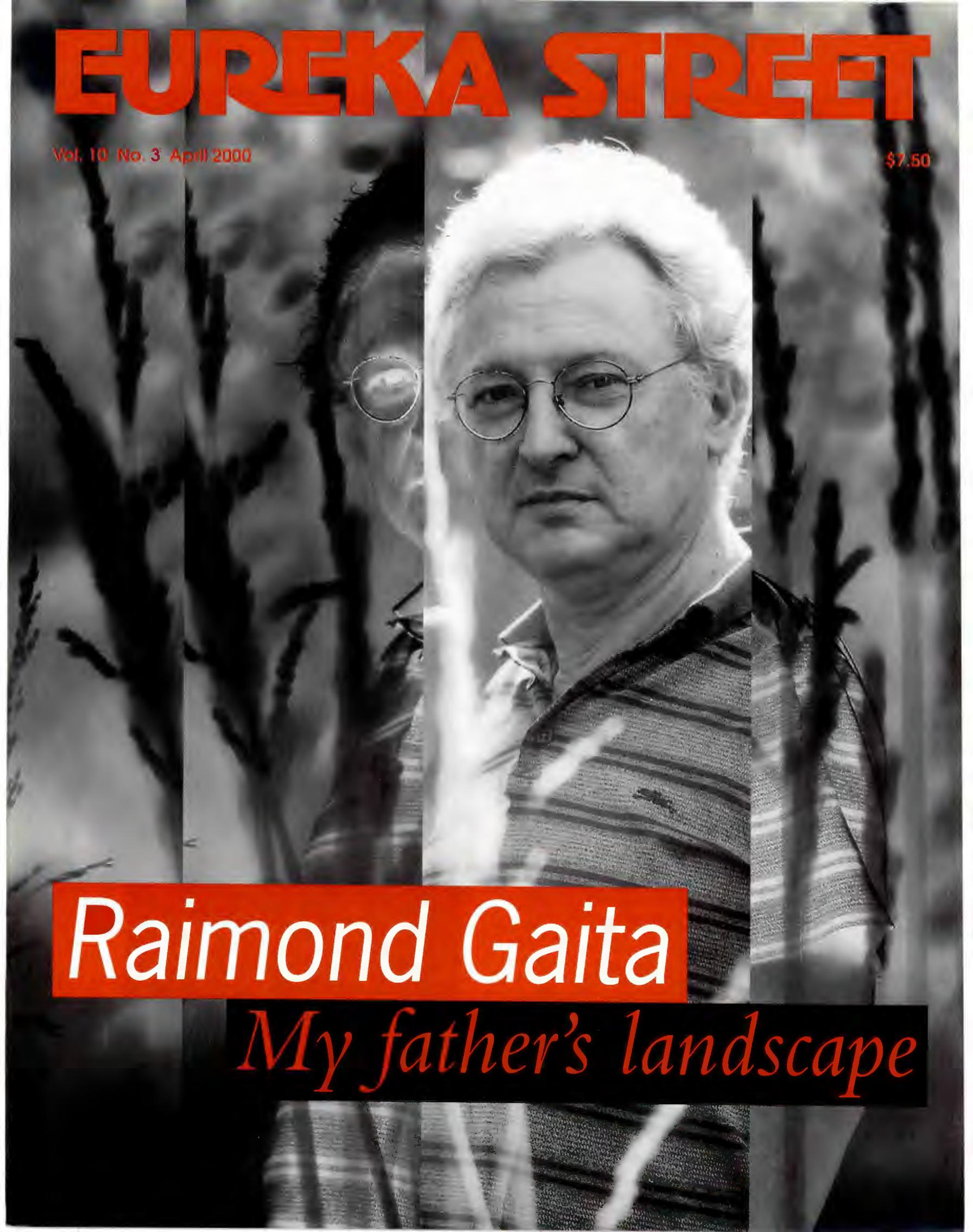


EUREKA STREET

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Raimond Gaita

My father's landscape



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Art Monthly

AUSTRALIA

IN THE APRIL ISSUE

- Humphrey McQueen and Tim Morrell at the Adelaide festival
- Helen Maxwell checks out the graduate shows around Australia
- Christopher Heathcote and the Exile of imagination
- Joanna Mendelsohn on cows and outside art
- Jon Conomos on art & film

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'We must create a strong civil society to prevent the government forgetting universal values and the sacrifice everyone has made for this change. But East Timor will not value material development as much as its moral and cultural identity.'

—Xanana Gusmao,
interviewed by
Jon Greenaway, page 26



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EUREKA STREET

A magazine of public affairs, the arts
and theology

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COMMENT: I

MICHAEL MCKERNAN

After Anzac

MY FIRST TRIP TO GALLIPOLI was in 1990. Clifton Pugh and I had gone ahead of the veterans who were still catching their breath in Istanbul; he to sketch and I to roam the battlefields. The captain of *HMAS Sydney*, our host, had given us two young sailors to help Clifton with his gear. We had



walked Anzac Cove and, leaving Clifton behind, had climbed up to Lone Pine. Now we were having lunch on the edge of the Beach Cemetery not far from Simpson's grave.

One of the sailors, in particular, was in awe of the place and its people. He was of the same age as the Anzacs who stormed ashore here; much older than the midshipmen who had guided the diggers to the wrong place. But to him these men were ancients, almost mythical creatures, not the blokes he knocked around with in Sydney and beyond. 'But you're in the Defence Force,' I needled, 'you might be called on to do these things too.' The thought was foreign; these were heroes, he insisted. Six months later he and *Sydney* were steaming to the Gulf War.

They must drum it into them, surely, in the Defence Force, that all this training has a point and you might need to put it into action. Peace-keeping sounds innocuous enough; better, by far, than war. But a journalist with the Australians in Rwanda told me of a team of young Australian men and women detailed to clean out and clear up a morgue that had been without electricity for some weeks. The decomposing bodies were disgusting, the sights and smells unimaginable. The journalist lasted a matter of seconds only, as did many of the soldiers at first. The difference was that the soldiers would seek fresh air to vomit and to vomit again and then, because it was their duty, they would go back inside and get on with the job. For as long as they could stand it. But again and again they would return

until the morgue was back in working order. Then it was on to the next job.

I travelled far with these young Australians abroad on various veterans' pilgrimages and they were always interesting to observe. Intensely curious about the places they were visiting and more strongly interested in the story we had come to commemorate than I could ever have anticipated, they enjoyed a good time too and like soldiers everywhere, I suspect, they knew to sleep whenever they were waiting. They wanted to pack in as much as they could.

In East Timor, the men and women of the Australian Defence Force say they learnt more than they had expected and possibly more than Cabinet ministers and defence planners will ever learn. They learnt the madness and misery of war, the deceit of politics, the evil of hatred. They had to be alert to danger, to understand grief and to dispense compassion. They said they would miss the people among whom they had lived for they had come to share their lives.

CHARLES BEAN LIVED and worked among such soldiers for the four awful years of the Great War and he came to venerate them, too, for their achievement, their constancy and their victory. They learnt a lot, he observed. They were curious and intensely interested in the people among whom they moved. They were compassionate and they learnt more, certainly, than the Cabinet ministers and defence planners who moved them around the Western Front like so many pawns.

And when Charles Bean came to write the last words of his official history which was to be their monument and over which he had laboured for 20 years, he knew that he would do their spirit wrong if he big-noted. 'What these men did nothing can alter now. The good and the bad, the greatness and the smallness of their story will stand. Whatever of glory it contains

nothing now can lessen. It rises as it will always rise, above the mists of ages, a monument to great-hearted men; and, for their nation, a possession forever.'

It's a pity that those who shaped the Australian monument at Hamel, inaugurated in 1998, did not stick with Bean. The monument can strike the visitor as boastful, verging on the notion that but for the Australians the war might have dragged on and on. It's a pity, too, that the Interfet commander in East Timor, Major General Peter Cosgrove, apparently left his Bean at home: 'One of the battalions,' he told a journalist, '... has been on the border. It's the equivalent of being on the border in the Somme. It's the equivalent of being in the trenches at Gallipoli.'

Well no, it's not really. Peter Cosgrove has won high praise for the straightforward way he went about his extremely challenging task. He deserves our thanks and our praise. And it is important that he is proud of his troops and prepared to tell the world that they have performed to the highest expectations of Australians and in a manner entirely in keeping with the Anzac tradition.

But as my sailor friend at the Beach Cemetery would have been quick to point out, comparisons will not help us on this one. Let us be proud of what the men and women of the Defence Force have done for Australia as peace-keepers and in East Timor. Let us hope that they say to the world that there is an Australian spirit greater than the morally timid, small-minded and hateful official positions on so many matters crying out for robust notions of social justice. If they serve us in that, they will have earned the words that a Charles Bean could offer them. They would say, though, like those who have gone before them, that they were just doing a job. ■

Michael McKernan is the inaugural Frederick Watson Fellow at the National Archives of Australia for 1999–2000.

Above left: At the Dili wharf, Major General Peter Cosgrove signs, at her request, the Interfet armband of one young Australian soldier. Photograph by Jon Greenaway.

COMMENT: 2

BRUCE DUNCAN

The justice contract

RIVAL CONCEPTIONS of social justice and the role of government bedevil the current debate about welfare reform and the meaning of 'mutual obligation'. Various groups define social justice according to their ideological preferences.

Enthusiasts for the free market believe that the market will, with minimal regulation, tend to produce the best social outcomes. Their critics argue that the free market needs to be regulated more closely to

ensure social outcomes are just, and that society is not polarised between rich and poor. They appeal to the principle of social justice to ensure all citizens have the opportunity of a decent livelihood.

For their part, neo-liberal proponents of the free market at times reject any notion of social justice. In a 1998 publication, the then Director of the Menzies Research Centre, Marlene Goldsmith, dismissed social justice as 'propaganda'.

The aim should not be to punish or publicly humiliate those on income support, but to help restore their dignity and expand their capacity.

Such neo-liberals tend to shrink the classical concepts of social justice and distributive justice—whereby government allocates the benefits and burdens of citizenship—down to contractual justice. In other words, they tend to accept as just only what people freely agree to do, as if by contract. Anything more is fundamentally charity in their eyes. Hence the trend to small government, and the attempt to shift welfare provision further from government and on to business and private charity.

The concept of social justice, however, is one of the most fundamental in European political thought, and needs to be reclaimed as a guiding principle in social policy. The term 'social justice' only came into common use late last century. Pope Pius XI adopted it in the 1920s as a more contemporary term for what Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century had referred to as 'legal' or 'general justice'.

Following Aquinas, Pius understood social justice as providing a norm against which to evaluate government policies to ensure that they enhanced the common good, providing the conditions necessary for the human flourishing even of the poor. Far from being a propaganda tool, social justice stands as one of the most important concepts in evaluating social policies.

In a strong challenge to neo-liberalism within his own party, the Liberal member for Kooyong in Victoria, Mr Petro Georgiou, recently called for a recovery of the Liberal tradition of social justice. Speaking at the 1999 Menzies Lecture last November, Georgiou reminded his audience that the founder of the Liberal Party, R. G. Menzies, had emphasised social justice and the need for a better distribution of wealth.

Georgiou continued: 'Over the past 30 years, however, the notion of social justice has come under intense and systematic attack.' Increasingly prevalent, he said, are views that social justice 'is a disguise for a discredited socialism', that it 'unduly interferes with the freedom of the marketplace', or 'leads to an unacceptable welfare system'.

THese disputes about social justice underlie the current debate about 'mutual obligation' and the duties of unemployed people receiving income support.

If one assumes that relationships between individuals and the state are mainly contractual, then mutual obligation will be seen as an exchange in which benefit recipients are bound as if by contract to make payment through their labour.

However, this conveniently minimises the obligations of the state and society, which should be seen not primarily in terms of contractual or market-exchange justice, but in terms of social and distributive justice.

According to the church's notion of social justice, the state and society are required to organise

socio-economic conditions so that all their people can live a decent life. Hence they are obliged to promote full employment. If this is not possible, then the state is bound, according to the level of economic development, to help supply the means of livelihood to needy people.

In Australia, unemployment benefits are set at a punitive level. They were not designed to support people for long periods and are much below comparable benefits in most other OECD countries. The original assumption in Australia was that this low level of benefits would support people until they could take advantage of the then abundant work opportunities.

However, today there is simply no suitable work for many unemployed people. In this regard, the state and society have failed in their obligations to them.

Melbourne Catholic Social Services recently conducted research into the adequacy of income support for various recipients. Without exception, these people experienced acute difficulty on their meagre benefit, and overwhelmingly were desperate to find work. Many had suffered extreme disadvantage from child abuse or abandonment, illiteracy, homelessness or ill health. If anyone thinks that making a single adult survive on unemployment benefits of \$163.35 a week is anything but draconian, he or she should try it.

To give the impression that the primary failure to find employment lies with the unemployed would be in most cases to blame the victims and to inflict a cruel new injustice on them.

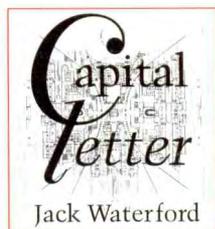
Nevertheless, recipients of income support can still contribute within their means to the common good, most especially, however, by promoting their own well-being so they can play their full role in work and society. Improved services could help people assume greater control over their lives, through, for example, retraining, financial or personal counselling, literacy training and parenting training. This is where more money is needed, and programs to implement these goals should be restored or expanded.

It would be especially counter-productive to force people into work-for-the-dole programs at the expense of caring for children or other dependants during vulnerable years.

Mutual obligation should not be used to press these recipients into compulsory labour. The aim should not be to punish or publicly humiliate those on income support, but to help restore their dignity and expand their capacity as responsible persons.

Imposing unreasonable and burdensome obligations can indeed result not only in added damage to individuals and families but, paradoxically, in greater long-term costs and deepening welfare dependency. ■

Bruce Duncan ccsr lectures on history and social ethics at Yarra Theological College, Melbourne, and also works for Catholic Social Services.



No consistency please, we're politicians

THE LITTLE IRONIES OF POLITICS. A few weeks ago, former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser was at Parliament House giving a speech in honour of the late Alan Missen, the Liberal's liberal of his day and a thorn in the side of the Fraser Government 20 years ago.

In those days Malcolm, for all of his foresight on race, was hardly seen as a liberal figure. Not a little of his legislation was considerably reshaped by the arguments and floor-crossings of Senator Missen and some of his close colleagues.

It is rather more difficult to imagine a John Howard, in the year 2020, rising to speak at a Peter Nugent memorial lecture—harder even, given the small impact that liberals have in the present Liberal Party, to imagine anyone or any achievement that anyone would be busy memorialising.

About the same time as Malcolm Fraser was speaking, some of the party's liberals were earnestly cogitating a revolt on the question of mandatory sentencing in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Within a week, they had been neutralised by being allowed to pour out their angst at a party-room debate: John Howard had conceded no ground to them whatever. Responding to a comment in the party room that the moral conservatives now standing most firmly on state primacy were precisely the same people who had argued a need to interfere with state and territories on euthanasia or heroin, Howard could say calmly that one could not expect consistency in politics.

The liberals in the Liberal Party are far from an impotent force. It will be liberals and moderates such as Robert Hill and Michael Wooldridge who will determine which of the Liberal leadership aspirants will succeed John Howard. They lack the power to get up one of their own, but their numbers will be critical in choosing which one of the hard-liners will misrepresent them in the future.

Not a few of the key spending departments are, or have been, led by liberals. Health, education, immigration and environment have been in liberal hands. It is doubtful, however, that the personal and philosophical attributes of the ministers have had any great impact on policy. On the contrary, these Liberals have had to seem tougher and more hard-line than many of their colleagues, if only to show their worthiness to be in the councils of the government.

The illiberalism, for example, of a Philip Ruddock in immigration, or of an Amanda Vanstone as she was merrily slashing into education or pretending that the drug problem will be resolved by police work, has won them neither respect from their ideological enemies in their own party nor reputation among their friends.

'Wet' Fraser ministers could claim, weakly, but with some justification, that their achievements might have been limited but that they had at least succeeded in softening some of the raw edges of harder ministers. That's a claim that few of the Howard moderates could make. Indeed, it is a part of the Howard skill that, when he detects things have gone too far, it will be he himself who moves in from the left of his ministers. He seems warm and responsive, they appear aloof.

Nor does the voice of the moderates count for much in the party room. On policy, there is scarcely a debate. A few stalwarts, such as Petro Georgiou and Brendan Nelson, seek to have influence in wider forums. But they cannot claim to have any in the primary one to which they belong.

IN SOME RESPECTS, one might think the tide could be turning. Panic about the situation in rural and regional centres has sparked a new wave of government spending. So has the counter-reaction to Telstra's plan for job cuts and Howard's determination to sell Telstra. Social issues are much more strongly on the agenda.

Debacles such as the nursing-homes affair (which has seen ministers of all colour united in their pleasure at Bronwyn Bishop's discomfort) and the shutdown of clothing factories have put far greater pressure on the government to drop some of its mean-spirited approach to social welfare.

If there is any change in direction, however, it does not involve giving any leeway to the moderates. John Howard is the one who sends out the messages. If it is done by anyone else it is by close lieutenants—Tony Abbott, for example, on unemployment—or by ministers with hard-line credentials. And the message is still aimed at the pub-talkers and the radio talkback audience. It beams back their prejudices—as some opinion polling has recently demonstrated most clearly on issues such as Aboriginal affairs. For those who had hoped that some phrases coming from Howard had signalled that he meant to put more effort into reconciliation, it is by now clear that the polls have pushed him in the opposite direction.

Malcolm Fraser did not begin his office with much interest in Aboriginal affairs. He subscribed to the popular view that it was riddled with waste and corruption. But he wanted it neutralised as a political issue, and not weighing the government down. It was only about three years into government that he became personally interested and then, as he actually visited Aboriginal communities, committed to change. In his day, of course, there was more room under the Liberal umbrella. More noise too, from those closest to the rain. ■

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

Let readers judge

From Anne O'Brien

I write in response to correspondence from Leo Dunne and Margaret Slattery in *Eureka Street*, March 2000. Their lengthy efforts offer nothing of substance in respect of my book, *Blazing a Trail*, the fruit of a PhD thesis.

Nowhere was it suggested that Mrs Slattery was or had been a member of a political party. She claims that her communication with the Australian bishops 'always contained the latest facts and figures on the "State Aid" issue.' But these data reflected the views of the Australian Parents Council [APC] and not the real needs of Catholic schools.

I do not cite *The Bulletin* in my book. The articles by G.E.F. Hughes were published in *Quadrant*.

Dr Ken McKinnon's view of Mrs Slattery refers to the impression she created in her lobbying for state aid.

The real source of contention was not the issue of state aid but the method of funding. The APC advocated equal per capita grants to all children in non-government schools plus an extra allocation for 'special needs'. Had this policy prevailed, many Catholic schools would not exist today. The block method of funding consequent on the Labor Government's acceptance of the Karmel Report saved most Catholic schools.

And the influence of B.A. Santamaria? Let the reader be the judge. My book proves that he wrote the response to the Karmel Report published under the name of the Australian bishops. This statement formed the basis for attacks launched by Santamaria, the bishops, the APC and the independent schools lobby throughout 1973, and from some sectors until the late '70s.

Why did I not interview Mrs Slattery? Apart from the role played by the APC in this debate over the method of funding, she played no part in the issues being examined in my book.

Anne O'Brien
Cheltenham, VIC

Dis-content

From Gerry Harant

Kate Manton's chilling insights into the minds of media moguls and government ministers itching to exploit digital television (*Eureka Street*, March 2000) should be seen

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in the light of previous excursions into changing broadcast technologies (FM radio, cable and satellite TV) which, while disastrous commercially, had little impact on those who stayed with the old delivery pipes.

The currently mooted changes, which will require all current receivers to be obsolete in seven years' time, are unlikely to work. The proposed channel allocations are likely to cause interference. Datacasting would ask you to stop the family watching TV while accessing e-commerce; why not use your computer for that instead? Multi-channelling would be meaningful if there were alternative content to endless re-runs. Considering the grossly mis-tuned sets happily used by most people to receive the present quite adequate PAL transmissions, who would want to spend \$5000+ on higher definition in game shows, sport and ads? Besides, how long would it take before the latest techno-gimmick is superseded by the latest-plus-one? In the UK, DTV owners have just discovered that recent DVD players are incompatible with their DTV and standards are changing constantly.

Apart from this farce, there looms a real tragedy. The standards conversion is estimated to cost A\$30 billion by 2007. A very large percentage will be spent overseas, and local initiatives will contribute little. For a fraction of this money, we could have a thriving drama and doco production industry with a proven export potential. After all, with all those channels everywhere, surely somebody will be looking for *content* even if this word is anathema to the local media

moguls and the techno-crazed ABC which has already used digitisation as an excuse to cut down on their artistic output.

Gerry Harant
Blackburn, VIC

Lay employment

From William Brennan. Bishop of Wagga Wagga

Might I make a few comments on Dr Neil Ormerod's thoughtful and well researched article, 'Drawing the Line' (*Eureka Street*, March 2000)?

First, Centacare workers are employees of the Diocesan Corporations. They are agents of the bishops, and that gives them a different ecclesial status from Catholic laity who work, say, for Employment National or who run their own job search agencies. I believe that when Paul VI spoke about the 'world of politics, society and economics' being properly the arena of lay activity, he was not talking primarily about laity who are part of the church structure. It was the lay employees of the Sisters of Charity who fronted the TV cameras over the injecting room proposal yet no-one had any doubt that that was the project of an Institute of Consecrated Life, not a lay initiative. Similarly the activities of the Centacares are activities of the dioceses.

Secondly, while it is true that the 'expertise of bishops does not lie in the vast and complicated world of economics, politics and social policy', it may be conceded that we have some expertise in church matters.

Thirdly, while it is also true that Centacare has been involved in employment work for the last ten years, this involvement was of a minor, subsidiary and support nature, targeting specific cases and niche problem areas, such as the disabled. My concern is that, with these latest contracts, Centacare Australia has taken a quantum leap to become a main player in the big league. While each bishop may know what his own Centacare is doing, only the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference sees the full picture and, though the bishops were told that 12 dioceses had tendered for employment contracts, we were not informed of the size of the tenders or of the exponential shift they represented in Centacare Australia's involvement in this field.

Fourthly, no-one as yet has addressed my basic philosophical problem, namely, what justifies a Catholic social welfare agency putting 300-400 people nationally

out of work? If the matter had been brought to the bishops, it would at least have been debated.

Finally, Catholic involvement in a tender system for social welfare leaves me uneasy. A process which results in the organisation which submits the lowest tender being contracted to service the disadvantaged seems to me to be one of the uglier faces of economic rationalism.

William Brennan
Wagga Wagga, NSW

Short list

From Jean Dunn

You recently carried a fine review of biographies of John Curtin and Sir Robert Menzies. Melbourne University Press published the latter and, as a long-time MUP editor, I was delighted to see our book acknowledged so warmly by a distinguished historian.

But the review's coda astonished me. Both volumes of Allan Martin's *Robert Menzies* were edited by a colleague whom any number of academic historians would regard as Australia's leading scholarly editor. Yet the coda alleged 'too many errors which it would be churlish to list' and charged MUP with having 'lost sight of the importance of an editor'.

In some trepidation, I asked Michael McKernan for his list. MUP was aware of an errant hyphen, a misspelt Norwegian name and a photograph mis-cropped by the printer—a bad last-minute error for which we had apologised to the author.

The list came: three errors of fact or spelling, one discrepancy of date (was it March or April?), one unspecified allegation of misspelling, one challenge to Martin's argument.

I cannot be sure that, were Michael McKernan to apply a fine-tooth comb, he might not find more. But is it fair on the evidence of five errors in some 600 large pages, to cast such a savage slur at Australia's leading—if beleaguered—scholarly press?

Jean Dunn
Carlton, VIC

Michael McKernan replies

I've had two friendly letters from Allan Martin and a couple from Jean Dunn who tells me we are all on the same side. 'With thanks for your care', she wrote on MUP letterhead, 'and for your championing the role of editors'. But let's not miss the point by seeking to establish who's got the biggest list of errors, a path I don't wish to tread.

I identified a horrible error in *Robert Menzies: A Life* (a photograph of Wilfred Kent Hughes purporting to be that of Athol Townley). A reviewer is entitled to draw attention to such an error no matter where the fault lies: author, editor, 'process'. Long may MUP continue to edit books with care and attention to detail and long may reviewers attempt to keep them up to the mark.

Hard pressed

From John Meckan, Director, Melbourne University Press

In Michael Smith's review of Tony Coody's *Why Universities Matter* (*Eureka Street*, March 2000), he has made a number of erroneous assumptions and claims. Firstly, Professor Smith states that Melbourne University Press (MUP) 'renege'd' on publishing this book. This is totally untrue. This book was rejected by MUP's Publications Committee and no formal offer was made to Professor Coody as a result of that meeting. I have always understood that 'to renege' is to change a decision made, and as the book was never accepted for publication, the use of this term is highly misleading.

Secondly, the initial enthusiasm for publishing, as claimed by the author of the review, was by some of our staff and while I applaud and encourage this enthusiasm, it does not, however, constitute any form of approval or acceptance to publish by MUP. Our normal authorisation process applies. Nor is it ever our aim to suppress any ideas. MUP's role is to foster a commitment to advance the frontiers of knowledge and contribute to the international community of scholarship through careful editorial judgment, ensuring that only scholarship of the highest quality receives the imprimatur of the university. We take this role very seriously.

I am glad that Professor Coody was sought out by other publishers. In fact on many occasions when we reject works, we offer names of suitable alternative publishers to authors.

A lot has been written about the reasons for MUP's rejection of the book. Most imply some sort of conspiracy between MUP and the management of the University although none of the initial articles ever sought to have our views on the matter. It served their cause to foster this conspiracy. Let me say categorically that the rejection was predominantly based on commercial grounds, that is, we did not think we would sell enough copies to make it viable. It may

or may not have been a correct assessment, but we still maintain that without the marketing imperatives that are currently fuelling this debate, sales of this book would have turned a loss for MUP. We operate as an independent publisher, receive no direct funding from our parent university and have the capacity to publish only about 50 books per year. We have to choose carefully which books make our small publishing program and sometimes rejection is a reflection of our capacity, rather than the quality of the work.

I was most disappointed that the Editor of *Eureka Street*, in writing her Afterword in the book, also failed to get our side of the story. I guess what we have to say on the matter is not very sensational.

I should add that our publishing decisions are sound, attested to by MUP authors winning in the last couple of years the Age Book of the Year, NSW Premier's Literary Awards—Book of the Year, NSW Premier's History Awards for two categories and the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, non-fiction prize, to name a few.

Over the last 78 years, MUP has been Australia's leading scholarly press and it will continue to be so. All Australians should be proud of its achievements and should be concerned about all attempts made to discredit these achievements to gain ground on a political agenda against the current management practices of universities in this country. We will continue to offer Australian academics an outlet for their work. We wish we could do more, but therein lies another story.

John Meckan
Carlton South, VIC

Morag Fraser replies

The rejection of Professor Coody's book was a matter of controversy within the University of Melbourne, MUP and in the public press well before any 'marketing imperatives' came into play. When I came to write my Afterword, I relied not upon conspiratorial promptings but on written documentation, much of it from MUP itself, which showed that Professor Coody was informed after one meeting that his book was accepted and after another that it was rejected (hence Professor Smith's term, 'renege'd'). At the very least, there was demonstrable confusion in some of MUP's procedures, and a significant departure from its past practices. I should emphasise that, with Mr Meckan and the staff of MUP, I share a sincere desire that MUP maintain its position as a scholarly press of independence and high repute.



The Month's Traffic



Visiting

JUST BEFORE LENT began we had a visitor. The Secretary for Jesuit Social Ministries, Fr Michael Czerny, came to the *Eureka Street* office on a Sunday morning to talk about the social mission of the Society of Jesus, which owns and publishes this magazine.

We are often asked what *Eureka Street* was set up to do, what its 'mission' is, and how closely it is tied to its religious proprietors. Very closely, is the answer I always give, adding, again always, that the closeness does not interfere with what the secular press calls 'editorial independence'. In fact the Jesuit connection is more an aid than a hindrance to that independence. The proof, of course, can only be in the now nearly ten years of publication.

So it was particularly interesting for a lay, female editor of a Jesuit publication to talk for an hour or so to the man whose job is currently to be Secretary 'to the whole world' of Jesuit social ministry. And gratifying to discover how much work we had in common, how a publishing enterprise might dovetail with a radical commitment to justice, as a mobile, international order of Jesuit priests might conceive it.

The term 'social justice' gets a regular battering in Australia at the moment, in theory and in practice. The nursing-home ructions and the most recent revelations of evasion and manipulation over the UN's pronouncements on our mandatory sentencing laws are only the most recent evidence of a national retreat from commitment to justice for the whole of society.

But Michael Czerny was not sitting at our kitchen table on a fine Melbourne morning to anatomise Australian public policy—although it was certainly in his sightlines. He was there to get a taste of one small part of Australian Jesuit activity and to fit it within the context of what he describes as 'still a very young ministry'. It

is more than 100 years since the papal encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, set the Catholic Church on a path which made close consideration of social justice issues integral to the church's activity. That commitment, admits Michael Czerny, is still controversial. But essential.

We talked a little about the recent letter from the Superior-General of the Society of Jesus, Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, on the subject of the social apostolate. Fr Kolvenbach quotes one of his predecessors, Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ: 'One cannot act justly without love. Even when we resist injustice, we cannot prescind from love.' I suggested to Michael Czerny that if one told that to the average Australian lawyer he or she would laugh at you. 'Maybe that's good,' he replied. 'It means that they know what we are saying, as opposed to those people who say yes, yes, yes.'

And that was the tone of his whole conversation. Radical commitment laced with realism. Michael Czerny says we live in a 'confusing, reductionist time'. His Jesuit work is to resist reductionism, to keep the whole picture in mind. So is ours.



After Michael Czerny's visit it was Adelaide, for the Festival and Writers' Week.

Dame Roma Mitchell's death had been expected. One of my Adelaide aunts told me on the Saturday before the opening of Writers' Week how moved she had been by Sir William Deane's bedside visit to Dame Roma the week before. He had come to present her personally with the Commander of the Royal Victorian Order award—while it was still possible. By Sunday Dame Roma was dead, and mourned royally within and beyond South Australia's borders.

It seemed only fitting, somehow, that she should have died during the week when Adelaide shows itself to the world as a city of cultural breadth and vision. She was not a woman to be afraid of the word 'vision', although there was never any vapour in her utterances. Gough Whitlam once remarked that he had never met a better lawyer. Her

state funeral, on the Friday, was a true celebration of a full and extraordinary life.

'There was a handful of them, a generation of South Australians,' wrote journalist Tony Baker in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, 'but Roma Mitchell was distinguished by more than just being the only woman and the last to go.'

On Baker's list were state premiers Thomas Playford and Don Dunstan, Chief Justice Sir John Bray and Max Harris. And Roma Mitchell. When Baker once asked Dame Roma what she would do after her retirement, she replied, 'Deliver meals on wheels.' She meant it.

At Writers' Week some of the talk in the convivial space between the two great tents was of writer and political scientist Graham Little, who died in Melbourne on 24 February. The most frequent remark was about the gap that Graham's death would leave in Australia's political and intellectual life. Like Dame Roma, Graham Little made a unique contribution, working as he did at the juncture of political and psychological commentary and analysis. But it was as a writer—of trenchant, insightful prose—that he was most mentioned and mourned by those gathering between the tents. Novelists and poets mourned him. So did historians, publishers and the public milling in the tents.

I think Graham Little might have enjoyed one of the early highlights of Writers' Week. Historian Inga Clendinnen drew a huge crowd to her talk and also to the launch of her memoir, *Tiger's Eye*. Sounding magisterial but also genuinely surprised by the overwhelming nature of her reception, Clendinnen made a plea for the mediating power of writing, of books. They are the means, she said, whereby one stranger can communicate with another. It was a highly political—literary political—speech, and was received with great acclamation.

The Week had its sprinkling of 'stars'. But more remarkable than the huge turnout for the likes of former Prime Minister Paul Keating was the overall consistency of

the crowd size. Of course they came for novelist Richard Ford, for Bernhard Schlink, German author of the controversial novel, *The Reader*, for Fay Weldon and Vikram Seth. But they also did what Adelaide crowds often do—they responded to the word-of-mouth that zings like electricity around the tents. So Russian biographer of Stalin and Rasputin, Edvard Radzinsky, became an instant favourite. Fireball academic and social commentator, Mary Kalantzis, kept a full tent spellbound with her point-by-point itemisation of the values Australia

that I heard. But that is so often the summing up of Adelaide Writers' Week. Even the weather under the tents stayed benign—except to a very moist Edvard Radzinsky, who had come direct from Russia, where it was minus something unimaginable, to the thermal shock of Adelaide's slanting autumn sunshine. 'You'll die,' his Russian advisors warned him. But he did not.

Elsewhere the Festival was running full throttle. Water was a theme—one close to Adelaide's heart. Not that Adelaide perhaps wanted it poured out in such lavish

Push for the bush

OVER THE LAST 25 YEARS, the USA has supported its regional and rural areas through successful economic development mechanisms. The result: the revitalisation of many rural areas. It's not socialism exactly, but it works. NB Canberra.



Good news: Last year, we published a photograph of the devastated marketplace in Dili (see inset). When *Eureka Street's* South East Asia correspondent, Jon Greenaway, revisited and photographed the *Mercado Municipal Dili* recently, it was cleaned up, repainted, and once again a scene of bustling life.



seems to have abandoned at the moment. When three theological books were launched in the west tent by Veronica Brady BVM, the crowds stayed to hear not just her splendid launch speech, but the reason why this new initiative by the Writers' Week committee should be an inevitable, a natural development in a city of churches. As indeed it was.

Diverse enthusiasms were served, and no disillusion registered, or at least none

quantities as in the Netherlands Opera production of *Writing To Vermeer*, with libretto by Peter Greenaway. The cast, with extraordinary fortitude, kept singing while they were doused with showers from above and obliged to wade through moats below. It was an emblem for the enthusiasm of the whole Festival, which year after year keeps bobbing up with new ideas, old traditions newly rendered, and an overall atmosphere of vivacity and grace. —Morag Fraser

Government in the USA can be surprisingly interventionist—much more than in Australia. Three successful US regional development strategies are particularly worthy of the Australian government's attention.

The first strategy is direct funding of local and regional bodies. Local government in the USA receives direct funding under the federal system of Community Development Block Grants, developed over

25 years ago. The level of funding is decided using a formula based on the level of economic deprivation in individual local government areas compared with national averages. The amounts provided are substantial and give local authorities the means to achieve real results—subject to their meeting national objectives, such as benefiting low and moderate income earners.

Eligible areas of expenditure include grants, loans, interest supplements, technical assistance, and acquisition and rehabilitation of property. While local government supervises the funds, a community-based board of trustees, chosen for their skills and interests, selects the projects to be funded. Whereas this US system involves significant devolution of power, in Australia funding is controlled more strictly (with the exception of the untied Financial Assistance Grants paid to local government). Match the narrow selection criteria and you get the money. Or don't, if you don't!

The second strategy worth examining is the establishment of 'Enterprise Zones' (EZs). These are a creature of State governments and they provide higher than normal credits against state taxes if a company

achieves certain goals. Goals could include the purchase of new equipment, employing target groups, employing people in quality jobs, and providing credits back to banks for lending to companies in the EZs.

The Australian federal government gets a case of hives when it hears about EZs. They say they are philosophically opposed to the concept because EZs 'prop up non-viable industries'. This is certainly not a concern in the USA. In fact, EZs were a creation of the Republican Party, which saw them as a way of bringing more and more businesses up to speed through modest levels of public assistance.

The Australian government gets nervous when tax rebates are mentioned, but they need to acknowledge that tax credits on EZs in the USA are only partial credits and only apply from a baseline of business activity established when the EZ is gazetted. The benefits apply to the increase in the business activity, not to the level of business operating before the EZ was created. Using that method of calculation, a government only forgoes part of the increased tax liability created as a result of the expansion.

Supporters of EZs argue that forgoing tax revenue from the expanded business

makes good sense. It provides further employment, gets people off welfare and increases the activity within the domestic economy. The Australian government worries that giving tax credits in one area would be unfair to businesses in other areas. The USA is not so timid: it provides the cure where it is needed.

Why is it that this outwardly free-market and laissez-faire government is so keen to control commercial activity? For two principal reasons: first, to make opportunities for private enterprise available to all and not just a few, and second, to ensure that the fortunate are made to face their responsibilities and deliver positive social outcomes.

Also of interest in Australia is the behaviour of our banking industry. Which brings us to the third regional development strategy. Since 1977, the US has had the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) which imposes (shock, horror) responsibilities on the banking industry to deliver its services across the entire demographic—in other words, to all the people. The CRA requires banks to earn credits by acting in certain ways: lending to low/moderate income earners and into depressed areas; lending to innovative projects and to target



groups. When the CRA became operative, the banks suddenly became nicer. The legislation does not require banks to operate branches at a loss or to make unsafe loans or investments, but it does require them to conduct business across all sectors of society and not just 'take the cream'. Similar responsibilities apply in other areas. Real estate developers and local government must work together to provide up to 15 per cent of any housing development for low and moderate-income earners.

It is naive to suggest that the USA has socialist tendencies. The reality is that the USA is a tough country, often tough on the world, tough on its poor, but also tough on its corporations. Successive legislatures have demonstrated a will to make people and corporations responsible for their actions and for the wealthy to share their gains with those less fortunate and, in doing so, minimise the public expenditure burden. Community Development Block Grants, Economic Zones and the Community Reinvestment Act are three examples which could translate very well to the Australian experience.

Whatever happens in regional Australia, either from John Anderson's Summit or whatever follows, it must be geared to quality job creation in the broadest sense. Regional Australians need to work, to feel a part of a community and its economy. The very great fear among country people is that 'the economic system' will continue to oppose their basic needs. While community spirit is important, much of what is required will be money-based, and that presents a difficulty. Government has successfully pandered to our greed by holding up tax cuts at every opportunity. When everyone's tax bill is cut, the public purse is diminished.

This paucity of available funding is seen as a major problem for John Anderson. It affects his preferred choice of mechanisms to bring the bush back to life. But the reality is that regional Australia does not expect ongoing heavy subsidies. What it does expect is that federal and state governments will take a genuine interest in the common good of the nation and the way in which its regional citizens fit into that picture.

The final example from the USA is one of commitment. If one is in love and utters sweet nothings into the ear of the object of one's desire, it is expected that chocolates and flowers will follow. Canberra appears flirtatious, but the box only contains half a chocolate.

—Graham Apthorpe



When the carnival is over

THIS YEAR, THE GAY AND LESBIAN MARDI GRAS in Sydney passed with a flourish of controversy. The Anglican and Catholic Archbishops of Sydney both wrote in mild criticism of it, and were in turn criticised by groups active in the festival. The controversy did not reduce the numbers on the day. Nor did it prevent the churches from being liberally made fun of during the parade. The events pointed to two elements of the Mardi Gras which stand in some tension. The Mardi Gras was born as an instrument to change intolerant community and church attitudes to homosexuality. But it also continues the traditions of Carnival: the days of excess and feasting that traditionally preceded the fast and straitness of Lent.

The Carnival has been the subject of much historical and theological writing in recent years. Many historians have studied Christianity as a form of social control. The Carnival then arouses interest because by definition it is uncontrolled, and indeed parodies such instruments of social control as hierarchy, public mores and sacraments. At the Carnival, roles and hierarchies are reversed. Servants and slaves become masters for a day, cooks are served by their guests, women take the initiative in relationships, church and secular rituals are parodied, thrift yields to impulse, while sexual inhibitions and boundaries are transgressed.

The historical response of the churches to Carnival has been taken as an index of the desire for social control at any given period. Preachers loved to excoriate it precisely because of its excesses and particularly because of its reversal of the commandments. While the (bad) Renaissance Popes encouraged it (Julius II introduced bear-baiting), the later (gloomy) ones, like Sixtus V, shortened the period of Carnival and even erected gibbets along the streets to remind people of the consequences of excess in his Rome. Their attitude was adopted by later Protestant writers who described the Carnival as peculiar to decadent Roman Catholic countries. Modern scholars have tended to rehabilitate the Carnival. By throwing off social controls, Carnival struck a blow for liberty.

Whatever of that, Carnival flourishes only where there are clear hierarchies and social norms. It is parasitic on the rigorous order of Lent, as its name, derived from the laying aside of meat, indicates. Only when laws of conduct and of belief and social hierarchies are firmly established can there be a celebration which reverses them. Without an order, there is only Showbiz. This makes the Sydney Mardi Gras interesting. For in the universal tolerance enjoined in Australian secular culture, there seems little space for reversal and mockery of established mores. From the perspective of Carnival, criticism from community leaders might be reassuring: underneath a surface tolerance lies a network of values to be laughed at.

But if it belongs to Carnival, you might wonder whether the Mardi Gras is an effective way of changing community attitudes and, for that matter, whether it is really open to question for being socially subversive. For, by reversing accepted patterns of social relationship, the Carnival paradoxically reinforces their acceptance. The more things are made different for a day, the more they are the same for every other day. ■

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When change is mandatory

THE CATHOLIC Commission for Justice, Development and Peace (CCJDP) often hears from non-government organisations which have major concerns about the use of mandatory sentencing laws in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Cases cited include a young boy who was imprisoned for two weeks for stealing a loaf of bread; an 18-year-old given the same sentence for the theft of a \$2.50 lighter; and another child jailed for stealing a yo-yo.

The cases often reveal that the offenders have experienced extreme poverty and long periods of homelessness. Some speak very

sentencing. Despite this public sentiment, it seems unlikely that the federal government will act. Already, Prime Minister John Howard has stated that these laws are matters of domestic concern and not matters for the international community, even though Australia has signed and ratified a number of international human rights conventions which these mandatory sentencing laws breach.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child raised considerable concern about these mandatory sentencing laws in July 1997, but their findings have been overlooked.

The Prime Minister has maintained that this is not a 'moral' issue and therefore not a matter for a 'conscience vote' by politicians. He has himself classified the laws as 'silly'.

you're out'. They take away the judicial discretion to take account of the history of the offender, the circumstances surrounding the offence and the circumstances of the victim. They also fail to look seriously at rehabilitation and reforming of the offender.

The Northern Territory and Western Australian governments argue that this is a matter of States' rights. In fact, these are matters concerning international human rights under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* and the *United Nations Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice*. They are matters which go beyond state boundaries. If this were not the case, every country and province of each country in the world could argue that human rights infringements should not be subject to international scrutiny, thus undermining the whole humanitarian and human rights function of the United Nations. Such an argument is reminiscent of those raised by South African prime ministers when defending apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s. Article 26 of the *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, of which Australia is a signatory, states: 'Every treaty in force is binding upon the parties to it and must be performed by them in good faith.'

The late Supreme Court judge, Sir John Starke, in his 1988 report into Victoria's sentencing, highlighted the many negative aspects of imprisonment which are contrary to the interests of any community. For example, when prisons:

- become schools for crime;
- damage physical health;
- damage mental health;
- cause psychological problems;
- place stress on family relationships;
- promote licit and illicit drug dependency;
- exacerbate institutionalisation; and
- expose prisoners to physical and sexual assault.

A 1998 study by David Heilpern noted that an estimated one in four prisoners aged 18-25 claimed to have been sexually assaulted and that younger, smaller and gay prisoners are at greater risk (*Fear or Favour: Sexual Assault of Young Prisoners*, Southern Cross University Press, 1998). Such experiences seem hardly appropriate penalties or life experiences for young people who have stolen a loaf of bread, a yo-yo, or Texas.

After analysing research and experience both in Australia and overseas,



Malcolm's lonely, busy
ill-judged life was no
impediment to flexible
learning

little English, are supposedly in the care and protection of the state, and have not had access to interpreters in their court cases. In many instances, the offending behaviour could have been addressed with purposeful interventions.

At the time of writing, in March, federal parliament was considering a bill for overturning the mandatory sentencing legislation in the Northern Territory, following national outrage over the suicide of a young Aboriginal boy in custody after mandatory

These 'silly' laws have serious effects. They send mainly young, homeless, often Aboriginal people to prison for minor offences, disregard the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and work to increase Aboriginal incarceration rates (which are already disproportionately high). They are incorrectly referred to in the media as 'three strikes and you're out' laws. In fact, in some cases, because of the method of laying charges, they can be 'one or two strikes and

criminologists have concluded that mandatory sentencing laws do little to deter criminals. Instead, they put young offenders into schools for crime, they increase prison costs and add to prison overcrowding. (See, for example, the *Report on Mandatory Sentencing*, Declan Roche, Australian Institute of Criminology, December 1999).

A caller to our CCJDP office, who was a victim of a minor property offence in Darwin, told us that, had he known that the result of his pressing charges would be a prison sentence for a homeless boy who needed help, not jail, he would never have pressed the charge. Another caller, from Western Australia and also a victim of a minor offence, expressed similar concerns about the lack of proportion between the offence and the penalty imposed, and the lack of judicial discretion.

If anything, these laws work against law and order. If they are allowed to remain on the statute books, they will engender a lack of confidence in the integrity and fairness of the Australian criminal justice system.

—Liz Curran

This month's contributors: **Morag Fraser** is *Eureka Street's* editor; **Graham Apthorpe** is Economic Development Manager for Cowra State Council; **Liz Curran** is the Executive Officer of the Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace (Melbourne Archdiocese).

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Women & Pilgrimage

*I am seeking women,
mid-life, as walking
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High-tech detection

IN LATE JANUARY, a British court convicted Harold Shipman—a family doctor in a small town on the outskirts of Manchester—of killing 15 elderly patients. The police think he may have murdered more than 100 others.

How did he get away with it? Surely his activities should have been picked up sooner? That's what the British Medical Association argued, as it demanded the immediate introduction of computer technology to alert authorities to anomalies such as an abnormally high death rate in one medical practice. 'Here we are, with technology in most parts of our lives, but there isn't the ability to actually select out trends with the sort of technology we should have,' the chairman of the Association, Ian Bogle, is reported as saying in the science weekly, *New Scientist*.

Well, the problem is not to do with the technology. Known as geographic information systems (GIS), computer programs to do what the British Medical Association asks have been around for more than 30 years. They allow data to be stored, manipulated and analysed on a geographic basis. Originally complex and available only on mainframes, nowadays the software is easy to use, fits on a standard PC, and is not even expensive.

So why is GIS technology not in widespread use in the health system of any developed country? Some of the answers are provided by a research project in the Department of Geomatics at the University of Melbourne. A team led by Dr Francisco Escobar has developed a program for plotting and analysing the health services of a region, so that, for example, neighbourhoods of low immunisation rates can be detected, or the location of new medical services can be better planned. In addition to the lack of government funding, Escobar's group has come up against a couple of other barriers. First, doctors are generally not particularly computer literate. Second, the efficient use of GIS demands up-to-date, accurate information, and plenty of it. Setting up such data collection systems demands time, money, expertise and attention to privacy issues.

But it can be done. A group from the Mayor's Office in New York City is planning to collect and review information on admissions to all the hospitals located in that city's five boroughs. The project involves commissioning special software to detect any anomalous patterns which might emerge—clusters of patients with unusual symptoms, or surges of patients with commonplace symptoms, for example. The project was initially supported as a measure against biological terrorism, but it has rapidly become clear that it could be used for much more—like detecting and treating a 'flu epidemic or highlighting the lack of services in a particular area.

The slow introduction of GIS technology illustrates a deeper modern problem—the all-pervasive complexity and specialisation which mitigates against generalists, people with an overview. While it is easy for suspicious specialists to marginalise generalists because they seem to possess no particular expertise, it is those with broad knowledge who can build the links between disparate groups such as health professionals and geographers—links which often lead to important advances. ■

Tim Thwaites is a freelance science writer.

On the edge of the desert

In the welter of disaster stories about Africa, it is easy to lose sight of the people who live with small means but great determination.

Anthony Ham met some of them in Niger.

THE NAME OF the end of the earth is Niamey. The capital of Niger—by the UN's reckoning the second-poorest country in the world—is a place of unrelenting harshness. The dust never settles in this city of almost one million people, whose low-slung mudbrick dwellings combine to create a village which long ago far exceeded its capacity to cope. In such a place, it can seem that Niger's history, having led to its people living in cities without access to basic services and infrastructure, has been a series of tragic, irreversible mistakes.

Imagine a country where more than 60 per cent of the people survive on less than a dollar a day. Imagine a city where the five-star hotels, which charge more than \$150 per night, occupy the prime locations along the tranquil and beautiful Niger River. Imagine a city where there are more white Landrovers belonging to non-government organisations, and more government ministries, than there are kilometres of paved road, where the dedicated doctors at the central hospital can do little more than provide palliative care because there are few medicines; where running water is a luxury.

As befits a country so desperately poor, Niger's statistics are shocking, and they are overwhelming when you are confronted with their human face. For every 1000 children under five, 320 will not see their fifth birthday. More than 80 per cent of children suffer some form of malnutrition, the most horrifying consequence of which is the return of noma, a severe form of gingivitis where gangrene slowly eats away the flesh of the mouth and face, and which is particularly prevalent in children. This disease could be prevented with a five-dollar mouthwash—beyond the means of

most parents. Hardly surprising, given that many civil servants have not been paid in almost a year. One in 20 women dies during childbirth.

Nor is it surprising that the streets of Niamey have an air of trapped desperation. My reason for being here—to write the Niger chapter for a Lonely Planet travel guide—seems absurd, obscene even, in a place which most of its inhabitants will never leave. The conversations I have on the streets of the capital are as familiar to me as they are demoralising for all concerned: Where are you from? Australia. Ah, Australia ... Niger is no good. Life is very difficult here. I want to go to your country. You can help?

I tell them that it is very difficult, almost impossible, although I cannot to their satisfaction (or mine) explain why. Sometimes, to my shame, I give them my address—false hopes on a torn scrap of paper—more to satisfy my own need to do something than because I believe it will come to anything. It would be better to give them nothing. One of Niamey's countless beggars extends her hand. *'Oui patron, patron. Un cadeau patron ... patron.'* I quicken my pace and shut my eyes to the pain of Africa.

At twilight, the bush taxi in which I am travelling pulls into Dogondoutchi. It is a beautiful small town in south-western Niger, in the arid zone where the Sahara Desert meets the Sahel. A striking escarpment, turned soft yellow in the sunset, overlooks the town. The lake is blue as blue, circled by palm trees. At the bus station, I stumble into a post-apocalyptic vision which presses close. Young boys without legs. An old woman who will not eat tonight. A boy missing an eye. A woman on a hand-propelled

cycle with a strange protrusion from her head, a child on her back and another trailing along behind in the dust. Huge basins of meat with a petrified goat's head at one end, a lengthy hairy white tail at the other. And, in the shade, sits a man intently reading a piece of paper as if it contains the instructions for how to put everything back together.

BUT THIS IS NOT another story of helpless Africans, another pitiful dispatch from a continent associated in the popular mind with hopeless misery or safari parks.

While the images of misery can be overwhelming, the people of Niger are too busy struggling to survive to want your pity. Perhaps, though, some understanding of the root causes of their desperate plight might encourage a radical rethink on Africa, highlighting the resilience and daily dignity of the Nigriens' struggle, recasting them as individuals bravely fighting against great odds.

Niger became independent from French rule in 1960. The colonial legacy for the newly independent state and its people was an ongoing dependence on patterns of living and trade wholly alien to Niger.

The French had asserted their control through a series of punitive military expeditions, the most notorious of which was the Voulet-Chanoine mission which laid waste to much of southern Niger, including a terrible massacre in Birni N'Konni.

The next stage of France's annexation of the country is a story of colonial exploitation common throughout Africa. Cash crops, predominantly peanuts, were forcibly introduced, replacing traditional

subsistence forms of agriculture. Small villages were 'consolidated', their populations relocated into higher density towns located along French access roads. The combined pressures of ill-suited crops, more intensive farming and deforestation ravaged a land accustomed

compensation. The local means of exchange was replaced with the French franc, in which taxes had to be paid and seeds purchased. Young men of the southern tribes—Hausa, Songhai, Djerma—were forced to migrate to the coast in search of employment paid in

But with virtually no infrastructure, Niger was still one of the most taxed colonies in the region.

It is easy to argue that 40 years of independence ought to be enough for Niger to have overcome the effects of French rule. Certainly it has not always



to rotating fallow periods on small land-holdings.

Patterns of interrelation between tribes and regions were similarly disrupted. The complex interdependence of the southern farmers and the Tuareg—a nomadic desert people of the north—was ruptured as trade was oriented away from the ancient salt caravan routes of the Sahara towards coastal ports controlled by the colonial authorities. The French requisitioned camels, the mainstay of the Tuareg economy, usually without

hard currency, thereby causing frequent labour shortages at harvest time. The French consciously limited the emergence of any educated group in Niger, instead relying for control on traditional chiefs whom it favoured and whose abuses it ignored.

With its control assured, French rule was thereafter increasingly characterised by neglect. Few teachers were trained, fewer schools were built, and of 1032km of paved road built by the French in West Africa, only 14km of them were in Niger.

been well served by its indigenous politicians, most glaringly in 1973–74 when, at the height of a devastating drought and famine, government ministers were caught squirrelling away stockpiles of international food aid.

However, some processes are impossible to reverse. Niger's soil, which once supported vast, fabulously wealthy empires, has been so depleted that only three per cent of Nigerien land can sustain any form of agriculture. The most serious problem is that of

desertification, the southward march of the Sahara which will soon be encroaching on the northern outskirts of Niamey. Whole villages are disappearing, their inhabitants migrating to the cities of Tahoua, Agadez and Niamey, forever severing their ties with the land, ties which survived for centuries but which have now been destroyed in a generation.

In Agadez, a predominantly Tuareg town in the southern Sahara, glimpses remain of ancient patterns of existence. Agadez, almost as fabled as Timbuktu, is a frontier oasis town with ancient lanes twisting their way through the Vieux Quartier of artisan workshops and mud-brick dwellings. Here, away from the touts, the greetings are shy and discreet but unmistakably friendly. In the centre of town is the breathtaking Grand Mosque. Over 500 years old and built in the Sudanic style, its single mudbrick tower stands 80 metres tall, criss-crossed with small windows and horizontal wooden struts, like an ancient fossil rising out of the desert.

Not far from the mosque, I first met Moussa Touboulo, a Tuareg. By night,

when he removes his turban, he is a diminutive man. By day, in his full robes, he has the stature of a Tuareg chief, known and respected by everyone with whom I spoke throughout Agadez. He prefers the desert to town, where he must live for business reasons. He strides around Agadez purposefully, as if hastening his return to his village in the Air Mountains, and he lives on the outskirts of town so that he can avail himself of a quick escape.

Moussa is a guide who makes his living by taking travellers on camel safaris into the desert and Air Mountains. Such trips are once again possible now that the Tuareg rebellion, which made northern Niger off-limits for much of the '90s, is over.

Tuareg agitations for a better deal, first from the French and then from the Nigerien state, have been a semi-regular feature of Niger's history, as have the subsequent brutal repressions by the authorities. It was not so long ago that Niger's prisons were disproportionately filled with Tuareg. Those not in prison were often forced into cities. There, they could survive only by selling off family artefacts, working as prostitutes, or working as security guards (a job for which, so the stereotype goes, they were well-suited by virtue of their love for violence).

The Tuareg resent what they see as foreign controls—state intrusion, international borders—and claim for themselves the title 'Citizens of the Sahara'.

The years of conflict were devastating for businesses like Moussa's. Tuareg wealth is measured in camels. Moussa has only three left, having been forced to sell the remainder.

A TRIP WITH MOUSSA into the mountains is a moving counterbalance to the bleak urban landscape of Niamey. Passing through oasis after oasis of bright green crops, wells worked by camels, and irrigation channels servicing nearby villages, Moussa shouts greetings to all. Astride

his camel he is a dignified and regal figure, yet unmistakably a man of his people. At each village, we are welcomed with warmth and hospitality, like members of the family, and offered a hut in which to sleep. It takes Moussa hours to do the rounds of the village, visiting each family compound to exchange 'the nez's'. The Tuareg greeting is an elaborate ritual of handshakes, each one accompanied by a question: how are you? how's your family? how's your child? Moussa works his way through the village, dispensing food, clothing, medicine and tobacco. When I make the utilitarian suggestion that tourists must be good for business, Moussa replies instantly: 'Not good for business, good for Tuareg.'

To the outsider, these villages are stunningly picturesque, particularly at sunset when the golden light softens the plains dotted sparsely with fenced compounds of conical straw and bamboo huts. But it is also a harsh environment, one of the harshest imaginable, where the basic elements of fire and water are everything, and where there are few young men remaining. Women do the work from dawn until dusk. Around the campfire, Yahye, our guide, makes rope from long lengths of straw. He talks softly in Tamacheq, the Tuareg language.

In this harshest of deserts, I found a proud and self-reliant people. There is nothing romantic in their daily toil for existence, but they remain connected to their land and way of life—a last, fragile bulwark against the urbanisation which is so oppressive in Africa, and against the worst aspects of modernisation.

The Tuareg are as disdained as they are feared in Niger. Their very name, 'Tuareg', used primarily by outsiders, is an adaptation of the Arabic word 'Tawarek', which means 'abandoned by God'. The Tuareg people, as Citizens of the Sahara, have been abandoned to their fate, if not by God, then by the French, the Niger state and the international community.

Yet the Tuareg have held to their traditional ways and their traditional lands. They understand a phenomenon that the French and the local dictators could not eradicate. Its name is community. ■

Anthony Ham is a Middle East specialist and *Eureka Street* correspondent.

"I don't know who sent me that letterbomb. I don't know if they are sorry. If they should come to me and say that they were, I should love to forgive them. But for their part they would need to do something to show their regret, not just say it."

South Africa's Fr Michael Lapsley on saying sorry.

"If people don't come to church then it is something that they are doing wrong. It couldn't be that our services do not communicate to them or that we do not get out and share the message on their turf. After all we are in the phone book!"

Peter Wilson and William Stewart on the churches after Christendom.

The Melbourne Anglican

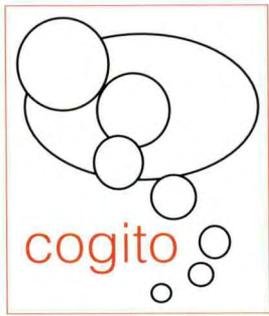
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Not your fault, Sir

NEWSPAPER THAT SIR RICHARD BRANSON proposes to operate a 'no-frills' domestic air service in Australia prompts me to wonder if it will be anything like his 'no-frills' rail service in Britain. Sir Richard's knighthood was for services to 'entrepreneurship', but it might as well have been for services to comedy, for his Virgin Trains are a splendid joke, and like many good British jokes, one easily patient of frequent repetition. Hardly a day passes but one hears it again.

Yesterday a Virgin Trains' service from Edinburgh to Brighton ran out of fuel some two hours from journey's end. The problem was not, a spokesman insisted, that 'we didn't fill it up enough'. No, 'the engines lost a quantity of fuel due to a leak'; a slow leak, however, so there was no danger of a conflagration: 'it was not a case of all the fuel suddenly leaking out in a few yards'. Well, that's a relief, then. 'It was Sod's law', the spokesman continued, 'that such a long-distance service failed so near its destination.' When would it have failed, I wondered, had Sod's law not been operating?

Recently I journeyed south from Edinburgh with Virgin Trains myself. Although the train was, remarkably enough, at the platform on time, the carriage in which my pre-booked seat was located had no heating. As the ambient temperature at Waverley Station was -8 C the absence of this particular frill soon made itself felt, all the more so as the blowers, at least, were in tip-top condition, and were pumping freezing air at our feet.

Appeals to the conductors were met with impatience. They would do what they could, in due course. Their first duty was to ensure that everyone had a valid ticket: the whole point of a privatised service, after all, is to make money. An hour later a conductor returned and endorsed our tickets to enable us to obtain 'a complimentary warm beverage from the buffet'. This might have brought some temporary relief, applied externally. No sane person would have contemplated ingesting it.

Later again, a conductor reappeared to announce that all hope of repairing the heating had, for the time being, been abandoned. We were free to hunt through

the train for unoccupied, un-booked seats in other, warmer carriages. Finding a seat was one thing, transferring the impedimenta of travel quite another, as the swaying and lurching of the train put one at constant risk of landing, laden with backpack, computer, briefcase, and luncheon hamper, in some traveller's lap, or on top of the livestock dozing fitfully in the passageway. The sliding doors at the ends of carriages each presented a challenge or a hazard of its own. Those that did not open automatically had to be prized apart with main force; those that did open automatically would slam shut, heavily and suddenly, against the direction of the train's lurching. But I got to my new seat without injury to others or myself. Then the heating failed in that carriage too.

AT BIRMINGHAM WE PULLED into a densely crowded platform. These people, it turned out, had not been awaiting our train at all, but another which proved to lack not just frills, but substance itself—a mere figment of the imagination: perhaps their own, perhaps Sir Richard's. Nevertheless, they were grateful for what they could get. Nor were we ungrateful for the additional body-heat as they crowded in upon us. A voice soon came on air to apologise for the delayed departure and to offer the most recent excuse. This I thought a little niggardly. It produced, as always, some merriment, but why were new passengers denied the full catalogue of the excuses that had been entertaining us since Edinburgh?

It is the British sense of fun, that legendary good humour in the face of adversity, that should have been knighted at the New Year, for services to Virgin Trains. 'Not your fault, old chap!' the man sitting opposite me said to the conductor when pointing out that black oil from the armrest of his chair had leaked over his trousers, 'not your fault, at all'.

I wish Sir Richard as much luck with his Australian customers. ■

Denis Minns *op* is *Eureka Street's* United Kingdom correspondent.

My father's landscape

*When writing his bestselling memoir, **Romulus, My Father**, Raimond Gaita often reflected on Iris Murdoch's remark that understanding the reality of another person is a work of love, justice and pity.*

For Gaita, his understanding of his European father and mother was mediated, unexpectedly, by the Australian landscape.



FIRST I MUST SKETCH the outlines of the story.

My father was born in 1922 in a Romanian-speaking part of Yugoslavia. He fled home when he was 13 and trained to become a blacksmith. Just before World War II broke out, he went to Germany where he believed he could best practise his trade. Trapped there by the war, he met and fell in love with my mother, Christine, at the time a girl of 16. After the war they immigrated to Australia because they had been wrongly advised that the climate would relieve, if not actually cure, her severe asthma.

Already on board ship and later in the reception camp at Bonegilla, my mother

had affairs with other men. Because my father was told that I was running wild, he called for me to live with him in a migrant workers' camp at Cairn Curran in central Victoria where he was working on a project to dam the Loddon River. There he met and befriended two brothers, Pantelimon and Mitru Hora. Pantelimon, whom I simply call Hora as my father always did, became my father's dearest friend and a second father to me. Mitru, of whom I was also very fond, became my mother's lover and the father of my two half-sisters. He and my mother had a desperate relationship which ended in his suicide in Maryborough in 1956, at the age of 27. Two years later

my mother killed herself on the eve of her 30th birthday.

My father and I lived for ten years together in Frogmore, a derelict farmhouse, situated between Maryborough and Maldon, six kilometres west of Baringhup. Most of the dramatic incidents of *Romulus, My Father* occurred during the period of our life there.

When I wrote *Romulus*, my main concern was to tell truthfully the story of my father's life. Now I want to reflect on what that meant for me. I have no general theory about the degree of truthfulness needed for a memoir, or even autobiography, to retain its integrity. Strange though it may sound coming



Raimond Gaita, photographed by Bill Thomas

from a philosopher, I doubt that anything could be said that is both general and interesting, or at any rate, that is general and likely to be true. One judges whether a book works, and there is little to be said in advance about what will make it work. One should judge books like people—as they come, open to their individuality, without too many preconceptions. Indeed, if one thinks, as I do, that the truthfulness of a book and its capacity to move its readers is often inseparable from the authority of the individuated voice of its author, someone who speaks with truthful integrity from his or her experience, then that's more than an analogy.

Belief in the truthfulness of *Romulus, My Father* has, I am certain, been important to its warm reception. More than by any other aspect of that reception, I have been touched by the way people of very different kinds have been moved by the story it tells. It's a fact, I think, that we learn most deeply about life when we are moved. Often, though, we are moved when we should not be, or in ways that we should not be, or more than we should be. Sometimes we are moved because we are sentimental, or liable to pathos, or in other ways vulnerable to the 'winged words' of rhetoric, as Adolf Eichmann called them. There are no standards, I think, that reason could firmly

establish, even in principle, which we could consult to assure us whether we have been rightly or wrongly moved. When we are moved we trust what moves us and trust that we are rightly moved. We trust wisely, however, only when trust is disciplined.

In the case of *Romulus, My Father* any reader who is moved by it must trust that things happened as I say they do: that my mother did fail to care for me, that my father did look after me, that Mitru did kill himself at the age of 27 and that my mother did the same at the age of 29, that Vacek did live between two boulders in the hills, that Jack the cockatoo did walk the half kilometre to Tom Lillie's farm,

and so on. Some errors would be forgiven, but not many. It's that kind of book.

Obviously, though, the book is not a report. It is a narrative, and its narrative character is interdependent with a conception of truth and truthfulness quite different from those which apply to the kind of facts I have just listed. They are facts in the sense in which a judge in a court of law might instruct a witness to 'stick to the facts please'. But the human meaning of such facts, their significance in the narrative of a person's life, goes together with ideas of truth and truthfulness to which creativity is answerable, and which disciplines trust when we trust what moves us. The difference might show itself like this. To be truthful merely about the facts, I relied on the usual sorts of things—memory, memory corroborated by others, by documents, by letters and so on. To be truthful about their meaning—which was by far the more difficult and important—I listened to music, mostly to Bach. I depended on him to keep me truthful.

Around the same time that I was writing the book, I wrote an affidavit for a solicitor, in which, among other things, I described the venal behaviour of a wife towards her dying husband in much the same tone and sparse language as I wrote *Romulus, My Father*. The solicitor said the affidavit was emotive and useless. Worse than useless, indeed, because he thought it would irritate the judge. 'Keep your emotions out of it,' he advised. When people use the word 'emotive' in this pejorative way, they mean that emotion and thought are clearly separable aspects of our nature, and that thought—the part of us that reaches out to reality—is more often hindered by emotion than it is helped by it.

Writing about things that affected me profoundly, such as my mother's suicide and my father's madness, I had to resist as much as possible all dispositions to pathos or sentimentality. That's not a merely personal remark. Anyone in similar circumstances should do the same. But in resisting pathos and sentimentality, I was not trying to get feeling out of the writing. I was trying to make the feeling true. I don't mean that I wanted it to be sincere. Sentimentality is sincere more often than not. In resisting sentimentality I wasn't so much trying to feel right,

but trying to see things right, understand things right.

A number of reviewers have described the book as a work of love and have said it is not judgmental towards any of the characters in it. You will understand how gratified I am by such comments when I tell how often I have admired and reflected upon a remark by Iris Murdoch. She says that understanding the reality of another person is a work of love, justice and pity. She means that love, justice and pity are *forms* of understanding, rather than merely conditions which facilitate understanding—conditions like a clear head, a good night's sleep, an alcohol-free brain. Real love is hard in the sense of hard-headed and unsentimental. In ridding oneself of sentimentality, pathos and so on, one is allowing justice, love and pity to do their cognitive work, their work of disclosing reality.

I WROTE THE FIRST DRAFT of *Romulus* in a rush, in three very intense weeks, without really thinking of what I was doing. I just wrote furiously. When I came to revise it and to reflect on what I had done, I thought of it as a kind of tragic poem. In the book I say something about tragedy as a literary genre and I link my sense of it as a young man to the landscape I grew up in. Only recently did I realise how important the landscape had been to my writing of the book, and to the kind of meaning it had for me. In a way I cannot explain very clearly, it connected with the kind of pity that Murdoch says is an aspect of truthful vision.

I was four when I came to Australia with my parents in 1950. At the time, assisted passage was granted to European immigrants provided they agreed to work wherever they were sent and at jobs of the government's choosing. My father was sent to Baringhup in central Victoria. There, he and I lived in a camp for a year or so until we moved to a farmhouse six kilometres away where we lived for the next ten years. My mother lived with us only occasionally. The farmhouse, situated in roughly 160 hectares of sheep-grazing country, was called Frogmore. Small and dilapidated, it had no electricity or running water. Rats lived under the house until snakes ate them and took their place. A couple of years after we settled there, our hens drove the snakes away.

My parents were hostile to the landscape and were ill at ease in it. This is how I describe the landscape and a characteristic European response to it:

Although the landscape is one of rare beauty, to a European or English eye it seems desolate, and even after more than forty years my father could not become reconciled to it. He longed for the generous and soft European foliage, but the eucalypts of Baringhup, scraggy except for the noble red gums on the river bank, seemed symbols of deprivation and barrenness. In this he was typical of many of the immigrants whose eyes looked directly to the foliage and always turned away offended. Even the wonderful summer smell of eucalyptus attracted them only because it promised useful oil.

It was especially bad for my mother. A troubled, intense, passionate and cultured city girl from Central Europe, she already showed signs of a psychological illness that would prove tragic. It was foolish for my father and me to hope that she could settle in a derelict farm house in a harsh landscape that aggravated her torment. She tried a number of times to kill herself. When she was only 29 she succeeded. I describe her return from hospital after one suicide attempt at Frogmore:

The road from Baringhup to Moolort was five hundred metres from Frogmore, connected to the house by a rough track. The taxi that brought my mother from Maldon left her at the junction of the road and the track, probably at her request. I first saw her when she was two hundred metres or so from the house, alone, small, frail, walking with an uncertain gait and distracted air. In that vast landscape with only crude wire fences and a rough track to mark a human impression on it she appeared forsaken. She looked to me as though she had returned from the dead, unsure about the value of the achievement.

She made light of her attempted suicide to me, but her vivacity was gone. Pre-occupied and uncommunicative, she lay in bed most days except for an hour or two when she went for walks. One evening, when she did not return from her walk, my father and I searched the paddocks calling to her, but heard no answer. Again my father ran to Lillie's from where he phoned

the police in Maldon. He feared she had killed herself. Later that night I stood knee-deep in the waters of a nearby swamp lit by searchlights as the police, my father, Lillie and others searched for her body. They did not find her and at about 3 a.m. everyone went home.

In the morning she came back to Frogmore, bleeding from a deep triangular cut in one of her shins. She said she had injured herself falling over a log and, dispirited, had spent the night sleeping beside it. She went to bed offering no explanation, then or ever.

went to a hill on the far side of Cairn Curran to shoot rabbits for our dinner and for the dog.

I reached the hill in the mid-afternoon. For the first time in my life I was really alive to beauty, receiving a kind of shock from it. I had absorbed my father's attitude to the countryside, especially to its scraggy trees, because he talked so often of the beautiful trees of Europe. But now, for me, the key to the beauty of the native trees lay in the light which so sharply delineated them against a dark blue sky.

coloured grasses. The landscape seemed to have a special beauty, disguised until I was ready for it; not a low and primitive form for which I had to make allowances, but subtle and refined. It was as though God had taken me to the back of his workshop and shown me something really special.

It was inconceivable to me that I should now shoot a rabbit. The experience transformed my sense of life and the countryside, adding to both a sense of transcendence.



Raimond Gaita with his mother, Christine, photographed near Frogmore. The tree in the background was unchanged when Gaita visited recently.

Like most children, I think, I had little sense of the aesthetic character of my surroundings. That changed dramatically when I was 11:

I liked living in the country and especially liked farm animals, but not in the way farm boys did. Conscious of this and of the fact that I was the only boy in the area who did not kill rabbits even though they were a destructive pest, I took my father's rifle and

Possessed of that key, my perception of the landscape changed radically as when one sees the second image in an ambiguous drawing. The scraggy shapes and sparse foliage actually became the foci for my sense of its beauty and everything else fell into place—the primitive hills, the unsealed roads with their surfaces ranging from white through yellow to brown, looking as though they had been especially dusted to match the high, summer-

On my return, a kilometre or so from home, I saw a crescent moon sitting directly above Frogmore. The surrounding trees were a dark clump amid the silver-coloured grasses. Even from that distance I could see the light of the kerosene lamp in the kitchen. There were no other signs of human habitation and the sight provoked a surge of affection for my primitive home. I arrived to find my father crazy with worry. He had noticed that the

rifle was gone, but had no idea where I went.

My feel for the beauty of the countryside was, I suspect, intensified by the freedom I enjoyed in it.

Riding the motorbike that summer, through the hot yellow grasslands of central Victoria and around the expansive waters of Cairn Curran, wearing only shorts and sandals, crystallised in me a sense of freedom that I possessed earlier, but never so fully, and which I always associate with that time in the country. I felt I could do anything provided I was respectful of others. The law and other kinds of regulations seemed only rules of thumb, regulative ideals, to be interpreted by individuals according to circumstances and constrained by goodwill and common-sense. From my father and from Hora I had already acquired a sense that only morality was absolute because some of its demands were non-negotiable. But I was too young to be troubled by that. I was eleven years old, riding my father's motorbike to collect the mail and visit friends, yet no one was troubled by this breach of the law. It left me with a sad, haunting image of a freedom, impossible now to realise, and which even then the world could barely afford.

IN 1972 I WENT to live in England and was immediately struck by its humanised countryside—the hedgerows, the drystone walls, the pretty, sometimes beautiful, villages. It could hardly have been more different from the landscape through which my mother walked when she came home from hospital in Maldon. I went for long walks—as the English often do—in Yorkshire, Kent, Sussex, and the Lake District, through farmers' fields, stopping to look at a beautiful church, to have lunch in a fine pub, to amble through a beautiful village. I marvelled at how deeply the English loved their land, and was impressed by the fact that intellectuals, writers and artists often lived in small villages throughout England. At the time most Australian intellectuals were ill at ease in their country and with its people. Many would have found it unthinkable to live in a country town.

To my surprise, because before I left Australia I was somewhat hostile to

England and things English, I quickly grew to love England. Although my father was Romanian and my mother German, I am sure my love of England and the English countryside was partly an expression of the fact that, despite my childhood love of the central Victorian landscape, my parents' estrangement from it had made a deep impression of me. I suspect it was also because as 'New Australians' they were the victims of humiliating condescension. Their manifest awkwardness in their environment, which made them so visibly outsiders, probably encouraged it.

In 1979, seven years after I had left, I returned to Australia for a visit and was dismayed to find that I had become estranged from the Australian landscape. I felt uneasy in it and realised that I had to some degree come to see it as my parents had, except that my response to it was conditioned by the uncanny realisation that it was the landscape I had previously loved. I came really to dislike most Victorian country towns.

On drives, even, or perhaps especially, in areas whose beauty no-one could deny (the Great Ocean Road or Wilsons Promontory in Victoria, for example), I longed to see a lovely village as we turned the corner, as one would in England or Europe. When I reflected on my alienation I remembered something from my childhood. Each year I used to go to the Maryborough New Year's Day show where Jimmy Sharman's boxing troop was a regular feature. Local lads fought with members of Sharman's troop, who were often punch-drunk Aborigines. The locals were fit and strong, it being harvest time, when many of them had been humping sacks of wheat on to trucks. Almost always they knocked hell out of those poor boxers. I remembered this and thought that the brutality and the landscape were all of a piece. I thought the harshness of the countryside explained, to some degree, the gracelessness that deformed middle-class respectability as I then perceived it.

AFTER THAT FIRST return visit in 1979, I often returned to Australia and was here, on leave from my work in London, for six years from 1993. Slowly I came again to appreciate Australia's delicate beauty. Not until last year, however,

when I wrote *Romulus, My Father*, did I again see beauty in the countryside of central Victoria. To write the first draft of the book I rented a cottage in Maldon a small town near Baringhup. A couple of days into my stay I went to visit the remains of Frogmore. I sat there for some hours, remembering and thinking of what I would write. As I was driving back to Maldon, around four o'clock on a late February afternoon, unexpectedly and suddenly, I fell in love again with the countryside of my boyhood. It seemed to me to be exquisitely beautiful, just as it was when I went to shoot rabbits on the hill overlooking Cairn Curran.

It was a joyful experience and it taught me how profoundly the landscape had affected my sensibility. I don't mean just my aesthetic sensibility. Perhaps I can convey what I do mean if I quote a passage from the book in which I describe my response to seeing my father for the first time after he had admitted himself as patient in the Ballarat psychiatric hospital.

The hospital represented a foreign world to me, one whose beliefs were shaped by ideas I instinctively felt to be in conflict with those that had enabled me to understand the events of my childhood. I could no longer see my father's illness just from the perspective of our life at Frogmore. Strange though it may sound, my sense of that life, of the ideas that informed it, was given intensity and colour by the light and landscape of the area. The hills looked as old as the earth, because they were rounded by millennia and also because the grey and equally rounded granite boulders that stood among the long yellow grasses, sharply delineated at all times of day by the summer sun, made them look prehistoric. More than anything, however, the glorious, tall, burnt-yellow grasses (as a boy they came to my chest and sometimes over my head) moving irregularly against a deep blue sky, dominated the images of my childhood and gave colour to my freedom and also to my understanding of suffering. In the morning they inspired cheerful energy of the kind that made you whistle; at midday in partnership with an unforgiving sun and alive with insects and other creatures, they intimidated; but in the late afternoon, towards dusk, everything was softened by a light that graced the area in a melancholy beauty that could pierce

one's soul, as it did mine on the day I went in search of rabbits, and many times thereafter.

Religion, metaphysics or the notions of fate and character as they inform tragedy are suited to that light and landscape. The assumptions of psychiatric medicine, affected as they are by psychiatry's debunking of metaphysics in its long struggle to become accepted as a science, were not. Life at Frogmore, in that landscape and under that light, nourished the sense, given to me by my father and Hora, of the contrast between the malleable laws and conventions made by human beings to reconcile and suit their many interests, and the uncompromising authority of morality, always the judge, never merely the servant of our interests.

For that reason tragedy, with its calm pity for the affliction it depicts, was the genre that first attracted my passionate allegiance: I recognised in it the concepts that had illuminated the events of my childhood. They enabled me to see Mitru, my mother, my father and Vacek, living among his boulders, as the victims of misfortune, in their different ways broken by it, but never thereby diminished.

That is why my heart broke when I saw my father in the ward before he saw us, in a room full of visibly disturbed people, some obviously insane, and he shrunken and bewildered. He had been given shock treatment and was one of those who felt it as a humiliating assault. Not everyone feels that way, but many do even when they concede that it is necessary. His pitiable state was increased by the effects of large doses of Largactil.

He had not been expecting us and greeted us with surprised hesitation, ambivalent about my presence, pleased but mortified and, I think, humiliated. He protested that he was fine, that he was not really ill because he could 'speak normally' whenever he made the effort. I suspect he was quite oblivious to the pathos in that claim, because he repeated it many times to protest that he was not as ill as he might appear to be.

I left the hospital changed. I had absorbed past sorrows against the sure confidence of my father's strength. I knew that, whatever was to come, I could never do so again.

I won't try to explain what I mean in that passage which is, for me, one of the most important in the book. If I did,

Possum

There you go, fast in a long swagger,
cool cat on a hot night,
impenitent and gleaming.

You, your siblings, *grandes dames* of the band,
slick as spit on brown limbs,
mount, rear, are flung

with aplomb against the surly clouds, printing
claw and brawn on dome and mind,
your plunge all defiance.

'I can', your name says in Latin. You do,
leaving a reek, year by year,
in my stone tent's pitch,

hooking your way by stubs of wire, fleering
back at a ruckle of twigs, launched
to bypass rhyme or reason.

Small clown, prince of the raw, moron
with blazing eyes, keep watching:
you are not alone.

Peter Steele

I would fall into obscurantism. It's not a passage I would have written in a book of philosophy. I hope that it sheds light on other events in the book and that other events shed light on it. If that happens, then readers of *Romulus, My Father* may understand my meaning. It is meaning that cannot be stated explicitly or elaborated discursively. It must show itself.

If I had not found myself whole again in my love of the landscape of my childhood, I could not have written the book that I did. It's not just that I could not have written the passages describing the landscape with the same feeling. The entire tone and mood of the book would have been different. My father disliked the landscape. I loved it. But the way I loved it was determined by how he saw the world. Because I accepted and made my own his distinctively European

fatalism, the light and the colours of central Victoria became for me the light and colours of tragedy. Metaphysical doctrines of determinism are far from my mind when I speak of my father's fatalism. I mean that for him, human life was defined by our vulnerability to misfortune and suffering.

It probably sounds absurd and, as I said, I could not defend it discursively, but I hoped that the story I told would be one whose events and characters would be bathed in the light and colours of that landscape. I hoped that in the telling of it I could achieve the same calm pity that I attributed to tragedy as a literary genre. ■

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THE REGION

Being Xanana Gusmao

To Australia's north, there are two leaders now preoccupied with the complexities of maintaining and exercising power. In Dili, **Jon Greenaway** interviews Xanana Gusmao and examines the impact of Indonesian President Wahid's visit to East Timor.

B EING XANANA GUSMAO is not an easy job at the moment, perhaps harder than it has been at any other stage over the last 25 years.

Pre-eminent among the East Timorese leadership, he is already a de facto president because of the close relationship between the transitional UN administration (UNTAET) and his umbrella organisation, CNRT (National Council of Timorese Resistance).

At his office on the Dili foreshore I remark on the rapid transformation that has taken place in the 12 months since we last spoke, in Jakarta, following his release from Cipinang prison into house arrest.

It is the end of another long day—at lunchtime he had farewelled Interfet commander Peter Cosgrove—and he gives tired nods of assent.

Gusmao talks first of the issues that are most pressing: the need to foster a unity which will include a reconciliation between the perpetrators and victims of last year's violence; growing frustration at the lack of employment and slow pace of reconstruction; and disgruntled youth and student leaders who see the CNRT as representing generational interests. In addressing these points he speaks with the self-confidence of a leader who is prepared to wait his problems out.

'We have to deal with anxiety,' Gusmao says. 'Anxiety from the perspective of the individual looking for a job, from the perspective of people wanting to rebuild their lives.

'Once we can open the doors to foreign investment then we will be able to respond to this anxiety ... so we will find then that these problems are not so great because everyone will be more concerned with their day-to-day lives.'

To the question of what kind of East Timor he would like to see emerge after this period of nation-building, he offers a less practised response.

'It is best explained not in political or economic terms but in terms of dreams,' he says, after a long pause.

'An independent East Timor must have democratic institutions that can provide our people with the opportunity to participate in the building of our nation.

'We must create a strong civil society to prevent the government forgetting universal values and the sacrifice everyone has made for this change.

'But East Timor will not value material development as much as its moral and cultural identity,' he adds, with some emphasis.

There are moments when Gusmao's diffident charm transforms itself into a steely resolve. There was one such moment during my visit last March, when he barked at his house-boy for being too slow to bring in the tea, and another during Kofi Annan's visit, when he glowered and shouted at the media mob crowding them during a tour of Liquica. But as quickly as it comes, it passes.

A UN representative on the National Consultative Council (NCC)—the body of review established by

UNTAET chief, Sergio de Mello, to include the Timorese leadership—describes his role as that of a mediator. But when it comes to an issue on which he has a definite view (for example, making Portuguese the official language of East Timor) then 'what he says goes'.

Gusmao announced the language decision unilaterally on the eve of the Portuguese president's visit in February, effectively subverting the NCC, which is yet to issue a recommendation on this matter.

Francis Suni is the ABC's interpreter in East Timor and is as unattached as the articulate and educated can afford to be in a place where political patronage is everything. He argues that Gusmao is the only candidate for the future presidency because he is the person who can unify the people.

'He fought for a long time in the jungle and he suffered a lot. The people of East Timor know him as their leader, no-one else.'

Nevertheless, there are rumblings of discontent directed at the CNRT leadership. Marcelino Amaral, an unemployed mechanic and political organiser, is angry at the lack of work and the seeming inaction of the UN, non-government organisations and the CNRT.

'If the [Timorese] leaders do not start to think about the young people and the others, then a new leadership will rise up to take their place,' he thundered while standing among burnt-out homes that lie in the shadow of a recently refurbished UN building.

A Timorese highly placed in the UN sees the relationship with CNRT as having an unhealthy consequence in that it has created a platform for Gusmao alone and he is already planning to use this advantage to entrench his position.

'In the CNRT there are four main factions, and the main objective of Xanana, with the help of Ramos Horta, is to keep CNRT together and turn it into a political party. There is some support for that among the Carascalao faction. If this happens we will see the creation of an authoritarian state.'

O NE OF THE REASONS Xanana Gusmao is paramount in East Timor's nationalist leadership is that he stayed at the helm during the transformation of the independence struggle despite his capture and imprisonment in 1992.

The change from fighter to prisoner-cum-statesman is reflected in selected writings that have been published recently, with his autobiography, in *To Resist is to Win*, launched at the Adelaide Writers' Festival last month. His early essays are shot full of invective, but over time his language has become more conciliatory, his anger less visible.

The change from fighter to prisoner-cum-statesman is reflected in selected writings that have been published recently ... His early essays are shot full of invective, but over time his language has become more conciliatory, his anger less visible.

He is still changing, but slowly. Last March he described himself as a soldier and therefore unfit to be the leader of an independent East Timor, since a good soldier is more authoritarian than he is democratic. Twelve months later, in response to a question about the way he would now describe himself—as statesman, politician or resistance leader—he chose ‘guerrilla’.

‘In war you have to be firm in your decisions otherwise you are dead. Maybe that nature still

accompanies me and it influences how CNRT is acting.

‘But I am trying with my colleagues to change that and to start turning CNRT into a more ... professional structure,’ he added.

As we parted, and as another delegation rushed in to take my place, he gave a sign that he will continue to accept the responsibilities of office:

‘How do you say it ... I have been glued to my seat all day.’
—Jon Greenaway

Both sides of the border

IF I WANTED TO ASSASSINATE him this would be the perfect place to do it.’

They are the words of a journalist with long experience in East Timor, speaking on 24 February, just after the Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid, had postponed his visit to Dili. The journalist was not prognosticating a military conspiracy against Wahid and nor was he indulging a ghoulish wish for a ‘story’. Rather, his words reflect East Timor’s continuing centrality in Indonesian power politics.

Many journalists and observers were surprised that Wahid made it to East Timor even for the three hours he managed on 29 February, believing that a visit to the scene of the Indonesian military’s great humiliation would be too bold at a time when the president is set on manoeuvring the old-guard generals out of their positions of influence. Yet the day after his visit, more than 70 military officers were reshuffled, with many Wiranto supporters moved to the outer. The most significant change was the appointment of Major-General Agus Wirahadikusumah, as head of the powerful strategic command unit, Kostrad. Wirahadikusumah is openly opposed to the army’s having a role in non-military affairs.

The only incident during the president’s visit was a relatively small demonstration, by 300 protesters, calling for justice for resistance fighters killed during the Indonesian occupation. Wahid visited the Heroes’ Cemetery for Indonesian soldiers killed in the former province, and the Santa Cruz graveyard across the road in the same Dili suburb. There he apologised for deaths brought about by Indonesia’s 24-year rule.

The other major occasion was the signing of a joint communique by the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Dr Alwi Shilab, and the head of the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), Sergio de Mello. It guarantees that discussions will be held between UNTAET and Jakarta on a range of issues, including property rights, border regimes, and the status of refugees remaining in West Timor.

Ten days before Wahid’s arrival in Dili, the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan,

visited both Indonesia and East Timor. He made two clear points: first, that the UN had confidence that the Indonesian justice system would be able to bring those responsible for human rights violations in East Timor to justice; and second, that refugees in West Timor should return.

There is a contradiction here. In one statement, the UN Secretary-General allows that the Indonesian legal system can account for atrocities identified under the special inquiry established by the Indonesian Human Rights Commission. But in the other statement, he suggests that authorities in West Timor are not allowing the free and unhindered return of refugees.

WHEN ANNAN STOOD BEFORE the crowds in Liquica’s soccer field, after having laid a wreath at the door of the parish house where up to 50 people were hacked to death by militia members on 16 April last year, he said that his message to the people still in West Timor was simple: ‘Come home; East Timor is your country.’

Kofi Annan could not say this directly to the people in the West Timor camps because his planned visit there was cancelled, for ‘logistical reasons’. But there was a further reason: continued attacks on UN and international personnel working in the Indonesian territory, culminating in the stabbing of a doctor from the International Organisation for Migration. As he flew to East Timor from Jakarta, Annan remarked to reporters that he had impressed upon Indonesian authorities the need to contain militias and to help return those East Timorese who wanted to go back.

The relationship established between UNTAET and the administration of the Indonesian president is now the only available mechanism for ensuring that people will be able to exercise a free choice about whether they return to East Timor or transmigrate to Indonesia by April, the date by which, according to the authorities, they must decide.

Approximately 100,000 East Timorese are still in the West Timor camps. One of the main reasons they remain is because there has been a lack of information about the situation in East Timor from



sources the refugees could trust. To address this, reunions were run during February by Interfet (before the Australian and New Zealand battalions donned the blue beret of the UN peace-keeping force), with the co-operation of TNI (the Indonesian military) on the other side and the help of the International Organisation for Migration. The success of these meetings at the Motaain/Batugade crossing was credited for an increase in the numbers returning.

Only 15km from Motaain is Atambua. Of the 100,000 thought to be still in the camps, more than half are in and around this West Timor border town. With them are the militia members who made them run in the first place.

At first impression the camps do not seem to be the places of fear and loathing they are reputed to be. In Fatukedi, the prostitute district of Atambua, a group of 60 refugees from East Timor's coffee-growing capital Ermera—an area of intense militia activity before the arrival of Interfet—are living under tarpaulins in an open field. A group of men gathered under a lone tree are playing dice on a plastic mat.

'We think nothing of East Timor now,' says Alfonso Martins, a small, sharp-eyed man in camouflage pants. 'If East Timor is safe then we would go back, but there is such hatred there for us now because we supported autonomy. Maybe in two or three years' time it will be safe, but until then we will stay in Indonesia.'

As we continue to talk I notice that Alfonso is the only one answering the questions. The others sit quietly, eyes averted. Behind, on each of their huts, an Indonesian flag is flying.

We take a photo before we leave and one of the men who had not spoken asks if we could take the picture to his priest. He mentions the name of a padre whose parish lies 70km from Ermera. The padre is widely known as an active supporter of independence.

As we walked away, the Indonesian Sister who has brought me here gestures back over her shoulder, 'That man Alfonso ... he is militia.'

In early February, a journalist from the UK *Sunday Times* was touring a camp a few kilometres from here with staff of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), under the protection of a police guard, when he and his photographer were set upon by a militia group. They were separated from their escort, chased to their car, and beaten with sticks and rocks.

THE SCATTERED NATURE of encampments in West Timor and intimidation by militias have frustrated the attempts of international agencies to reach the refugees. Church representatives have had the most success in establishing a presence in the camps. Fr Peter Hosking SJ, director of the Jesuit Refugee Service in East Timor which works on both sides of the border, says that the climate of fear in the camps is unrelenting.

'Protection issues for the refugees are a major concern as the militia presence is significant in most places and pervasive in Atambua.

'The military are there during the day but at night the camps belong to the militias.'

People in the camps still ask if East Timor is at war and if Interfet has stopped its 'atrocities'. Some are not intending to return.

'I would say that about 20 per cent of them are looking to transmigrate to Indonesia. Many of these are former civil servants, military and police along with their families; some are genuine supporters of integration with Indonesia,' Hosking says.

'Then again, another ten per cent come from a similar background yet I think they need to be reassured that it is safe for them to go back.'

Xanana Gusmao has said that militia members and pro-autonomy supporters are welcome to return. Indeed, he and the CNRT leadership are wanting to grant the militia chiefs immunity from any UN prosecution for crimes against humanity to facilitate this, much to the dismay of East Timor's spiritual leader, Bishop Belo, who wants people brought to account.

A senior figure in UNTAET says that this forgiveness is not being witnessed on the ground.

'There are payback attacks, kidnapping and interrogation of returned militia and their families. In particular a CNRT group called FSP, a security organisation approved by CivPol, has been involved.'

The question that has not really been answered is this: what purpose is served by the militias' keeping people in West Timor? Sister Lidwina, my guide through the camps, has a simple response.

'They are afraid themselves. They are afraid to go back, yes, but they are also not safe here because they are a problem for the government and they also know who in the TNI did what in East Timor,' she says.

'I think they believe they are safer and more secure if they have many people with them making it look more like a real refugee situation.'

What is clear is the pain caused by the separation of families during the exodus into West Timor. This is exacerbated by the lack of information from trusted sources about the situation in East Timor.

On the Saturday following my visit to the reunions at Motaain beach, Indonesian soldiers fired rounds into the air after some youths had thrown stones. The result was panic among the 13,000 people gathered there from both sides of the border. The next Saturday, a few days before President Wahid's visit, the reunion was cancelled. Threats had been made in the preceding week by militias that they would turn the sands 'red with blood'.

Jon Greenaway is *Eureka Street's* South East Asia correspondent.



Where do we go now with the republic debate?

There are four possibilities, argues **Frank Brennan**:

1. John Howard may be right. He may have won one of the great political gambles. Australia will keep the monarchy for generations to come, there now being no prospect of any republican model winning a majority thanks to last year's co-operative efforts of Kerry Jones, Ted Mack and Phil Cleary.
2. Everyone puts the debate to bed for a generation and dusts off the Turnbull model for recycling at a future time.
3. The politicians decide to run with the McGarvie minimalist model, in the hope of winning a majority coalition of those who accept the inevitability of a republic but who want absolutely minimal change to the existing arrangements.
4. The republicans take seriously the public sentiment for direct election and start the hard work on reshaping a Constitution with the unique Australian combination of an upper house having the power to reject supply together with a popularly elected president.

IF ANY OF THE FIRST three options is right, there is not much further thinking to be done. It will all be a question of timing and fine tuning. Option 4, however, requires a lot of fundamental constitutional thinking and political spadework. Now is the time to plant the seeds, if only to establish that any attempt will encounter very rocky ground in the Australian constitutional garden.

The November referendum result showed that we are a nation of diverse groupings: monarchists; those who favour the status quo simply because 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'; and republicans of all shapes and sizes. The republicans cover a spectrum of views but can be placed in three camps: McGarvie minimalists, Turnbull pragmatists, and Cleary/Mack direct electionists. There is no shortcut to a republican consensus.

The received wisdom prior to the 1999 referendum was that it was not possible, politically or constitutionally, to graft an elected presidency on to the existing Australian system of government. The Turnbull model, with the bells and whistles added by the 1998 Constitutional Convention, was a compromise between involving the public in the mode

of selection and maintaining the existing power relations between prime minister and governor-general. But precisely because it was a compromise, it appealed neither to the direct electionists like Ted Mack and Phil Cleary nor to the minimal republicans like Richard McGarvie. The Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy (ACM) succeeded by following the advice of Malcolm Mackerras, handing their trump cards to John Howard, 'because he, as Prime Minister, would be in the best position to play the cards'.

There can be no doubt that the overwhelming majority of Australians want to sever all links with the British crown. In that sense, we are a nation of republicans. Only nine per cent of those intending to vote 'no' at last November's poll said they liked having the Queen as our head of state, when they were polled by AC Nielsen. Seventy per cent of Australians want us to be a republic.

In 1996, there were suggestions that there should first be a plebiscite of the people: 'Should all references to the Queen be deleted from the Australian Constitution by 2001?'. The Howard government had no interest in conducting such a plebiscite. The Constitutional Convention

proceeded in February 1998 and attempted to wrap together the plebiscite question and a preferred model, thereby forging a 'no' coalition of monarchists and radical republicans. It was only in the closing days of the 1999 referendum campaign that John Howard for the first time gave a public explanation about why he was opposed to a plebiscite. He thought it could have left the country 'in a constitutional no-man's-land'. Monarchists like Howard and Nick Minchin knew that any plebiscite would favour the republicans by building a momentum for change, whereas any particular model of republic put cold to the people at referendum would be unlikely to get up. The opponents would always be a combination of monarchists, status quo-ers and those republicans whose model was not on offer. And so it could be for any future referendum.

THE TURNBULL COMMITTEE (which investigated republic options for the Keating government), the Australian Republican Movement, and the 1998 Constitutional Convention had good reasons for rejecting a directly elected president.

They thought it could not be grafted on to the existing constitutional arrangements. But the public remains unconvinced. The International Social Science Survey/Australia has charted Australian republic sentiment for the last 20 years. Since 1996, support for a republic has run at 66 per cent. The Survey calculates that a direct election presidency 'would have won handily in Australia as a whole' in November 1999 with 55 per cent in favour of that model.

There are many voters who say they do not understand much about the complex provisions of the Constitution; they do not trust politicians; and 'if there is going to be a president, we should have some say in choosing that person who will represent us as the head of state'. After all, in countries such as Ireland, there is an elected president and there are no constitutional problems. But in Ireland, the upper house cannot reject or block supply. In Ireland, the president has recourse to a Council of State for seeking advice. In Ireland, there is no prospect of a John Kerr sacking a Gough Whitlam, as occurred in 1975.

WE NEED TO REVISIT 1975 and see if changes can be made to the Australian constitutional arrangements so that we could safely advocate a directly elected president. One theoretical option would be to take away the Senate's power to block supply, making the Senate in that regard more like the House of Lords and the Irish upper house. But can you imagine trying to run a referendum campaign on the need to take away the Senate's power? It would be turned into a referendum about the propriety of John Kerr's and Malcolm Fraser's actions in 1975. State-righters would run rampant exclaiming, 'How dare you attempt to wind back the powers of the States house?'

The only practical option is to refine the constitutional arrangements, smoothing out some of the difficulties and inconsistencies highlighted in 1975 while leaving intact the Senate's constitutional power. Whatever the mode of election and whatever the powers granted the president, it would be essential to assure electors that the model on offer would not cause greater instability and uncertainty were the events of 1975 to recur.

If the president is directly elected by the people, there has to be some symmetry between the mode of appointment and the mode of dismissal. A directly elected president could be removable only for proven misbehaviour or incapacity established either before a court or else determined by impeachment proceedings involving both houses of parliament. Given the mix of politics and law in any decision to sack a head of state, it makes sense to vest the power of termination in the parliament, with each house being required to play a role in the impeachment process. One consequence of this constitutional symmetry would be that an elected John Kerr in a re-run



of 1975 would be guaranteed absolute security of tenure throughout the crisis. There is no way that the Senate would vote to sack him. He would be in a stronger position against the prime minister than if the prime minister were still able to contact the Palace and order dismissal.

Given the increased security of the president, there is a need for better safeguards to avoid the questionable practices of Kerr in 1975 or to render those practices beyond reproach. Three matters would need reform before there could be consideration of a directly elected president. In 1975, Kerr consulted the chief justice despite the prime minister's expressed desire that he not do so. He dismissed the prime minister without notice, having previously made the leader of the opposition more aware of his intended course of action than the prime minister. He decided to grant a double dissolution of the parliament on the advice of the new prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, who had no intention of proceeding with the Whitlam bills which had been blocked by the Senate. These

21 bills related to issues such as health levies and State electoral redistributions to which the Coalition parties were opposed.

Paul Kelly revisited the 1975 crisis in his 1995 book, *November 1975: The Inside Story of Australia's Greatest Political Crisis*. He concluded:

Given the magnitude of the decision Kerr had reached—resort to the reserve powers to dismiss the Prime Minister—there can be no decisive argument against his consultation with the supreme judicial figure. In such an extreme circumstance the Crown must possess a right to such consultation.

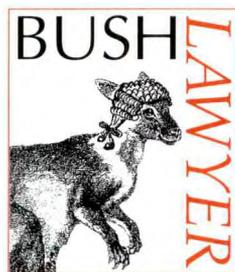


But on the death of Sir Garfield Barwick, the then Chief Justice, Sir Gerard Brennan, observed:

It seems that the most newsworthy event in his varied career was the tendering of advice to Sir John Kerr in November 1975, a course for which he could find precedent in the tendering of advice by some of his predecessors in office. It was, and remains, a controversial matter but, if only on that account, will not happen again. It can now be seen as a subject of academic interest, not the defining event in a life of other achievement.

If the reserve powers (including the power to dismiss a prime minister and commission a new prime minister without the advice and the consent of any minister) are to be retained without being codified, the president needs to be able to consult with advisers who are not serving High Court judges. I suggest a Council of Advisers consisting of those persons willing and able who have held the office of president, prime minister, chief justice or solicitor-general, provided any such person is no longer a member

The saddest story



I SOMETIMES FIND IT DIFFICULT not to feel jaded by the monotony and banality of many of the stories I hear as a magistrate. One pub fight or car crash is much like another.

A few weeks ago, however, I was jolted out of my dull complacency. It was the last plea of the day. Ford Madox Ford starts *The Good Soldier*, 'This is the saddest story I have ever heard.' That line sprang to mind when I heard this story.

A man—call him Joe—was driving home from work and was pulled over by the Random Breath Test police. He proved positive when he blew in the bag, and was charged with a 'Mid-Range' (0.1) drink-drive offence. He pleaded guilty. As I read the police papers and his traffic record, I thought, 'the usual'.

His solicitor started to tell me that he had some written submissions and character references. I have a little speech which I trot out to drink-drivers, almost all of whom are good blokes and somebody's father and need their licence for work. I tell them that when they run over a child because their reactions are too slow it doesn't matter if they are Mother Teresa or Pol Pot. So I put the solicitor on notice that evidence of good character wasn't going to take matters very far.

But I started to read. Joe had come to Australia from Germany as a child, and had had a rough start to his life. When he was 24, he formed a relationship with a woman who had drug and alcohol problems. He, on the other hand, was generally abstemious and was a good worker, building up his own motor repair business. The woman's problems would ebb and flow and he would be the rock in the relationship.

They had a child. The baby suffered from a calcium deficiency, and was hospitalised for much of his first 18 months. When the child was four, the parents split up. For reasons which are not clear, the mother retained custody of the child. I suspect this was because Joe was unselfish. They agreed at the time that the boy could decide with whom he would live when he was 12 years old. After the split, Joe found a flat for the mother and boy close to his own home. He supported the mother and saw the boy several times a week and had him for weekends and school holidays.

The mother, despite many efforts, was unable to defeat her drug and alcohol problems. The boy often told Joe that he wanted to live with him, but Joe, being an honourable man, asked the boy to wait until he was 12 because it would break his mother's heart when he left. Eighteen months ago, as the boy approached his 12th birthday, he stressed his desire to live with Joe. By this time, Joe had remarried. His son and the four stepchildren were close friends. The mother, on the other hand, lived alone, but for the 11-year-old boy.

Shortly before the boy's birthday, Joe visited the mother's flat to see his son. He found it empty. She had taken off with the boy in her old car. No-one knew where she had gone. Some days later, the car was found. Inside were the mother and son, both dead from carbon monoxide. She had murdered him and killed herself. All those present in court secretly thought of their own children.

I gave Joe a 12-month non-conviction bond. ■

Séamus O'Shaughnessy is a country magistrate.

of parliament, a judge or a member of a political party, and provided any such person has not reached the age of 75.

The two most unsatisfactory aspects of Kerr's actions in 1975 were the privileged access Fraser had to Kerr's thinking while Whitlam was still prime minister, and Kerr's pre-emptive decision to act before supply ran out.

Kerr claimed he needed to keep Whitlam in the dark for fear that the Palace would become involved, with Whitlam providing advice to the Queen for the termination of Kerr's commission. That would not be a fear with an elected presidency subject to removal only by impeachment. The perception of subterfuge could be overcome if the Constitution provided that: 'The president may exercise a power that was a reserve power of the governor-general in accordance with the constitutional conventions relating to the exercise of that power provided the president first publishes a proclamation of intention to exercise such a power after a period of at least two days.'

This way there would be no risk of a prime minister being ambushed and a reduced risk that the leader of the opposition would be better informed than the prime minister.

Kerr's political strategy was posited on finding what he described as 'a democratic and constitutional solution to the current crisis which will permit the people of Australia to decide as soon as possible what should be the outcome of the deadlock which developed over supply between the two Houses'.

He could always dissolve the House of Representatives on advice from a willing prime minister. The Senate was a different matter. Senators are elected for fixed six-year terms. The regular election for half the Senators can be held up to a year before the Senators' terms expire. But the Senate can be dissolved only under the double dissolution procedure. A double dissolution cannot occur within six months of the scheduled dissolution of the House of Representatives. It can occur only if the House of Representatives has twice presented legislation to the Senate which has then twice failed to pass it.

In 1975, Fraser and Kerr used the coincidence that the Senate had rejected 21 bills unrelated to supply (bills unac-

ceptable to the Coalition) as a pretext for dissolving the Senate. This improper use of the double dissolution procedure could be precluded if the president could grant the dissolution only on receipt of a request from the House of Representatives. Such a request would never have been forthcoming in 1975.

With these suggested changes in place, there would be no need for the prime minister to retain the power of summary dismissal of the president. The Senate could retain the power to block supply. And the president could be elected by the people.

HOWEVER, even if a repeat of the 1975 crisis were to be assured of an adequate resolution, there would still be a need to redraw the public understanding of the different roles of prime minister and president. Being elected by all Australians, not just the electors of Bennelong, an elected President Deane, for example, would be seen as having democratic legitimacy, especially on issues where there was a difference of perspective from the prime minister. This legitimacy would be emphasised by Howard critics, Deane supporters and media outlets.

Even an *elected* president who has run the gauntlet of party preselection would be expected to be head of state for all Australians.

During the 1999 referendum, Sir Zelman Cowen, who had been Governor-General after Sir John Kerr and who rightly enjoys the reputation as healer of many of the wounds on the body politic following the events of 11 November 1975, joined with ex-Chief Justices Mason and Brennan, saying:

It is a central aspect of the office of president that he or she should always be concerned to promote the unity of the nation. He or she is head of state, and not of government. He or she should possess the capacity, intuition and skills to promote the unity of the nation. By speech, conduct and example, the president can help to interpret the nation to itself, and foster that spirit of unity and pride in the country which is central to the well-being of our democratic society.

Cowen, Mason and Brennan doubted that this role could be performed by someone coming to office through the machinations of party politics,

fundraising, and election campaigns.

At his press conference following the referendum, John Howard went out of his way to offer a rejoinder to this proposition:

Can I just say in relation to the mood in the Australian community—I listened to the debate about the mood and one of the arguments that was put in favour of the republican cause was put by Sir Zelman Cowen, the former Governor-General, the idea of having somebody who is head of state who would interpret the nation to itself. With the greatest respect to him and others who hold that view, I don't think that can ever happen in this country. We are too individualistic to ever find one single person who is going to interpret the nation to itself.

The nation would be well served by a head of state, rather than a party politician, who can promote the unity of the nation, interpreting the nation to itself. If the task is to be performed by an elected president, there will be a need for a clear



demarcation of functions between the president and prime minister. Some elected presidents would rightly want to continue Sir William Deane's style of leadership, a style which annoys some power-brokers who resent leadership not managed from offices in the ministerial wing of Parliament House.

Let's recall that during the 1999 referendum campaign, some Aborigines went to London to see the Queen. Sir William Deane assisted with their request to meet the Queen at Buckingham Palace. Ex-Minister Peter Walsh was horrified. Writing '1975 revisited' in Christopher Pearson's *Adelaide Review*, he said:

If however it can be safely assumed the government neither knew nor approved of this self-indulgent exhibition of vice-regal vanity, it follows that Sir William, behind the government's back, facilitated the Queen's involvement in what is a controversial political issue in Australia.

A month later, Glen Milne took up the theme in *The Australian*: 'In doing so, Deane acted without the knowledge or advice of the Prime Minister—the convention that underpins the legitimacy of our constitutional monarchy.' Milne

had asked Deane's spokesman what consultations had occurred. Following protocol, the spokesman was not prepared to disclose the details of such consultations, if any. But then the spokesman added, 'It was just facilitating the call [to the Palace]. The Governor-General would not normally feel the need to consult the government in such circumstances.' The editorial of *The Australian* went well over the top, saying, 'Intensifying disquiet is the news that Sir William supported the meeting without telling the Government. This not only violates convention, it is sneaky.' For its part, the government remained silent, leaving the Governor-General hanging out to dry. Four days later, Peter Yu, one of the Aboriginal delegates, clarified the matter with a letter to the editor: 'We also, as a matter of courtesy, advised the Australian Government of the trip, and its aims, to avoid any perceived embarrassment to our Government.'

An elected president would be expected to perform more controversial political tasks than acting as postman for the Palace. The powers and functions would need to be clearly articulated so that allegations of sneakiness, when the president is simply doing the job, will be readily perceived—even by the president's critics—to be misplaced.

It may be another decade before the republic is revisited at the polls. An elected presidency has popular appeal and many constitutional pitfalls. If the elected presidency is the preferred path for the Australian people, now is the time to face the fact that, in this debate, nothing is as simple as Ted Mack and Phil Cleary made it seem. On reflection, maybe Mack and Cleary should be offered knighthoods for their contribution to the maintenance of the monarchy in a time of rising republican sentiment. Maybe Turnbull and Keating had it right. And maybe John Howard had good grounds for displaying smugness at his cleverness when the true monarchists came to the party popping champagne for a victory of lasting consequence. Contrary to the will of the people, we are likely to remain tied to the regal apron strings for some years to come. ■

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Labour's loves lost

Running on Empty: 'Modernizing' the British and Australian Labour Parties,
Andrew Scott, Pluto Press, 2000. ISBN 1 86403 098 4, RRP \$29.95

IN 1990 I attended a meeting of the British Labour Party in Cambridge's Corn Exchange building. The main speaker was Robin Cook. At the time, he meant little to an Australian postgraduate student, yet I remember being impressed by his obvious intellectual capacity and bemused by his fluent self-regard. Sort of a Scottish Gareth Evans. Today, of course, he is Blair's foreign minister.

But more impressive still was the singing.

Before the meeting, attendants had handed out programs containing the lyrics of 'Jerusalem', 'The Internationale' and 'The Red Flag'. Between speeches my British comrades lustily sang these hymns to socialism, mostly from memory, while I joined them self-consciously and with constant reference to the songsheet. Not surprisingly, my mind turned to the Sunday School of childhood and the thought which preoccupied me during this brief dalliance with religion: what should I believe? Did these 'hymns' make any more sense than the religious ones I eventually rejected as a boy? This strange hybrid—part political meeting, part church service—also made me ponder the different labour tradition in Australia; after all, the Australian Labor Party does not sing.

At the time, British Labour was in the midst of an 18-year losing streak; while the ALP was halfway through its longest period in government. Did British Labour really have anything to teach its antipodean counterpart, other than the pleasures of a good singalong?

Andrew Scott's new book, *Running on Empty: 'Modernizing' the British and Australian Labour Parties*, is an extended compare-and-contrast essay on these themes. It is also two books in one. The first explores the intertwining histories of British Labour and Australian Labor in order to examine the tension between 'modernisers' and 'traditionalists' that is



common to both parties. The second is a polemic against the direction of the modern ALP under Hawke, Keating and, now, Beazley. Scott is a 'traditionalist' who believes that the modern ALP and Blair's New Labour have erred from the path of righteousness. In his opinion these parties have discarded:

not just the excess and unfashionable ideological luggage, but their essential basic clothing, so that they [are] now running on empty: naked, exposed to the hostile elements, buffeted by the chill winds of right-wing economic 'rationalism' and desperately [in need of] some new clothes—or even ... their unfashionable old ones—in order to stay alive.

UNFORTUNATELY, neither of the two books contained in *Running on Empty* is wholly successful. Scott the polemicist is not well served by Scott the historian: he abhors 'modernisation' but he never properly explains why it occurs.

Twins separated at birth are a boon to psychologists studying the classic 'nature or nurture' debate, but political parties are different: a common inheritance does not guarantee a common experience. If you wish to discover the dynamic that drives the modernisation project in the ALP it

doesn't seem necessary to go looking for it in the history of Britain's Labour Party.

In the early years of the ALP's existence, the mother country did have an important impact on Labor politics. As Scott points out, most of the early members of the ALP were in fact British. But at the turn of the century Britain was highly influential in many aspects of Australian public life; indeed, most Australians were British. This historical influence soon wore thin, however, and local conditions quickly took precedence.

By the post-war period the nature of Australia's unique political history far outweighed any British-nurtured inheritance. Links between the parties at this time were restricted to the reading of books like Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism*, speaking tours by famous British labour figures and the education of key individuals. None of these played a decisive role in the ALP's development. It is an interesting fact that Bob Hawke, Neal Blewett, Gareth Evans and Kim Beazley all attended Oxford University, but it tells you virtually nothing about today's ALP or why these senior party figures advocated the 'modernisation' of Labor in the 1980s. Scott does not come to grips with the main determinant of the ALP's periodic quest for modernisation: electoral politics.

In parliamentary democracies like Australia, political parties learn like lab rats: through trial and error. Each election loss is scrutinised for the clues to success: which buttons did we press; why weren't we rewarded? And each election victory is used to validate policy: see, we do know the way through the political maze. As early as 1923, V. Gordon Childe famously wrote that 'starting with a band of inspired socialists, [Labor] degenerated into a vast machine for capturing political power'.

And capturing political power in Australia is difficult, as the history of Labor testifies. It requires appealing to the wider

electorate, not just to Labor's core supporters. How do you develop policies that win government yet still make the effort something more than merely an act of electoral opportunism? If Scott sees the modernisers as sinning against Labor tradition, the modernisers would point out that, electorally speaking, sinners are winners.

Whitlam remade the ALP in opposition and reaped the benefits in 1972. Hawke benefited in 1983 from similar work done by Hayden after Labor's catastrophic loss in 1975. In the post-war period, whenever Labor has modernised, it has eventually won—with admittedly mixed results. But getting into government is more than half the battle. The problem with the Beazley

Labor Party might not be that it is changing in a way that Scott fears, but that it is not reforming itself enough. Can the present Opposition really surf all the way to victory on the GST alone?

As Scott already knows, it was Labor saint Ben Chifley who invented 'the light on the hill'. But as Scott may have forgotten, it was the Labor politician Ben Chifley who also coined the phrase 'the hip-pocket nerve'. Of these two phrases, which defines the Labor tradition? ■

Brett Evans' book, *Labor Without Power*, will be published later this year by UNSW Press. The Pluto Press website is: <http://www.socialchange.net.au/pluto/>

BOOKS: 2

ANDREW HAMILTON

Talking up

God Matters: Conversations in Theology, Graeme Garrett, Michael Glazier, Minnesota, 1999. ISBN 0 8146 5944 6

FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER, one of the most influential of modern theologians, addressed his work to those whom he called the 'educated despisers of religion'. His work was erudite and stylishly argued. While *God Matters*, a book of exploratory theology, has a far less monumental feel, it addresses the same context, one which expects readers to come to theology rich in questions and hesitations.

To address a dubious audience requires good rhetoric. You need above all to be able to write. Garrett writes well. His title shows himself aware of language; he is comfortable with irony and passion; his style engages and re-engages his readers in reflection that takes them beyond where they would have believed themselves comfortable. The texts with which he engages are catholic, which is to say Non-Catholic: the cartoons of Michael Leunig, the screenplays of Alan Bennett, the stories of Oliver Sacks.

To use modern secular texts within theology is fraught with danger—it becomes all too plainly evident that they are being used. Comic texts are even more perilous,

as discussion verges on explaining the joke. But Garrett attends closely enough to text and subtext to illuminate the texts themselves, so that the illuminated text in turn illuminates the broader point which he is exploring. He helps the reader not to understand, but to appreciate, the joke.

The questions addressed in *God Matters* are central within theology and unfashionable in secular discourse. Garrett asks how we can speak of God today, how we can understand Jesus Christ, and what it means to say that we find salvation through Jesus Christ. He pursues these topics with persistence and subtlety, and shows easy familiarity with the major theological approaches to them.

His work is distinctive in that the insights of his interlocutors are elusive, and are spoken only with difficulty in contemporary culture. Garrett's response is conversational and provisional. In his most original contribution, he addresses the perennially central question about our capacity to know God by examining the relation between faith and humour. His exploration of humour illustrates both the

pretensions to which the theological enterprise is prey, which lead it to be justly laughed at, and the capacity for humour to disclose insights that are hidden from more discursive uses of mind. He addresses in fresh ways the mystery of God.

This, then, is a stylish book. I cannot think of any recent work of Australian systematic theology that has equalled it. *God Matters* adopts a style which is uniquely suited to its topic and its audience. Garrett is elegant, simple, attentive to the texts which he interrogates, and both persistent and modest in pursuing the large questions which he raises. He never reduces positions with which he takes issue to an oversimplified form. He carries his theological learning lightly, but deploys it effectively and economically.

Garrett would want to leave his readers with questions different from those with which they began. Mine came out of his choice of texts. All touch on human aloneness. Most notably they touch the aloneness of those who are confronted with the possibility of real goodness after their illusions of goodness have been stripped away, but who find no encouragement to consider this possibility. The texts all unmask the fraudulent connections designed to keep loneliness at bay: the easy consolations of normality, of meaning through acquisition, of matey-ness before the divine. They leave the naked and vulnerable individual with a hunger for connection.

The scripts of Alan Bennett, in particular, explore the loneliness hidden behind a code of highly socialised language and conduct. Garrett treats in considerable, perhaps over-much, detail Bennett's monologue of Susan, the Vicar's wife. Others of Bennett's characters—the paedophile or the genteel invalid—are found in even more exigent predicaments.

What theological style will suffice to address this loneliness which results when an individual recognises the spuriousness of the claims of institutions to provide connection? Christian faith speaks of and enacts connections that are grounded in God, in Christ and in church. But by and large, church styles fail to commend them. Garrett's patient, conversational teasing-out of layers of despair and hope embody the delicacy of processes of connection. It also encourages us to hope that one day he will address these processes, too, in argument. ■

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In her sights

Tiger's Eye: A Memoir, Inga Clendinnen, Text Publishing, 2000. ISBN 1 876485 26 4, RRP \$ 24.95

THERE'S AN ENCOUNTER between a professor of metaphysics and a student in Saul Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift*. The student has a question: 'How do I know that I exist?' The professor replies: 'And who is asking?'

That kind of metaphysics animates much of *Tiger's Eye*, historian Inga Clendinnen's memoir of illness and identity.

Her body is weakened, frail, unrecognisable; her memory failing—and still Inga Clendinnen is herself. Not only because she keeps asking how she knows she exists, but because she keeps answering the question.

She is immutably a writer and an historian. She records and recollects her illness, her feelings, her thoughts, her memories and her hallucinations with a breathtaking strictness—the strictness that is her characteristic quality as an historian. She is rather like an old-fashioned natural historian, impaling the fragments of her self like butterflies on a board.

Strange things protect us in times of need. An example: someone had told the young Inga Clendinnen a story about a man whose eyes were stolen by a wizard. The wizard kept a whole heap of stolen eyes, and he allowed the now-blind man to search for his own in the heap.

I don't remember whether he found his eyes or not. It was the search I liked, because as he tried the eyes he could see what that particular animal could see. A wolf's eyes, and he saw flying snow and tossing pelts and blood on grey muzzles. A jaguar's eyes, and he saw deer flinch and start away, the birds fall silent, the jungle hush. Then bears, sharks, hawks, hummingbirds, ants—he tried them all, and I imagined them all.

That childhood game of imagining saved her at a crucial point in hospital, partly because she remembered the tiger in the zoo. That was her favourite 'because he was the only animal who did not acknowledge he was in a cage'.



Thereafter, in hospital, 'whenever I felt the threat of the violation of self, I would invoke the vision of the tiger'.

The quoted passage encapsulates the themes—search, imagination and identity—that are central to the book.

This is a memoir driven by Clendinnen's particular need to reclaim and re-examine her identity in the peculiar circumstances of extreme illness. It is partly an autobiography, but only partly, because there are great lacunae. Its form is not a conventional narrative at all, but an exploration of self. Who am I? How am I? (Which is to say, how do I behave? how do I perceive?)

How is she? She was very ill indeed. Had to have a liver transplant because of a rare disease, Active Auto-Immune Hepatitis.

That is where this story starts. When healthy people become ill—seriously and chronically and life-threateningly ill—they assume a new role, a different identity.

Hospital life, with its constraints, was only one of the changes. Before that, her physical identity changed with illness. Those changes are recorded with an eye fierce and steady as the tiger's eye that is photographed on the front cover:

My skin abandoned what I had taken to be its minimal duty of keeping the inside in: it spat and dribbled blood at the mildest affront ... meanwhile the rest of my person thinned. Long-buried bones elbowed their

way to the surface. I previewed my face at eighty, then eighty years after that ...

Then a diet of steroids fattened her, curled her hair, and turned her into a 'choleric kewpie'. Illness caused her memory to slip, too. She was socially isolated, living 'behind the invisible cordon of the chronically unwell'.

So if she is transformed by illness, who is she? What is she?

She recalls her childhood, her mother, her father, her first conscious experience of joy, the women who lived down the road. Tiny fragments (a lantana flower left in a miniature garden bouquet) lead her in great loops of Proustian recollection, but her memories are driven by something as insistent as a mantra. This is who I was, this is who I am. This is Me. As she says, the act of writing is part of the preservation of her self.

THROUGHOUT HER OWN recollections and the little outbreaks of fiction, what we are shown again and again is a bravura performance exploring the nature of recollection, the nature of writing, and the nature of storytelling.

Without recollection, nothing else can make much sense. The ability to remember is central, as the ancient Greeks knew when they made Mnemosyne (Memory) the mother of the muses. (Clio, muse of history, was one of her children.)

'I had incited memory in my hospital bed. Now it roared like angry bees.' Clendinnen recalls a summer holiday from her childhood that marked a sea change from childhood to adolescence.

But recollection is not straightforward: 'Writing my childhood has made me see that the marshland between memory and invention is treacherous.'

That's where the fiction comes in, as a way of mapping that marshland. But the fictional stories are sometimes remarkably revealing. She records a death in the hospital,

and what follows is a short story about 'a more fortunate mortal who was able to choose his death in a place a world away from hospitals'. But even though Clendinnen says she wants to memorialise the women who died on the hospital trolley, the impact suggests that she is reworking her own possible death.

The fictions are all part of the exploration of the nature of writing, of the transformation of experience into text.

This is a remarkably dense book, astonishingly lucid and challenging, and enormously pleasing to read. It is an account

of a personal struggle; it is a personal testament, a trumpet call for the importance of history; and it is full of a lifetime of sharp recollections and observations on the written and spoken word. The observations start early, in childhood: 'She said: "He is our only brother. He fell in Flanders field." She should have said *was* our brother.' Decades later, she reads the words of Mr Robinson, the 19th-century Chief Protector of Aborigines, with the same attentive exactness.

The book closes with her evaluation of the experience of illness and writing about

it: 'I have returned to where I began: to history, with a deepened sense of what peculiar creatures we are ... making our marks on paper, puzzling over the past and the present doings of our species, pursuing our peculiar passions for talking with strangers.' The strangers include Mr Robinson, herself when ill, and us as readers. We're lucky the tiger burns so bright. ■

Rita Erlich is a Melbourne-based writer who has written for *The Age* and *The Australian*.

BOOKS: 4

PETER CRAVEN

The Ireland inside

I Asked Cathleen to Dance, Gerard Windsor, University of Queensland Press, 1999.

ISBN 0 7022 3127 4, RRP \$24.95 (hb)

GERARD WINDSOR has built up a formidable reputation as a writer without being especially biddable or cajoling, and in spite of the fact that his work fits no easy category of fiction, meta-fiction or faction.

The better part of two decades ago he had already written the odd story which was built to last, even if his longer fictions could sometimes seem thwarted or wilful. In recent years he has concentrated on a form of memoir which makes little concession to imaginative slackness and at the same time does not dally in any fashionable sense with the interstices of fiction.

Windsor seems to me an authentic writer, a craftsman of unyielding integrity who achieves an effect of art despite a discernible unwillingness to charm, and a storyteller almost as intent on retaining the privacies of the self as he is on uncovering them.

I Asked Cathleen to Dance follows in the wake of his Jesuit memoir, *Heaven Where the Bachelors Sit*. It is overtly concerned with the matter of Ireland and Windsor's freewheeling attempts to wrest something or other—some epiphany or negation—from the remembrance of his younger self wandering through the country of his forebears in order to make sense of (or sometimes it seems to render vivid the nullity of) the individuals and types he encounters. It's a book dominated by the



mythical figure of Cathleen ni Hoolihan and a testament to the evanescence and wistfulness of Irish womanhood. It is also a kind of unsentimental journey in which the scene-painting of the younger experiencing self is always being disordered by a young man's preoccupation, now and then fitfully explicit, with the stratagems of getting laid.

Windsor shuffles his cast of characters like cards and they are exhibited sometimes intimately and sometimes without comprehension, but with a consistent intensity of awareness, almost as if the fiction-maker in Windsor were defying the world to make sense. The Ireland he remembers and etches into being is full of a sadness that is not self-consciousness. These creatures in their chains have a kind of fierceness, rapidly honoured by the writer, which stops the writing from being engulfed

by nostalgia or wistfulness. There are women who exist on next to nothing and minister to frail men; independent girls who can see this narrator coming. There are interludes that pay homage to the notion of a country curdled by Catholicism, but there is also an inwardness with this world of incense and ejaculations that normalises its exoticism and stops it from becoming quaint.

WINDSOR IS VERY ADEPT at conveying what Greg Dening once referred to as the area of licence at the heart of every absolutism without which that absolutism would become intolerable. There are wild girls who turn into stern ladies of the manor, former nuns who tell ribald tales about their former superiors' incomprehension of bras, misanthropic monks who seem to disdain their 1000-year-old tradition of hospitality, feminists who talk with the silvery locutions of a character from Joyce. Windsor does Ireland proud and conjures it up like a dream even though we are aware, at every point, that it's the moody bric-a-brac of the self's progress that he is intent on.

You can't complain about the performance, which is adept and engrossed at every point, though it's possible to quail at the amount of miniaturisation: not only has he found no purple in the bog (to borrow a phrase of Shaw's) but it is as if the kin of

Joyce and William Trevor had been transformed into another Lilliput in which this Antipodean Gulliver could tramp and be amazed. And if the vision is not so savage as to be Swiftian and the writing too level to be satirical it is also, for much of its length, notably cool and unenthralled. Windsor does not say to the reader, in this narrative guise, 'And say my glory was I had such friends.' On the contrary, in place of any such Yeatsian vaunting there is the riddling question, ambiguous but implied: 'What manner of man do you take me to be that I spent so much time among pygmies, vivid though their eyes were, as full of pain and surprise as you could imagine?'

So *I Asked Cathleen to Dance* is a distinctive if disenchanting addition to the literature of the Irish-diaspora-strikes-back. It is a great antidote to the green beer and begorrah of one kind of Irish sentimentalism, but it is sometimes a rather pinched book as well as a driven one. The author's wandering desire—for Irish womanhood and to trace the lineaments of a face lost like a memory but fundamental to a sense of self—is notable for the stimulating degree of restraint with which it is evoked. This looks like part of one of this country's more notable ongoing works of self-portraiture but it remains, as it stands, a fragment, forever suggestive of depths which remain undisclosed. It is not an especially likeable portrait, nor is it meant to be. It is the quiet record of venial blunders, prudently recalled by a narrator with a lean and nosy style who occasionally bewitches but is more often intent on the delineation of the small things that compel the memory and speak as often out of lovelessness, hunger and indifference as out of what might seem fine and grand.

James McAuley said once that he was terrified of the Ireland inside him. At times, though, the power of suggestion Windsor has as a writer makes you feel that he could scare himself with spaces as empty as the mountains of the moon. At others the easeful transition of anecdote and non-event drift on to create a web that seems about as real as a representation of an individual self could be in the absence of true confession. But the test of this story of a nominally Irish Australian soul will come when all the parts are interrelated and the structure is made clear. My hunch is that it will be a building of some grandeur. ■

Peter Craven is the editor of *Best Australian Essays 1999*. A paperback edition of *I Asked Cathleen to Dance* will be released in May 2000 for \$19.95.

The war effort

The Middle Parts of Fortune, Frederic Manning, Text Publishing, 2000.
ISBN 1 876485 36 1, RRP \$24.95.

Private Wars: Personal Records of the Anzacs in the Great War, Greg Kerr, Oxford University Press, 2000. ISBN 0 19 550799 1, RRP \$49.95

NOT UNTIL THE LATE 1920s did writers try to tell us what it was like to fight in the Great War. They needed time and space to make sense of that enormous disaster for humanity. Nor did they feel that they could reflect openly, earlier, on the incompetence and ineptitude of those running the war at all levels.

Despite these sensitivities, the backlash against the publication of these honest war books was severe. Writing anonymously in the *Army Quarterly* in 1930 a critic, 'Australian', regretted that the new writers about the war 'were not among the fallen'. How, 'Australian' asked, 'can any decent English publisher be found to publish these books' when all they do is tell a rising generation that 'the men whom they loved and admired were practically all drunkards or beasts, and that anyone who laid down his life was a fool'. 'Australian', incongruously, also castigated the publisher of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* for releasing the book anonymously.

In the 1930s, the Annual Congress of the RSL asked the federal government to install Australian official war historian, Charles Bean, as the official censor to ensure 'historical accuracy' in war films and books. Bean declined, pondering what might be meant by 'historical accuracy'.

I first read *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (now republished by Text Publishing) in the early 1970s, immediately after reading, on the trot, Bean's six volumes of the official

history. (I was just embarking on doctoral studies and was inclined to take my work very seriously.) I remember thinking then how much better it would have been if I had read Frederic Manning before I had read Bean. I might have been more alert for the critical tone that can be found in our war historian, a tone, for the uninitiated or unsuspecting, carefully wrapped up in 'historical accuracy'. I might have better understood, too, the anger that is in Bean, an anger more revealed the more his reader knows of the conditions in the trenches.

The Middle Parts of Fortune, 'one of the most comprehensive and authentic documents of the First World War', as the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* describes it, is a book that will tell you more about the Great War than almost any other single source. It is also a remarkable novel. It reminds us that historians do not hold exclusive access to the truth about the past.

Frederic Manning, an Australian who lived and fought with the British, tells us, above all else, of the powerlessness of every participant caught up in the war. His focus is on a small band of the lowest of soldiers; ill-educated, for the most part, provincial, narrow in their outlook, helpless in their predicament—held together by a saintly, almost Christ-like figure. Their leaders, more remote and safe from the ghastly misery of trenches, shells, barbed wire, mud, starvation rations, and total lack of control



Australian soldiers with a skull found at the City of the Dead, Cairo.
From *Private Wars: Personal Records of the Anzacs in the Great War*.

over their lives, are just as powerless to do much about this war and just as incapable of understanding it.

From the historians we read of plans and strategies, of campaigns and of incremental gains. We learn of hard-won insights into the best way to win the war and we read of heroism and determination in the face of horrible adversity. *The Middle Parts of Fortune* mocks all these things. There is no control, there is no plan; there is simply attrition until the weight of numbers will eventually deliver a verdict. Men blindly follow their orders and scorn the poor wretch who tries to run away, but they cannot think how the thing will be stopped and they cannot believe that they will have life after this disaster.

But I don't want to give the wrong impression about this book. It is not set remorselessly in the trenches; indeed it

describes only one major attack across no-man's-land and a couple of raids. That is what makes it so chilling. The horror of war is permanently part of the lives of the three central characters, whether they are at rest, on fatigues, in the line, or even asleep. Their nobility lies in their acceptance, in their loyalty to one another, and to a sense that there is something meaningful, a spirit, in each of them that is beyond the madness all around them.

PRIVATE WARS IS MORE the kind of book likely to have found favour with the *Army Quarterly* in 1930. It is essentially a collection of photographs taken by the soldiers themselves, and Greg Kerr has added lengthy captions and introductions that are both informative and 'historically accurate'. He tells something of the life story of dozens of members of the AIF in a tradition springing

from Charles Bean's notion of 'democratic history'. That Bill Gammage and Alistair Thomson, to pluck a couple of examples, did it so much better than Kerr—vastly more comprehensive, more context, more knowledge—is not to damn this book.

Each generation will come to its history anew. Indeed Bill Gammage began his research into the letters and diaries that would make *The Broken Years* such a powerful study in the year that Greg Kerr was born. But those who come for the first time to the story of the Great War through *Private Wars* should look to Gammage, but certainly to Frederic Manning, to find out what happened. We do still need to know. ■

Michael McKernan is the inaugural Frederick Watson Fellow at the National Archives of Australia for 1999–2000.

BOOKS: 6

HUGH DILLON

Men among women

The Blackwater Lightship, Colm Tóibín, Picador, London, 1999. ISBN 0 33378319 0, RRP \$25

THE ANGELA'S ASHES phenomenon needs an antidote. Arresting as it is, Frank McCourt's tale, for all its polish and artifice, is an old-fashioned, pig-in-the-kitchen Irish story, to be shelved with Myles na Gopaleen, *Tales of an Irish R.M.* and old Tommy Makem & the Clancy Brothers records.

Colm Tóibín offers us a clear and astringent tonic which counters the intoxicating romanticism of traditional Irish fiction and the McCourt comet. In *The Heather Blazing* and now *The Blackwater Lightship*, Tóibín sets up a tension between the Ireland of De Valera and the new Ireland. In the new Ireland, young women may be feminists who have babies out of wedlock, and young men may be openly gay. Modernity has rushed upon Ireland and the older generation has had little preparation for it.

In *The Blackwater Lightship*, Tóibín explores these tensions by bringing together three women who have to come to grips with the fact that Declan—brother, son, grandson—is dying of AIDS. This is not a 'gay' book, but it goes to the heart of the gay



experience. In an essay for the *London Review of Books* on Gregory Woods' *A History Of Gay Literature*, Tóibín wrote:

Other communities who have been oppressed ... have every opportunity to work out the implications of their oppression in their early lives. They hear the stories; they have the books around them. Gay people, on the other hand, grow up alone; there is no history. There are no ballads about the wrongs of the past, the martyrs are all forgotten. It is as though, in Adrienne Rich's phrase, 'you looked into the mirror and saw nothing.' Thus the discovery of a history and a heritage has to be made by each individual as part of a road

to freedom, or at least knowledge, but it also has serious implications for readers and critics who are not particularly concerned with gay identity, and it also has serious dangers.

When I last visited Ireland, in 1988, a gay Irishman told me that in Dublin there was a large gay network which was tolerated by the police and the rest of the populace. They preferred to pretend that gays did not exist rather than deal with the problems that acknowledgement of homosexuality would necessarily entail. Gays were prepared to pretend they did not exist.

Times change. In *The Blackwater Lightship* Declan chooses to face the risk that he will die without having his family accept him and love him as a gay man: he asks to see his sister Helen, his mother Lily and his grandmother Dora, all together. By doing so he triggers a series of confrontations in his grandmother's house in Wexford where the three women meet each other and Declan and his two gay friends.

In his *London Review of Books* essay, Tóibín makes clear some of his concerns about gay life. One of the chief characteristics of the gay past, as he sees it, is that it is full of silence and fear. Gays have feared their own homosexuality, because of the consequences it may bring them. Consequently, he tells us, 'the gay past is not pure; it is duplicitous and slippery, and it requires a great deal of sympathy and understanding.' But shedding the duplicity and slipperiness is, he seems to be saying, a precondition for understanding and sympathy (as it is in human affairs generally).

He also observes that gay and Irish literature, curiously perhaps, mine the same seam: 'The idea that gay writing has a tendency to deal in the tragic and the unfulfilled ... has echoes in Irish writing, which seems at its most content when there is a dead father or a dead child (Leopold Bloom's father committed suicide; his son is dead) and domestic chaos.' And he recognises in himself 'an urge to have gay lives represented as tragic, an urge which I know I should repress'.

WHILE TÓIBÍN MAY BE GAY, his novels are not tracts. In *The Blackwater Lightship* he refuses to make the gay men the outstanding or most attractive characters in his ensemble. Declan is heroic, but this is manifest in his physical struggle rather than in any rhetorical or dramatic confrontation. His gay guardian, Paul, is a prickly character who is possessive and didactic, while Larry is humorous and pleasant and provides light relief in the frosty atmosphere Paul initiates.

By placing the gay men within a group of women whose natural compulsion is to care for Declan, rather than to raise moral objections to his lifestyle or sexual orientation, Tóibín structures the book so that each of the characters must gradually reveal him or herself through story, rather than action. Except for a few defensive jibes by Paul, there is very little combat between the gay men and the straight women, but lots of initial misunderstandings and apprehension. And as each of them, including Paul, comes to accept or to demonstrate acceptance of each other, the stories unfold and understanding and sympathy is propagated between them.

For example, Larry tells the company how he came out at a demonstration attended by President Mary Robinson, which was to be televised. He rushes home to insist that his parents not watch the

television news. His parents are astonished, so he takes his mother aside to break the story to her. Having got rid of his father, 'I still couldn't say anything and suddenly my mother looked at me and said: "Are you joining the IRA?"' The self-deprecating way in which this episode unfolds is cheering and funny.

The little group in the house by the sea operates as a sort of mini-Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The women have more unfinished business between themselves than with the gay men. Declan can be forgiven anything (if he needs to be at all) because he is the loved brother, son and grandson of the three powerful women who are brought together for the first time in years to talk. They are the axis of the story.

Helen is estranged from her mother Lily. They came asunder when Helen perceived herself to have been abandoned while Lily cared for her husband, dying of cancer in a distant hospital. Dora is the indomitable granny who has seen it all. Declan says to his friend, 'You should meet my granny, Paul. She's the one would put manners on you. She's a real paint remover.'

In a recent interview in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (5 February 2000), Colm Tóibín said he thinks of his characters 'always doing their best, always making an effort'. And so they do here. Much paint is removed from all the warring characters in the course of the novel.

The eponymous lightship makes only a cameo (but crucial) appearance in the story. Lily recalls to Helen that when she was a girl the lightship and the lighthouse at Tuskar could be viewed from her bedroom at night. She believed that the lighthouse was a man and the lightship was a woman and their signals were mating calls, and that they would always be together, he being strong and she faithful. The lightship was later decommissioned. To Lily this became a metaphor for their lives: she learned bitterly that love can be insecure and tragic. 'If [your father] was only to know, or see, or acknowledge with a flicker of his eyes what is happening to us,' she says, '... it's what I think about when I look at Tuskar lighthouse.'

I loved this book from the first sentence: Helen listening to her child whimpering in the night (how can a man without children capture this quintessential parental experience so accurately?). The whole novel is suffused with the tenderness with which it begins. ■

Hugh Dillon is a magistrate in NSW.

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Drama on tour and on trial

Whose future will be secured by the Nugent Report into the performing arts?

In the first of a two-part report of his own, **Geoffrey Milne** looks at productions by some of the theatre companies that are in the spotlight of the Final Report of the Commonwealth Government's *Major Performing Arts Inquiry* of December 1999 (otherwise known as the Nugent Report). The controversial report, subtitled 'Securing the Future', makes some 95 recommendations for action by governments and major performing arts companies. Many relate to the touring, co-producing and buying-in of productions among theatre companies which are clients of the Australia Council's Major Organisations Fund.

This month, Milne reviews two productions from major theatre organisations on tour in the first half of 2000, as examples of what the Inquiry had in mind in framing its recommendations.

FIRST TO HIT THE ROAD this year was the Sydney Theatre Company's production of Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*.

McDonagh is a young Irish playwright (he was 26 when *Beauty Queen* premiered in Galway in 1996 in a Druid Theatre co-production with London's Royal Court) and he is sometimes mentioned in the same reverential breath as his forebears—Synge, O'Casey and even Yeats. He is no stranger to Sydney. The Festival of Sydney brought the entire Druids/Royal Court production of *The Leenane Trilogy* here in January 1998 (directed by Druid's artistic director Garry Hynes); then the STC produced *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (part of another trilogy) in October of that year and then its own version of *Beauty Queen* in July 1999. This was also directed by Hynes: apparently, if you take on McDonagh, you get Garry Hynes as well, along with her designer Francis O'Connor. This is co-production (or facsimile reproduction: just add different actors and stir) on a global scale.

Now it's the rest of the country's turn to acquaint itself with this new scion of the Irish theatre. The STC's 1999 production has been bought-in by the Melbourne Theatre Company for its subscription season (16 February–1 April), the Queensland

Theatre Company (7 April–13 May) and the State Theatre of South Australia in yet another kind of co-production with the Adelaide Festival Centre Trust (17 May–3 June). After that, and with a substantial change of cast re-directed by Marion Potts, *Beauty Queen* goes to 12 venues in regional Victoria, NSW and Queensland, and then briefly to Hobart and Canberra, in a tour lasting until 24 August.

This piece of kitchen-sink realism is set in the isolated County Galway home of 70-year-old Mag Folan and her virginal 40-year-old daughter Maureen. Mag is an appalling old harridan and hypochondriac whose total dependence on Maureen for her material well-being is a means of totally subjugating her. However, despite Mag's deceptions, Maureen does meet and fall in love with neighbour Pato Dooley on one of his rare trips back from England where he is obliged to work as a builder's labourer. They have one wonderful night together (well, nearly wonderful as it turns out later) before Pato has to go back. They promise to keep in touch by mail.

At the opening of Act 2, Pato writes to invite Maureen to follow him to America. But the letter ends up (as we know it will) in Mag's turf stove and Maureen's flimsy dreams (or perhaps they're fantasies) appear

shattered. However, in a climax with sources in melodrama and echoes of a symbolism of which Ibsen would be proud, Maureen exacts a terrible revenge ... before a final scene with a psychological twist that pulls the rug from beneath our feet.

This at times moving and often very funny human drama is enacted in a production which is disappointingly unengaging. Much of the actors' work is forced and laboured; gestures are magnified and changes of mood telegraphed. The production is reluctant to trust the text to do its own work. Curiously, though, one of the most important moments, when we should discover the truth about Maureen's and Pato's night together, is slid over to the point that it goes almost unnoticed. That said, Greg Stone—one of the finest actors of our time—gives a superbly nuanced portrayal of Pato, the one sympathetically written character.

What emerges more strongly here, however, is the play's social drama. 'The crux of the matter,' as Maureen says with great force in the first scene, is 'if it wasn't for the English stealing our language, and our land, and our God-knows-what, wouldn't it be we wouldn't need to go over there begging for jobs and for handouts?' McDonagh's thesis is that this historic

repression of the Irish is what has made them the way they are (and all they get on their TV sets are re-runs of Australian soap operas). The disempowered and mentally fragile Maureen has to be seen as a symbol of that.

McDonagh is clearly a force to be reckoned with, if not yet in the same league as O'Casey or Synge. Much of his writing and sense of theatre are very fine (nowhere more so than in the final moments). His play is worth seeing, whatever the shortcomings of its production.

THEN PLAYBOX THEATRE began its new year with a remount of its surprise hit of 1999, Elizabeth Coleman's *Secret Bridesmaids' Business*, before a massive 42-town tour of six states and the ACT from March until September, thanks mainly to the Commonwealth's national touring arts fund, Playing Australia.

This simple Australian farce/comedy of manners about a hens' night on the eve of 33-year-old Meg Bacon's wedding to lawyer James Davis might have been easily forgotten after its première last April were it not for the undeniable fact of its extraordinary popular success.

The plot is easily enough told. Meg's 'biological clock' is ticking so loudly it keeps her awake at night and, after a fruitless long-term relationship with another man, this belated opportunity to marry James is too good a chance to pass up, despite inklings of doubt about him and the institution of marriage that surface as the play goes on. So a date has been set and, on the eve of the great white day, Meg and her bridesmaids, Lucy and Angela, prepare for the big event in a flash city hotel, with Meg's larger-than-life mum Colleen. Problems emerge, as well they might: vegetarian wedding guests, James' infidelity ... In the face of all crises, Colleen ('the improviser from Hell' who is running the whole show) copes splendidly.

Each character has a spotlit monologue in which she conveys her secret motives (and some sub-text missing from the rest of the play) privately to the audience. By interval, we've heard Mum's and both bridesmaids'. In a deft Act 1 finale, Lucy tells Meg the awful truth, or at least that her intended has been having the affair.

The big day dawns. Lucy has been dismissed as bridesmaid and rapidly replaced by Naomi. James turns up. Meg interrogates him, twice, during which all sorts of gormless excuses for his infidelity are trotted out. It would be unsporting to reveal the outcome, except to say that if this is all he



Jane Hall and Joan Sydney in Playbox's *Secret Bridesmaid's Business*.

can come up with by way of explanation, then I wouldn't want him as my brief in time of need.

What appeals most about this play, I think, is its insistence on the idea of friendship, which emerges in all of the monologues. Angela says, 'Friendship's not about gratifying your own ego, it's about doing what's best for your friend.' Lucy stresses that 'friendship's too important to stuff around with' and the final grudging rapprochement between Meg and Lucy is probably one of the play's best moments.

Elizabeth Coleman has a sound enough pedigree as a writer of popular entertainment for stage and television (*SeaChange* is one of her credits) and her 1993 play, *It's My Party (And I'll Die If I Want To)*, toured widely for commercial entrepreneur Malcolm C. Cooke in 1995. The actors for this remount and tour of *Secret Bridesmaids' Business* have also evidently been cast with at least one eye on TV appeal. Jane Hall (Meg) is best known as the presenter of a Network Nine program called *Weddings*, and as Joan Sydney's daughter from *A Country Practice*, while the program CVs

of Roz Hammond (Angela), Nicole Nabout (Naomi) and Scott Irwin (James) feature their TV experience prominently. Some of them look too young for their roles—although they work well enough as an ensemble in Catherine Hill's simple but fluent production—but it is Joan Sydney (as Colleen) who gives the outstanding performance, with character nuance, classic comic timing and real stage presence.

An idea that surfaces a couple of times (in Naomi's monologue, and in the writer's notes) is that 'things seem really simple when you're young—everything's so black and white. But as soon as life gets interesting it starts to turn grey'. In the end, *Secret Bridesmaids' Business* is little more than black-and-white TV on stage, with just enough shades of grey to keep it mildly interesting.

Next month: the ramifications of the Nugent Report. Are its recommendations the shot in the arm Australian theatre is said to need? ■

Geoffrey Milne is head of theatre and drama at La Trobe University.

FLASH IN THE PAN



Bridge works

La Fille sur le Pont ('The Girl on the Bridge'), dir. Patrice Leconte. Talking candidly to camera, Adèle (Vanessa Paradis) tells us her story—or at least a poetic shortening of it. A catalogue of failed love affairs, bad luck and extraordinary naivety. Obviously Adèle is too trusting and too good-looking for her story to be a happy one. Whatever motivates this tragic beauty, she is sad enough to be poised on a Paris 'pont' ready to jump. Enter Gabor (Daniel Auteuil, above), a knife-thrower looking for a target. And where better to recruit than among the suicidal, after all, what do they have to lose? Unconvinced by this argument, Adèle jumps, Gabor follows, and so their partnership begins.

La Fille sur le Pont is a story about love, trust and luck of a decidedly surreal kind. Adèle, Gabor and a set of throwing knives magically hurtle from Monte Carlo to Constantinople in a steamy haze of sexual encounters both metaphoric (knife-throwing) and hysterically flexible (the love scene with a circus contortionist is a delight). With Adèle as his partner, Gabor is inspired, as is Lady Luck, and for a fragile moment everything seems possible.

The surreal and hypnotic rhythm of the black-and-white photography seems like a strange combination of Fellini's *And the Ship Sails On* and Jarmusch's *Dead Man*—

moving from the calmly insane to scratchy madness in the blink of an eye.

La Fille sur le Pont has some lovely moments. The ritual task of Gabor applying band-aids to Adèle's small knife wounds is handled with a poignancy that gives it both charm and sexual charge. And the repeated use of Brenda Lee's 'I'm Sorry' sets an appropriately edgy mood.

—Siobhan Jackson

Mother's day

All About My Mother, dir. Pedro Almodóvar. This may well be the best film you're likely to see this year. It is probably Almodóvar's best, and has been described as his masterpiece. It is certainly the most profound of his celebrations of womanhood, particularly motherhood—this film is a tribute to his late mother, whom he greatly loved.

You can readily see threads he has drawn together from ideas in *High Heels*, *The Flower of My Secret*, and *Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown*. In *All About My Mother* he has found a way to weave them into a whole.

The story is of Manuela (Cecilia Roth, a marvellous performance), whose engaging, talented 17-year-old son Esteban (Eloy Azorin) wants to find out about his father. The incidental detail of mother and son sharing food, conversation, and enjoying theatre and television together is poignant, loveable.

Manuela works in a hospital as an organ transplant co-ordinator. Almodóvar here returns to the strange world of the workshop, the quasi-official handling of bereavement that was so compelling an image in *The Flower of My Secret*: the flat, well-meaning yet occasionally effective efforts of wider society to engage with the chaos of life, its deepest griefs and most catastrophic misfortunes, all of which form Almodóvar's basic material, the bread and meat of his work.

This film has given up on sexual relationships: it is friendship and parenting that live on when passion has taken its toll and died. In an agreeable twist on received ideas, *men* are the mystery; or perhaps not mysterious or complex enough. Here they are brutish, demented, ineffectual, irrelevant—or trying to be women.

As in other films, the plot is counterpointed by other works—here we have two: an amusing reworking of *All About Eve*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire* mined for insight and significance. (It has the glorious archetypal fag-hag Marisa Paredes as Blanche Dubois/Huma Rojo, whose momentary unkindness sets in train the whole soul-tearing sadness of the story.) We see the consequences of the kindness of strangers—the bereavement counselling workshops, the altruistic work of a young nun (Penelope Cruz) who becomes pregnant to Manuela's ex-husband in circumstances that only Almodóvar can carry off, as he does so thoroughly here. And the kindness of the wonderful Manuela herself. Men, says Almodóvar, are excluded from tenderness by their macho nature: the transvestite La Agrado (Antonia San Juan) becomes a bridge between the genders: the scene where he/she is included in a scene of female camaraderie, where of all things the penis is being gently joked about, is deeply comic and one of the most touching you will ever see in cinema.

And the end is all redemption, without any glossing over just how hard some events, and people, are to redeem.

—Juliette Hughes

Not a weepie

Boys Don't Cry, dir. Kimberly Peirce. Like many movies based on a true story, some facts have been changed in *Boys Don't Cry*, but at the core of this film is a performance of such extraordinary truthfulness it overcomes any concerns we might have about verisimilitude.

A young woman, Teena Brandon (Hilary Swank), is compelled, as if her life depends on it, to go into the world as Brandon Teena, a young man. It is an enormous risk to take in rural Nebraska, even if it is 1993.

With the aid of short hair, breast strapping and a sense of utter conviction, Teena plunges into the life she desires. As Brandon she drinks beer, brawls in bars, even picks up girls; and because we believe in Swank's performance we readily accept that Brandon's 'performance' rings true for the other characters in the film: we believe that they could believe.

We even believe—as we must—that the beautiful Lana (Chloe Sevigny) could fall in love with Brandon. Even after sex, Lana doesn't want to admit the truth of their relationship, probably because of what she would have to admit about her own sexuality. It is upon such fine levels of emotional detail that the film teeters but never falls.

In time others discover the truth as well. Eventually, John (Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom (Matt McGrath)—two ex-cons as confused about their own lives as Teena is about hers—direct their rage and disgust at the defenceless young woman.

From the beginning we know where Teena's story is heading. If she had started her journey in New York and not the mid-West she might have survived; but in this, as in so much of her life, she had no choice.

—Brett Evans

Long hot slummer

Magnolia, dir. Paul Anderson. There is ample precedent for a film script which tells the stories of a number of loosely intermingled characters who somehow lend themselves to a common theme.

Here we share the lives of nine principal characters over a short time span. Depending on the detail of the storytelling, the integration of these characters inevitably takes time, and time proves to be *Magnolia's* greatest enemy. Its length of 188 minutes fails the 'numb buttock' test and detracts from the film's virtues.

Paul Anderson (*Boogie Nights*), who wrote and directed the film, has created non-stop angst with a pastiche of roles, all of which offered an opportunity to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor or Actress.

The characters include Jason Robards as the dying millionaire; Julianne Moore as the guilt-ridden wife; William Macy as the

grown-up quiz wizard who frets over past fame as much as his missing prize money; Philip Hall as the quiz-show master dying of cancer; Jeremy Blackman as the junior quiz genius trying to cope with an unforgivingly ambitious father and Tom Cruise as the TV guru of aggressive misogyny. There are few moments when the characters are left in peace. The writer-director puts them through a series of unremitting emotional hoops which they are required to endure and survive.

Sharper direction would have enhanced the film. There is an indulgent prologue which is entertaining, but irrelevant and should have been cut. There is a protracted quiz show during which neither the competitors, nor the director, for that matter, seem to know what to do.

On the other hand, there are some fine performances. Julianne Moore is exhausting to watch as the distraught wife, while Cruise struts his usual stuff in a role for which he is well cast. Good moments include the Dennis Potter-like singing sequence and the weather phenomenon that proves a real squelch. While these moments work well, a banal soundtrack, apparently designed to override dialogue, was contrived and annoying.

Despite the quality of the performances (and beware any film where the actors are listed in alphabetical order!) the film was strangely unmoving. The reason is that both the script and the performances stray into the area of caricature and distance *Magnolia* from reality.

Was it John Houston who said that every minute of a film beyond two hours represents a director's indulgence? The present spate of three-hour heavyweight Academy Award hopefuls bears witness to that statement.

—Gordon Lewis

Greene out to grass

The End of the Affair, dir. Neil Jordan. There is one scene in this rather bleak film where Ralph Fiennes (as Maurice Bendrix, the Graham Greene-ish novelist) becomes sufficiently animated to serve as a credible lover—adulterous or otherwise. Oddly, it is not in one of the many exchanges with the woman who obsesses him, Sarah Miles (played wonderfully, and against the odds, by Julianne Moore), but with the private detective, Mr Parkis, who he sets to follow her. Bendrix corrects Parkis over a matter of detail. It is a perfect cameo of the English class system in operation, and Bendrix/

Fiennes does it with a zestful condescension that lights up the screen. Ian Hart, as Mr Parkis, takes the blow as a member of the lower orders ought—with a stoical crumple. Hart's performance is one of the film's highlights, as is the brief appearance of James Bolam (remember him in the TV series *When the Boat Comes In?*) as Parkis' shrewd employer, Mr Savage.

But the main game—the affair between Bendrix and Sarah—is curiously unsatisfying. Greene's novel is as much about trammelled religious belief as sexual passion, and his narration holds the balance. Under Jordan's direction, belief becomes a kind of risible irrationality, so the novel's tension is lost and the film must rely on the evocations of one kind of desire, not two. A kind of secular failure of nerve.

But for all that it is a moving film, perhaps because Julianne Moore knows how to embody trust on screen, and Stephen Rea, as the husband, Henry, can do hapless and dignified at the same time. And there is also London—dark, rainy, threatened by war, and irresistibly nostalgic.

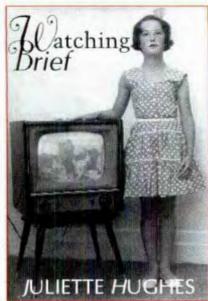
—Morag Fraser

Ouzo & bloke

Wogboy, dir. Nick Giannopoulos. The other day a humourless prat of a woman rang a local ABC talkback show to complain about *Wogboy*. What an offensive word, she was saying, just as bad as being called a Jew or a nigger. (To equate those two words betrays a strange cast of thought. Unlike the vile insult 'nigger', 'Jew' is a basic proper noun like 'Finn' or 'Dane'.) She was not herself, she hastened to assure us, of the Mediterranean persuasion—she was ringing up for 'a friend'. She was incapable of understanding the achievement of Giannopoulos and his colleagues, who have taken rightful possession of the word 'wog'. Telling Giannopoulos that he mustn't use the word that was used against him is just more of the same old prejudice ...

Wogboy is harmless fun, with a bit of good old left-of-centre propaganda about unemployment that will balance out some of the awful lies kids are getting every day from the telly. It's in the same happy little ballpark as *The Castle*, which also copped a pasting from people who think that you can only laugh at things that aren't really funny, and who seem to think that being working-class is, like being non-WASP, something to be very serious about.

—Juliette Hughes



Trashing treasure

APRIL WASN'T THE CRUELLEST MONTH FOR TV reviewers: March won hands down, with divers horrific examples of how much bread is being spent on circuses these days.

The biggest circus was the highly publicised *Who Wants To Marry A Millionaire?* on Fox 8. Most people would have read in the news about the debacle when the chosen bride, Darva Conger, annulled the marriage. (Such names occur only in America, folks: I blame her parents actually, first for not changing their surname and next for calling the poor thing DARVA. Imagine the tremulous moment when an innocent infant is put into your arms and you say 'I think I'm going to call her Darva because I've got a bad case of postnatal depression coming on and I want to take it out on someone.')

The two hours were filled with personable, rational beings parading up and down because they were prepared to sell love and intimacy in public to a man chosen by a TV channel. He was referred to constantly as 'The Multi-Millionaire'. OO-AH. The compere, some minor actor doing a very desperate Troy McClure gig, was sickeningly deferential to the MM, who sat like a slave-buyer, concealed behind a screen as the women hawked their honour at him. The finalists were invited to give their views, which they duly provided from their small store of wisdom gleaned from magazine astrology columns and desk calendars. 'Ah'm a passionate, generous woman,' asserted one, all evidence to the contrary. Then they went away to put on hired white wedding gowns.

In the end Darva, the most peroxidised one, was chosen, but when the MM came out, you could see she was wondering if she'd in fact drawn the short straw. No delicate flower, this one, though. Every time I felt sorry for them all, I remembered what they were doing.

FRIENDS AND FAMILY tried to protect me from the abomination of desolation that masqueraded as *Oliver Twist*, hiding the Green Guide and trashing my email from ABC programming. I heard them whispering: 'She'll never make it—you know what she was like after *David Copperfield* ... Maybe we should ring her shrink again ...' But I didn't heed their advice to go out on Sunday nights. Chastened, I have come back from the brink of terminal banality to tell you of a strange dream the night after watching the first two interminable hours of the latest defilement of Dickens ...

'You really need to see this,' said a voice.

'That's what they all say,' I said, or thought, and opened my eyes.

He was about ten feet tall, and the wingspan was a real problem even though furred. He moved a step forward, which

was a mistake because the dressing-table top was full of jars, ornaments and books.

'Oh, sorry, I'll put them back,' he said, knocking over the bedside lamp as he bent down.

'Don't! I'll do it—just stay in one place, will you? And who the hell *are* you?'

'All right,' he said, a little sulkily. 'Gabriel's the name—patron of television, among other things. But I have to show you something rather quickly because I'm due at Rupert Murdoch's in half an hour when his REM kicks in.'

'You're due *where*?'

'Every bloody night. Otherwise Beelzebub gets it *all* his way ...'

Next thing I knew I was hanging on to some rather slippery feathers and trying not to look down. We touched down inside the Louvre, where Fra Angelico and St Clare were having a furious argument in front of a small, famous portrait. 'Just *look* what you've done!' yelled the monk, jabbing a trembling finger in the direction of the smiling face. 'What were *your* qualifications for being one of the patron saints of Art, eh? You're supposed to stick to being the Patron of Embroidery! They've had to let Leonardo out of Purgatory early because of this, and I might add he's already causing trouble among some of the more butch Dominations.'

'I think she looks better with a nice set of teeth,' sniffed St Clare primly.

'And what about the Venus de Milo, hey?'

Gabriel. 'All very well to give her arms back, but you *know* that she wasn't originally sculpted knitting a large jumper.'

'I thought it best,' said Clare, 'She was most immodest without it—'

'And that stupid prequel to *Star Wars*?'

'I thought the young Queen Amidala's dresses were very modest and beautiful.'

'Well then, what about the even stupider prequel you suggested to Alan Bleasdale when he adapted *Oliver Twist*? What did you do to the man, lobotomise him?'

'I think it was improved with a little embroidery—look, you two, I *know* you're just hanging out for Sister Wendy to kick the bucket, but she's got a snowball in Hell's chance of being canonised, let alone being allowed *near* a bit of Art in the next aeon after all that *filth* she goes on with ...'

I woke, sweating, with a plaintive receding echo of Gabriel saying, 'Tell them, tell them to pray for a new patron saint of Art ...'

Juliette Hughes is a freelance reviewer. ■



Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 82, April 2000

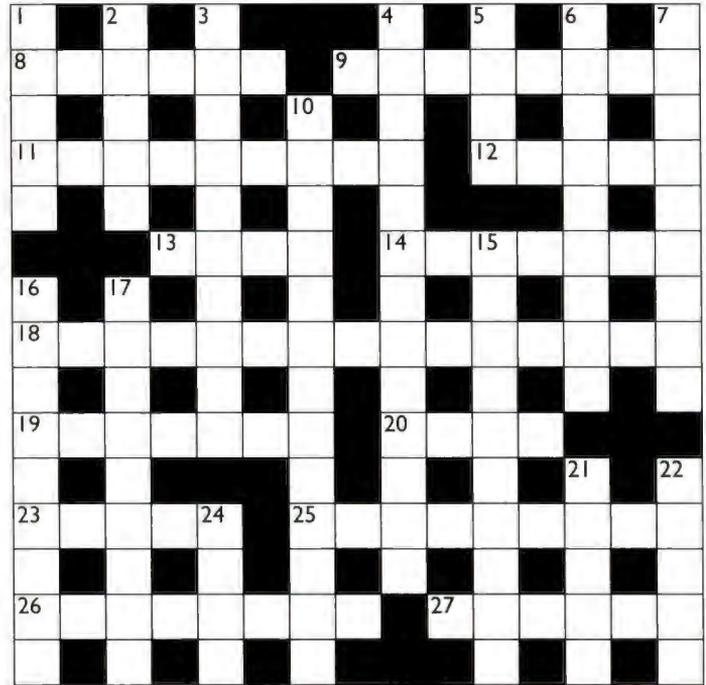
Devised by
Joan Nowotny IBVM

ACROSS

8. Relax! International organisation, we heard, wined and dined the group. (6)
9. He likes to share pie, perhaps, in a way that makes him noticed? What a hypocrite! (8)
11. Came, catching breath, to Noel—on way back from seeing the changeable creature. (9)
12. Carried on and answered—skipping about? (5)
13. Incredible lapse in maintenance—left off part of the church. (4)
14. Is old German prince a constituent? (7)
18. Arrange a free song first, at the beginning of Evensong, to encourage seasonal contributions. (6,9)
19. On returning, I take a strong drink as Nipponese warrior appears. (7)
20. Sound return in screech-owl's call. (4)
23. Its invention set standard for technological turn-about? (5)
25. Straight GST information: supermarket figures will appear as added. (9)
26. Several people initially on ice arena half left because of light shower. (8)
27. Is monarch involved in winter sport, for example? (6)

DOWN

1. Alive and nimble-witted! (5)
2. Opponents are about to take the pledge. (5)
3. When could Lena pray—that is, make a proposal to a chap? Or so folk-lore would have it! (2,4,4)
4. 'Earth' represents repentance, for instance. (6,2,5)
5. Stole, and took the consequences, we hear. (4)
6. Collaborator? The fool is German worker. (9)
7. Loving eyes, it seems, ready to marinate. (9)
10. Punctiliously attended to the ritual formalities. (13)
15. Heart disturbance brings great upheaval. (10)
16. At any rate, the most stupid were heard. (9)
17. Adjust my term, say, for lack of correspondence. (9)
21. Maiden in the entrance? Allow for it. (5)
22. Saying of the present epoch? Rather, it's time-honoured. (5)
24. After this liturgical season of 1-down, otherwise expressed, it's time for 18-across. (4)



Solution to Crossword no. 81, March 2000



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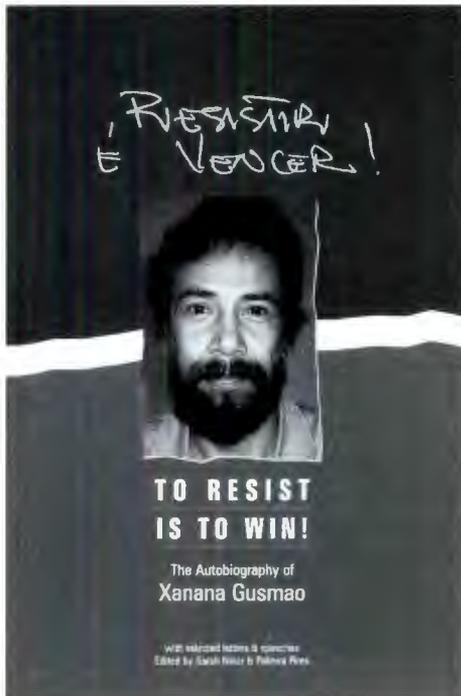
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