli-Hizbullah war in 2006 which started after Hizbullah launched guerrilla raids against Israel is widely seen in the region as a consequence of Iran's willingness to engage in a proxy war with Israel. The fact that Syria is also a major sponsor of Hizbullah has only served to drive a wedge between Arab states. As the Damascus summit demonstrated, the Arab world is divided between US allies and the rest.

But this is not the only political demarcation. The Arab world is also suffering from a growing rift between the ruling regimes and the people. There is widespread discontent in Arab streets about a distinct lack of political will to settle the burning issues of Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq. The Arab street yearns for a pan-Arab response to Arab problems, while the ruling regimes pursue their own self-preservation.

This rift has major repercussions for political reform. The political regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia have everything to lose by engaging in reforms. They may be the best friends Washington has in the Arab world, but that does not mean they would follow the so-called democracy project. If they do, there is every chance they would lose power and deprive the United States of strategic allies. The 2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt in which candidates affiliated with the banned Muslim Brotherhood registered strong support among the electorate at the expense of the ruling party was a vivid reminder of the risks.

Washington has grasped the reality of the situation. It either pushes for political openness and risks losing its Arab allies, or accepts the authoritarian regimes as legitimate at the expense of democracy. After a period of vacillation, Washington has opted for the latter.

This policy of expediency has undermined the standing of the United States, and has contributed to a widening of the rift between ruling regimes and their subjects.

## Maintaining the rage against WorkChoices

### POLITICS

*Tim Battin*

One of the aims of governments introducing far-reaching change is obvious: to see new laws bedded down and survive long enough to gain widespread acceptance. Progressive governments, especially, hope for the public's approval because they realise that, from a progressive and democratic point of view, extensive support is the only game in town.



Governments attempting regressive change, on the other hand, quite often need only rely on seeking the approval of the loudest and most powerful. Even if this method should fail at the ballot box, it might achieve the bulk of its purpose if a new government, claiming to be progressive, acquiesces by leaving most of the unjust legislation in place.

The frustrating and worrying aspect of the industrial relations discourse in 2007 was how appallingly narrow it was. For the most part, discussion centred on AWAs, erosion of penalty rates, and the Coalition's removal of the no-disadvantage test.

These were important (and repugnant) aspects of WorkChoices, but they were not its driving force. The philosophical mainstay of the Coalition's attack was its comprehensive undermining of union collective action.

WorkChoices made Australia the world's only western democracy where employers faced a fine if they made agreements that allowed union officials into a work site. Similar provisions, such as union training, were to be prohibited content; in Howard's Australia, employees or unionists could be fined for even asking for such a provision.

These and innumerable, similar aspects of WorkChoices constitute the proper context from which an assessment should be made of any legislation claiming to repeal or ameliorate the Howard Government's IR laws.

As the name suggests, the new Government's Transition to Forward with Fairness Act, which commenced on 28 March, is a stop-gap framework designed to address some immediate problems about replacing AWAs with Individual Transitional Employment Agreements, reinstating a no-disadvantage test, and covering outworkers with relevant awards. It would be unreasonable to expect a transitional act to contain all the sorts of measures citizens would want to see in a thorough overhaul of the Howard legislation.

Having said this, it is disappointing that some other changes were not made in the interim. It is difficult to see, for example, what delay or other problem would have been caused by abolishing the prohibited content section of the Act.

But more broadly there are some worrying signs that the Labor Government will interpret – or has already interpreted – the 2005-07 grass-roots campaign against WorkChoices, involving unions, churches, and community groups, in the most conservative light possible. The Rudd Government could even be described as bordering on indifferent towards the groundswell opposition to the Howard legislation.

One major voice of opposition outside the unions was the Catholic Church. Drawing on Catholic social teaching, church organisations were able to point to numerous ways in which the legislation offended Catholic social justice principles. To the extent that WorkChoices shifted bargaining power further to employers, prevented or thwarted workers' collective action, or removed the authority of the independent Commission, it was clear that Catholic social teaching was violated.

The specific means by which these affronts were achieved are too numerous to list here. It is perhaps more fruitful to focus on a fundamental objection to the way political debate has been conducted in the past two decades, especially but not exclusively pertaining to industrial relations. It is what might be termed the 'we-can't-go-back' argument, which is not an argument at all, but an assertion.

The so-called 'modernisation' agenda is a necessary fig leaf to cover what would otherwise be plain to see: changes that rely on facile jingoism such as 'moving forward' (with or without fairness), and where their intrinsic merit is not explained, are, *prima facie*, shifts of power to the already powerful.

Catholic social thought defies this fashion – not only in a straightforward sense of upholding specific principles such as the primacy of labour over capital, or that unions, far from being 'third parties' in the employment relationship, are the legitimate representatives of workers, but in a fundamental and general sense insofar as Catholic social thought is grounded in a rich tradition that does not blow with the latest wind.

It is noteworthy that, shortly before last year's election, the late *Quadrant* editor P. P. McGuinness – God rest his soul – was reduced to claiming that the only problem with Catholic social thought was that it was 'out of date'. He did not even bother to explain why what many Catholics regard as universal principles were now to be regarded as obsolete.

The current wind is still in a decidedly neoliberal direction, and in the public debate accompanying the next parliamentary bill on IR, proponents of Catholic social thought will have to remain vigilant about universal truths that need to be enunciated, explained, and defended.

## Fat-free finale for loyal 'losers'

### TELEVISION

Tim Kroenert



A confession: over the past two years I've become a regular (though not religious) viewer of *The Biggest Loser*. This interest has been aided by virtue of living in a household where the show is often on the TV, and abetted by a Foxtel IQ box that lets us record the program and skip through tedious 'filler' to focus on the competition itself.

I've consistently sneered at reality TV, and always considered *The Biggest Loser* to be a particularly objectionable example. Yet in the lead-up to the season finale, due to air tonight, I've been forced to reassess a couple of my prejudices, while others remain firmly intact.

Don't get me wrong. This is trash TV. Some of its dubious features are common throughout the 'reality' genre: the formulaic structure, the emotional manipulation, the vapidity of the format, the sniping and backstabbing which is cast as 'drama'.

Others are idiosyncratic: the nauseating pap-psychology dribbled by the Aussie trainers — as if bulky biceps give them the ability to psychoanalyse their emotionally vulnerable charges — and the try-hard tough talk spouted by militaristic motivator, The Commando.

Then there's the 'temptations', where high-fat, high-calorie foods (how can you fit so much bacon and fried eggs onto one plate?) are dangled in front of contestants, with the promise of prizes such as a week's immunity from elimination if they give in and scoff up. And, of course, there's the irony of a show that purports to celebrate weight loss while keeping thousands of viewers pinned to their sofas and their television sets.

As far as losing weight goes, the 'big brother' approach seems a particularly undignified one. That is a personal judgement. I'm a self-conscious exerciser. I prefer to pound pavement under cover of night. I use the gym at times when I know it will be nearly empty. The idea of sweating it out on a treadmill or struggling through my stomach crunches in front of a camera and a television audience seems totally abhorrent.

So while my overriding emotional response to the decreasingly overweight contestants on *The Biggest Loser* is one of pity and vicarious shame, that has more to do with personal biases than anything else.

I've reassessed another personal prejudice. In the throes of skepticism, I usually scoff at the seemingly insincere camaraderie between contestants. After all, at the end of the day each has



their individual eye on the cash prize, and to hell with camaraderie.

It was for this reason that last year, I was rooting for Chris. Cast by the show's producers as the series villain, Chris was the outsider who came into the house during the final few weeks and swiped victory out from under the 'real' contestants' noses.

Chris wasn't into playing games, except to the extent that he was there to play *the* game. I respected his frankness, and was pleased when his skeletal form stepped onto the scales at the finale, and he was declared to be the 'biggest loser'. There can be only one winner, so surely to be openly self-interested is the only way to play without being disingenuous.

Or so I thought. This year I've been eating my words, like one of those overstuffed plates of bacon and eggs. Two of this year's final three, who will take to the stage for tonight's final weigh-off, have gotten through simply by being too damn nice to vote out.

Only a seriously heartless mug could have eliminated baby-faced Sam, with his cheeky grin and little-brother affability, or 30-something Alison, the unofficial 'mum' to the other contestants, who gets weepy every time she talks about missing her young daughters back home.

This year's final three have put paid to the idea that 'every person for his or herself' is the only way to win. The third finalist, Kirsten, is a former Olympian with one hell of a competitive streak. She's been a contender from the get-go, but has made it to the final thanks in no small part to an alliance with Sam and Alison.

In an apparent reversal of the reality TV formula, a pact based on loyalty and friendship, not on backstabbing and strategy, has allowed this triumvirate to stand strong while the other contestants have gradually competed themselves out of the game.

It could be that 2008 goes down in history as the year *The Biggest Loser* redeemed itself. On the other hand, Sam, Alison and Kirsten may have simply rewritten the strategy book, so that next year's competitors exploit teamwork as a way to achieve individual success.

## Indigenous summiteers put dreams into practice

### THE MEDDLING PRIEST

*Frank Brennan*

Not since the 1998 Wik controversy had Noel Pearson and I enjoyed a pleasant conversation. But we did at the 2020 Summit. Back in 1998, the Labor Party was adamant that the Howard government amendments to the Native Title Act were utterly unacceptable, and they would be reversed at the first opportunity. Wik and the Native Title Act hardly featured in any 2020 Summit discussions.



The Summit was an opportunity to leave old conflicts at the door and look beyond the short-term political future. With a new government in Canberra after 11 years, all came with their favourite agenda item and wish list. But even these had to be scrutinised and packed down with an eye to Australia in four elections' time, regardless of who might be in government and who might be running for election — Samantha '20 or whoever.

I was one of 20 or 30 non-indigenous Australians privileged to join the largely indigenous group discussing options for the future of indigenous Australia. I came to Canberra hoping to hear new, young Aboriginal voices. Some of them were there, but unfortunately they were not heard above the media din surrounding the established Aboriginal leaders occupying their well known positions.

Much of the media commentary since the Summit has drawn lines between those committed to a rights agenda (constitutional recognition, treaty, representative bodies to replace ATSIC, UN declarations etc.) and those committed to alleviating the plight of children in remote communities.

But being an ideas summit for the long term, this meeting was not either-or. It was both-and. We were allowed to dream and strategise about closing gaps while also wondering how best to recognise the enduring rights and entitlements of indigenous Australians once the gaps are closed, and even while we are working together to close the gaps.

The symbolism was strong from the beginning, with the indigenous welcome to country in Parliament House, following upon the National Apology two months before. Whatever the blemishes in Brendan Nelson's February apology speech, the summiteers saw the apology as a new beginning, as a bipartisan commitment to put the past behind us and do the hard work in closing the gaps in health and education as completely as possible.

The nation was introduced to a bold new idea in the presentation at the opening plenary by 24-year-old PhD student Sana Nakata, who spoke proudly of her mixed heritage, proclaiming that there was no need for her migrant narrative to suppress her Torres Strait one.

During one of the session breaks Peter Yu told a few of us about his recent visit to China tracing family roots, while in the formal sessions he was relentless in advocating the preconditions for Aboriginal business success in the Kimberley.

Though a long-term critic of the Howard government's ham-fisted federal intervention in the Northern Territory, I participated in a small group with Aboriginal magistrate Sue Gordon, who has been instrumental in advising government on the intervention strategies. At the summit, we were urged to think bold new ideas, to be positive, and to be respectful of opposing views. Regardless of the divisive media coverage of some of the indigenous participants, we had the opportunity to find common ground and to complement our differences.

The priority themes to emerge were formal recognition of Australia's indigenous peoples, closing the gap on all social indicators, and a renewed focus on indigenous children and their families.

Unfortunately, lawyer and National Bank board member Danny Gilbert failed to develop effective support for the idea of building on the joint policy commission announced by Kevin Rudd and endorsed by Brendan Nelson on the National Apology day.

Gilbert suggested this commission be turned into a statutory authority with representation from corporate and indigenous Australia together with health and education experts. He saw such an authority as the most efficient way of having governments, service deliverers, and the corporate sector cooperating to close the gaps.

I was impressed by this bold idea. The stream considering the 'future of the Australian economy' proposed a new Federation Commission to review the roles and responsibilities of all levels of government in the national economy. If such a commission is a good idea for the economy, then why not for the most pressing blight on our landscape and national soul?

Everyone accepts that the situation for residents in the Alice Springs town camps or for children in remote Aboriginal communities is a national disgrace. Given real life choices, no one would choose to live as they do.

Everyone knows that these situations will not be changed except with full cooperation by all levels of government and with Aboriginal participation in the decisions which determine the priority of rights and obligations.

The sexual abuse of children in remote communities without any prospect of adult supervision or intervention has been the catalyst for revising the romantic notion of land rights and self-determination that resulted in children having no real prospects in life, regardless of their cultural heritage to land.

The failure of ATSIC has tempered the appetite of many indigenous people for a national representative body which could be more attracted to symbolism and the blame game rather

than partnership with governments, doing the hard work to close the gaps. But rightly, they still want a place at the table when their lives are being subject to government intervention foreign to other citizens.

The summiteers came away with two insights confirmed. Disadvantage gaps will not be bridged unless the people on the wrong side of the gaps and their leaders believe in the programs and own the compromises on rights and dignity. Further, even were the gap to disappear, all Australians would be enhanced in their identity were they to acknowledge the uniqueness of our indigenous citizens, most of whom, like Sana Nakata, incarnate the national history of indigenous Australia and migrant Australia meeting and living in harmony.

## Desalination devastation

ES CLASSIC

*Margaret Simons*



It has been dry here lately, and my lawn is a series of green circles where the water from the sprinklers falls. At the edge of the spray's reach, the grass goes from green to grey in the width of a pencil, as if someone had drawn round it with a compass.

This lawn is at the top of a limestone cliff overlooking the River Murray, at Waikerie in South Australia. From my patch of European growth, I can see the gentle curve of the earth against the sky. The pea-soup river sweeps across in indolent curves, waters still and warm. The gums are grey and the soil is pink or rusty red, and dry, dry, dry.

Near the horizon, on the rise of a sand hill, I can see another patch of deep green where the orange trees and the grapes and the stone fruit are grown; irrigated, like my lawn, with the warm, rank water of the river.

When the river is low, that water can be salty enough to wither the leaves on the vines. No one drinks it. It has, after all, already drained and watered a fifth of the continent ...

The story of the Murray River, named more than 150 years ago for some otherwise long-forgotten colonial secretary, is a fair metaphor for Europeans in this foreign, bright land, and our uneasiness with it. These river towns would not exist were it not for Victorian engineering, and the pride people took in turning the dry 'waste' of this continent to a use they could understand. It was a time of hope and confidence in a new yet ancient land.

Yet today the engineering feats to which we are wedded seem not so much a testimony to our power as to our continued foreignness. In a land where water is everything, the Murray River is our only major watercourse. It is in fact many rivers, draining a vast basin that covers most of the fertile parts of the continent.

There is a history of the river, written by Ernestine Hill in 1958. It is called *Water into Gold*. She begins her book thus: 'Here is the beginning of a great story, the transfiguration of a continent by irrigation science ... the radiant twin cities of Mildura and Renmark, the Garden Colony in that lucky horseshoe of Murray River that unites two Australian States, will always be our first national shrine to irrigation science.'

A shrine to science. Miss Hill goes on to describe the Chaffey brothers, who developed Mildura and Renmark, as 'apostles of irrigation'. The water they pumped on to the land was a benediction, bringing civilisation to the dusty and hostile Mallee wastes.

Today, the Murray is a harnessed beast, its flow regulated by locks and weirs. But for the flip side of our grasp on this seemingly indifferent continent, you must look under the soil. There you will find another mute and insidious testimony to our manipulation of the landscape. The holy water is rising to meet us, and it threatens to drown us.

I have over my desk a contour map. It shows, not the rises and falls of this flat landscape, but fluctuations of the salty ground water under our feet. The irrigated areas and the towns they surround are resting on man-made water mountains, built out of the water that drains off the orchards and down the gutters of the main street.

Ground water underlies much of this continent. It is, in fact, the inland sea that the explorers searched for, but like so much about this country, it is hidden.

Before European settlement, it lay at least 25 metres below the surface. Now, thanks to the clearing of trees, even in non-irrigated areas it rises to within a few metres of the surface, bringing with it the salts that lie in the ancient landscape. Once the water is within two metres of the surface, crops suffer and the trees begin to die ...

We have no way to express the loss except in figures, and they are graphic enough. If salinity is not tackled, within our lifetimes it could reduce as much as half the fertile land in the Murray-Darling Basin to waste.

The economic implications are enormous. Already large chunks of New South Wales and Victoria have been virtually abandoned, left to 'saline agriculture'. The scientists are still trying to work out what that means. The irony is immense. Just as our grasp on this foreign land seemed firmest, we find the water turning upon us, and the agriculture and economics that bind us to the land thrown into disarray ...

It may be that this semi-desert country should never have been settled, as some radical conservationists now suggest, yet it would be wrong to say that the people do not belong here ... There are stories of struggle, of carrying on in spite of fruit that didn't sell or couldn't be transported, of grandmothers and women in labor being rescued from floods, and of the days when a trip to Adelaide took a week over a dirt road delineated with pot holes.

Hard to say these people don't belong, and too easy from the city to be self-righteous and simplistic about the heritage of the engineers, when we all rely on the food basket they have brought forth.

We cannot retreat. Our ties to the land may be recent, expressed in terms of dollars and engineering and full of crime and paradox, but nevertheless we are bonded. And so we stand under this blue sky, within our green circles, struggling with the rising tide.

## **Tossed salad state of mind**

POETRY

*Various*

### **1. Disarming**

From one side of the partition  
she looked up  
from her tossed salad state  
and mineralised water world  
put down her implements  
and guided him  
a disarming smile.  
On the other side  
of the international cafe  
he was diverted  
from the impending roast  
and wiping red wine  
from his generous lips  
he mouthed sweet nothings  
in retaliation.

*Tim Heffernan*

### **2. Looking for a name**

Alone on the platform  
waiting for the train,  
god knows who  
I am to be, from place  
to place, face to face:  
Inner Catastrophe

seeks normal social chat,  
and involutes,  
and tumbles  
into terrible fear.

Holy fire, caught in the bush,  
I brush your cold white flame.  
This night,  
say my name,  
right into me,                      again,  
for here we are once more,  
the prayer of confession,  
and returning,  
amen —

*David Hastie*

### **3. Paris**

look at your bird face in the mirror of my hand  
under the light of a chandelier  
in Paris  
watch my marble face  
turn to  
ribs in the  
snow.

*David Murcott*

### **4. Part-time job**

Salt on those?



Eat here or take away?  
As if that refrain wasn't bad enough,  
To have to contend with a  
Sharp-eyed rodent of dubious intent,  
And his heavy-duty partner  
In sandwiches and wedlock,  
Who reach their climax in praise  
At 'That's no good.'  
After today  
I'm not going back.  
A simple resolution,  
Like a breath of fresh air.

*Heidi Ross*

### **5. Heart remedy**

My doctor prescribed  
50 grams of dark chocolate  
three times a week  
for high cholesterol.  
Get the fair trade stuff, she suggested.  
In the night I fumble  
empty packets from the bin,  
scribbling surfaces, where my pen  
tries to unblock other arteries.

*Steve Isham*

### **6. Belonging**

In dreams, fish fly over  
the mangroves  
and speak to me of dominion.  
And there are other signs  
that I was born out of the womb of this earth:  
made up of vegetation, sea, air, dust.  
Light rears on its hind legs and claims me.  
This is where my skin sheds.

*Cassandra O'Loughlin*

### **7. Old men play cards**

slap slap king of spades  
at the pagoda pavilion  
old men not much else  
to do huddle here daily  
alongside their tall murky  
jars of chunky green tea  
few get here early enough  
to claim cement seats  
with cold grey marble  
tops others carry fold-  
out stools some bring  
cushions the remaining  
balance their weight in the  
Chinese squat sitting  
their bums on their heels

*Jodie Hawthorn*

### **8. Estate agent's snap**

On our first evening in our new house,  
empty except for us, we look from  
the spacious balcony  
towards the green-curving park.  
Just like in the estate agent's  
photograph, except that nine  
black curving overhead wires  
are strung from thick poles  
slicing through the view.

They seem to have doctored the snap.

Snip.

And so proud of it, they've  
mailed us a poster-size  
blow-up of their three-snap ad.  
I may hang it on the balcony.

*Max Richards*

### **9. Mushrooms after drought**

Pushing through mulch and moisture,  
pale fingers wearing light brown umbrellas,  
restrained Victorian skirts billowing quietly  
veiling such thin, musty legs of stalk.

I have waited for you, mushroom,  
through five bone years of drought  
and finally, sudden rain brings you,  
miniature skydivers fallen, safely,

onto the eucalyptus leaves'  
shy green smiles.

*P. S. Cottier*

### **10. Twenty**

She's a long way away  
from the banal, the ho-hum  
the usual teenage angst, she implies.  
She's twenty. It's  
quite possible she was into  
her teens before her teens  
& out of her teens before  
her teens ended. She looks  
& apparently always looked  
older than her age. Still  
despite her advanced years advancing  
towards her early twenties  
the last minutes of  
her yesterday  
are over & done with  
just as the first minutes  
are long ago.

*Graham Rowlands*

## Big Brother cameras inhibit teacher performance

### COMMUNITY

*Gillian Bouras*

‘Teaching runs in the family like wooden legs,’ my mother used to remark. And it was true. My parents, assorted uncles and aunts, and my paternal grandfather were all teachers. The latter started it all, taking an escape route from his publican father and the hated world of hotels.



When I was young, girls could be wives and mothers, nurses or teachers. Marriage did not appeal to me at that stage. As for nursing, I couldn’t stand the sight of blood, let alone other messes. In any case, the life of teaching was the only one I knew.

It was a very sheltered and circumscribed one way back then, and the world at large bore an attitude of faint scorn towards teachers. Cushy job. All those holidays. But during the holidays, conscientious people prepared for another term of a job that was far from cushy.

Sad to relate, the information I receive these days indicates that teachers are working harder and more thanklessly than ever.

Grandfather began work with the Education Department of Victoria in 1908 as a pupil-teacher. He was 15, and schools were his life until he was 70. In 1908 the system of teaching inspection was one of Payment by Results, but 55 years later teachers were being inspected and graded. Their salaries no longer depended on examination results. Rather, their prospects of promotion depended on the all-important ‘mark’.

I began teaching at 21, at a school in what is now a posh beach resort. Those were the days of external examinations, and it was absolutely no fun teaching *The Merchant of Venice* to a group of tow-headed surfies who could check the waves from the schoolroom window.

Because I taught in both primary and secondary sections, I was inspected twice that first year. The representatives of the Board of Secondary Inspectors were less fearsome than the despotic District Inspector, who ruled his primary schools with a rod of iron.

I received a good mark, but I was a gibbering wreck for a week, and can still remember, a good 40 years later, the recurring nightmare in which the DI lights a cigarette, stalks up the aisle between the desks, and then stubs the fag out on my upper arm. What Freud would have said I didn’t like to imagine.

In Australia last week, Federal and State ministers agreed to a performance-related pay structure for teachers. The idea, an American one, is that short videos will be made of teachers in the classroom. I'm not sure how I feel about this, and I cannot know, either, how Australian teachers feel about it. But educational research these days being as sophisticated as it is, presumably changes in dynamic have been considered.

I once had a very weak and inadequate senior history teacher. His preferred method was to sit in his chair with his feet on the desk and dictate passages from a text-book, underlining what he deemed relevant passages along the way. When the dread Board appeared, he got to his feet, picked up a piece of chalk, and tried to engage us in question-and-answer. Unaccustomed as we were, we gazed at him in consternation.

Needless to say, the lesson was an utter disaster. But it could have been that the Board blamed us rather than him.

What effect will cameras have? The Hellenic American Union, for which I work on occasion, has a practice of making videos of examiners on a random basis. So far I have been lucky, but (you guessed it) I become a gibbering wreck at the mere thought.

Perhaps, in this more media-conscious age, both teachers and pupils will take the whole experience in their stride. Perhaps experienced teachers will be able to pretend the camera is not there. But what are the criteria? Will those individuals with a more flamboyant style be deemed better performers/teachers? The world is geared to the extrovert, after all, and there is no such thing as cosmic justice.

A teacher can never know where his or her influence ends. How sad it would be if such influence was inhibited or changed for the worse by the Big Brother eye of the camera.

## Pope visit holds mirror up to 'grappling' US Catholics

### RELIGION

*Binoy Kampmark*



Did the six day visit to the United States by Pope Benedict XVI usher any significant changes in the direction of Catholicism in that country? For prolific writer on religion Amy Welborn, the visit was not only 'busy' and 'rich', — it was a 'mirror held up to American Catholics, asking us to consider who we are, honestly and with humility'.

The reflections in that mirror were often jarringly unpleasant. The institutional crisis wrought by child abuse allegations hovered menacingly over traditional discussions about faith, war and peace. According to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, some 689 new accusations of sexual abuse were made in 2007 alone, with \$615 million paid in settlements.

Since 2002, when allegations of sexual abuse within the Boston Archdiocese came to light, charges have proliferated. They were not only directed at individuals such as a now defrocked John Geoghan, but the culture of concealment that had crept around those suspected of abuse. Pointed salvos were fired at Cardinal Bernard Law and former deputies Bishop John B. McCormack and Bishop Thomas Daily for their seeming indifference.

To his credit, Benedict made it clear that it was a problem that had to be confronted, a cultural condition sorely in need of eradication. In St Patrick's Cathedral, New York, he urged officials to 'continue to work effectively to resolve this issue'. At the Immaculate Conception Shrine, he argued that the issue of pedophilia or what he termed 'gravely immoral behaviour' within the Church had been 'very badly handled'.

But the Pope would not divorce the matter of child abuse from the broader assault on community values, perpetrated by, among others, members of the media. 'What does it mean to speak of child protection when pornography and violence can be viewed in so many homes through media widely available today?' The 'manipulation' of sexuality had proven corrosive for the young.

Very little in the way of concrete responses were outlined, though he urged a 'determined, collective response'. And, to the disappointment of some victims, Benedict did not visit the Archdiocese of Boston.

Despite the omission, he made it clear early in the tour that the church would 'absolutely exclude pedophiles from the sacred ministry. It is more important to have good priests than many priests. We will do everything possible to heal this wound.'

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops has undertaken its own steps, drafting an annual report detailing progress made in implementing a plan of child protection outlined in a newly drafted charter.

The Pope found himself in a country where Catholicism is seemingly in institutional disarray and retreat. Out of 19,000 parishes in the United States, 3200 are bereft of a resident pastor, while 800 have closed since 1995. The number of priests started declining in the 1970s, and has continued to do so. Church officials found the Pope's visit a tantalising recruitment drive.

America's Catholic schools have been a particular casualty, a fact that has not escaped Benedict's attention. Some 1267 have closed since 2000.

President George Bush, while not singling out the Catholic pedigree, noted in this year's State of the Union Address that 'faith-based schools' were 'disappearing at an alarming rate in many of America's inner cities'. US Education Secretary Margaret Spellings has called them 'treasures' in decline.

Nationwide enrolment has fallen by a figure close to 400,000. Schools such as the ailing St Monica School of Miami Gardens in Florida are on life support. A loss in enrolment numbers inevitably drives up tuition costs. Schools contract or close altogether.

Dioceses have had to tempt partnerships between the private and public sector to keep schools afloat. But receiving tax payer dollars comes at a cost: a removal of religious instruction from the curriculum. Catholic America is being impoverished at its roots.

Being fully aware of the Catholic retreat in school instruction, Benedict made a plea to Catholic educators at the Catholic University of America in Washington: 'do not abandon the school apostolate; indeed, renew your commitment to schools especially those in poorer areas'.

Benedict leaves a country seeking to grapple with core issues within the Catholic faith, a mirror of problems from recruitment to administrative indifference to internal abuses. The Pope will find the problems of hierarchical complicity difficult to overcome, but the moves by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops have been positive. The work has at least started. Let it now be finished.



## Anzac a 'politically pliable' legend

GUEST EDITORIAL

*Tom Cranitch*

With Anzac Day over, and the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli campaign just under a decade away, it's time to re-examine, re-frame, and hopefully tame, the Anzac legend for the start of its next century.

You don't need to be an expert in every component of Anzac values to understand that the legend has a stranglehold over Australian public life. It enables people to feel comfortable in myths and non-sustainable notions of our nationhood rather than in identifying the new symbols and values which will give meaning and life to Australia as it moves forward.



The widespread acceptance of Anzac Day's quasi-religious sacredness is evidence alone of this viewpoint. Historian and soon-to-be appointed director of the Arts faculty at the Australian National University, Professor Joan Beaumont has observed that contemporary Australia is obsessed with materialism. She adds that 'Anzac, which has often been called a secular religion, is filling the void of meaning.'

Without demeaning the sacrifice of those Australians who gave their lives and others who left their youth at Gallipoli and western European battlefields during World War I, this rigid persistence to a flawed tradition is not healthy for national development.

Even for those victims of war in Crete, Tobruk, Kokoda, Changi, Burma, Borneo and in the jungles of New Guinea, 'Anzac' on its own is not a satisfactory legend because it fails to address the social and political complexities of the Australia then, and the Australia of today. Equally important, it is not a guide post for our future.

'Anzac' became a politically pliable legend soon after 1915 and has remained one since. Melbourne teacher and academic, Dr Martin Ball recently questioned the impending fate of 'Anzac' under Kevin Rudd's leadership. Earlier he noted its fluidity under two preceding prime ministers.

'Throughout Howard's term, commentators on all sides of politics observed how successfully he used Anzac as a medium to talk to the electorate. Rather than trying to historicise and re-interpret Anzac as Paul Keating had done, Howard's approach was to generalise the Anzac tradition and make it open and current to all Australians.'

In short, for all its perceived sanctity, Anzac is a political plaything. Even more disturbingly, its chief 'playmaker' is not our political leaders, but arguably Australia's most anachronistic institution, the RSL — most recently seen thundering scorn against a planned hot-air ballooning festival in the ACT due to commence on Anzac Day morning.

RSL national president Major General Bill Crews said it was a 'disrespectful' event at a solemn time of reflection and remembrance. 'A mass of balloons in the sky emblazoned with commercial advertising is hardly consistent with the mood of the nation at that time.'

Rather than attempt to judge our nation's mood let us push past the self-interest and debate Anzac in a spirit of openness and frankness which befits a mature, multicultural nation of a new millennium. Surely this is an ideal worthy of a fight by former and future generations.