EUREKA STREET

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Refugees: more pilgrims, less progress

Ailing Australia

- Peter Sheehan's failed Camelot
- Need, greed and the market
- WA Inc's bright golden lure

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Cover photo: Afghan refugees in Peshawar, by Irie Duane RSM (see story, p. 17)

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The way to Easter

EASTER, THE RESURRECTION FEAST, shows signs of regaining its prime place in the Christian calendar. The 'feast of feasts' marks off the followers of Jesus, yet in popular Australian culture Easter has been overshadowed by Christmas. And while Australia's culture since European settlement has often been called 'Christian', the lack of a focus on Resurrection queries that description.

Christian visual art, literature and song generally centre on Jesus as the suffering one—the Christ who turned the other cheek, dying as an innocent at the hands of people he prized.

In a world riven by innocent suffering, and by the violence and intransigence of the powerful, Good Friday remains a powerful symbol of God's solidarity with the earth and its people. Whenever we set out in quest of God, or look for people who can provide credible images of God, it is not to the powerful that we look first. Those attracted to Christmas, and this includes many non-Christians 'of good will', instinctively know this.

During the Gulf conflict, the faces that revealed the greatness of humanity with intensity were not those of the military, nor those of the politicians. Among thousands of television images, the rawest and most appealing were those of parents prying their children's bodies free from bomb shelters, and of Palestinians viewed through chain-wire fencing, crying desperate for peace and a home. For anyone whose mind is etched with images from the Scriptures, Jewish and Christian, these tragedies cry out with the anguish of God, anguish entangled in our own.

That said, Easter announces that more is to be said and done than our own last word and deed. That 'more' is not our own but God's. But first we must remember, and then recount, the tragedies. Publicly in the press, and privately in our conversations, we must tell the stories of failure (along with the others).

In Australia,some confident voices declare that the recession will be over by 1992, but it is doubtful whether our economic and political problems admit of any swift and predictable resolution. No ordinary cyclical upturn can distract attention from longer-term trends, including the worsening terms of trade, the decline of manufacturing (see 'In search of ties that bind', p.9); a lack of clarity about national goals and the role of government ('Hard times for local heroes', p.13); and catastro-

phes in banking and financial institutions whose effects will be felt into the new century. Even that emblem of Australia the plucky gambler—the bookmaker—appears destined for the museum ('The once and future bookie', p.21). Ailing Australia seems to have lost even its financial vaudevilleans.

For all that's said against the 1980s as a decade of greed and irresponsible ambition, those years still have their instructive lessons. It was a decade in which sections of the community—most notably unions and employer groups through the prices and incomes accord—recognised that Australians need to work cohesively if they are to work at all. It was a decade in which the rhetoric, if not the fact, of disciplined hard work was the key to productive effort. And it was a decade in which persistent voices emphasised our solidarity with those beyond our shores, especially those in acute need ('Sanctuary too far away', p.17).

If the Christian account is to be believed, Good Fridays past and present are never the end of the story. Once the period of grieving is allowed for, the power of the Resurrection can begin to work again its miracle of hope.

Nietzsche's quip that Christians should look more redeemed is rightly quoted against all believers who are moralistic, judgmental or joyless. In the Iron Curtain era, one force that kept many Eastern Europeans sane and alive was their humour—their dark-hued jibes poked at bureaucrats and rulers. Spirited humour it was, drawing its vitality from the contradictions that absolute power leads to. One suspects that it also sprang from an underlying Christian awareness of One who died but was never defeated. Polish hymns are as solemn as they come, but strength in the singing and persistence in the jokes spoke of spirits unsubdued.

And what of Australia and its multicultural tapestry? Can we expect here our own embodiments of the spirit of Easter—hopes that rise out of grief? Can we legitimately begin to look nurture expectations again while the national mood is sombre and our luck seems to have run out? A decade ago, professionals who worked to rehabilitate teenagers in trouble liked to speak of their methods as 'tough love'. Ours is a time for tough hope. Sunny optimism will not serve. What is needed is alertness for chinks of light at the prison window.

The stories of the survivors among us, refugees and others, are not yet well enough known in the wider Australian community. We have in our communities many whose spirits have been tested to the limit and emerged the greater. By no means all interpret their experience in Christian terms. Many express their hopes by beginning again with Australian-born children.

'Christians should look more redeemed.'
(Sculpture from Reims Cathedral, c. 1250)

Much of the time, Australian-born adults sell themselves short in the realm of the spirit. The understated, no-fuss, laconic approach to tragedy—born of inarticulateness about births and deaths—has its attractions. Ours is a culture with its feet on the ground. Australians do not readily fall for pretence or enthusiasms.

But our traditional stoic resistance to time and despair (while admirable) has never represented the fullness of Christianity. What is needed more than ever is courage to shoulder the impact of suffering—our own and others'—and to exchange life stories across ethnic, regional and religious boundaries. Solidarity is a word awaiting a characteristically Australian translation—into our language and into public life. That is the way towards the Easter experienece. ('Paul the pragmatist', p.38) There is no time like Easter for committing our nation to compassion for all, and to listening to each other's histories as we have never listened before.

We cannot *make* Easter happen. But we do know the right places and dispositions in which to wait. And if we do, we may find ourselves sharing new joy with the most unlikely people. ■

MARK SKULLEY

All that glisters

The kind of relationship between government and business that became known as WA Inc was not a creation of the '80s. It repeated an old Australian pattern.

IN THE EARLY 1980S, a former car salesman emerged from the scrum of aspiring Perth businessmen as managing director of a public company that we will call Big Deal. The change from capitalist pupa to small business butterfly bought trappings to match: a gold Rolls Royce with personalised number plates, gold rings, gold watch, gold bracelet and even gold hair, though the latter crown of success showed at least some dark roots.

Big Deal boasted that it was in the running for contracts worth millions of dollars from Ronald Reagan's Star Wars program. Its main product was said to be an 'image-based information system'. But visitors to Big Deal's headquarters in its brief heyday in 1985 were unable to examine this wonder technology. Secrecy, of course; too many technology pirates sniffing around. One visitor recalled the managing director having the perfect power handshake, his palm flat downwards, leaving the other party's hand clinging underneath, a favourite move among graduates of American-style classes in self-assertion.

As things panned out, Big Deal was way off striking gold for its shareholders. It was one of a string of Perth-based companies that crashed after its big brother, Laurie Connell's semi-legendary merchant bank Rothwells Ltd, went down for the last time in 1988. Big Deal has since emerged from Rothwells' shadow with new ownership and direction. It had plenty of competition in Perth from 1983 to 1987 in the great tradition of, 'Have I Got A Deal For You?'. Another Perth company had a contraption that looked like a large metal wardrobe wired for electricity. The idea was that shirts and other clothing placed inside on coathangers would be ironed at the touch of a button.

What has all this to do with the backdoor collaboration between the Western Australian government and local business that came to be called WA Inc? What is WA Inc anyway, and does it matter? The name arose, it appears, from a newspaper headline in late 1987. The article following was about the $370 million 'rescue' of Rothwells, which had money flying out the door after a run on deposits. The National Australia Bank crystallised matters by refusing to clear Rothwells' cheques. The rescue attempt, largely organised by the ubiquitous Alan Bond, drew support from 17 of Australia's top Australian businessmen, as well as the WA Government headed by the then premier, Brian Burke.

The newspaper headline actually referred to 'Australia Inc'. The businessmen who chipped in included east-coasters such as Kerry Packer, but as time passed the main supporters were locals: Bond, Connell and the WA Government. It is history now that Rothwells collapsed in late 1988, despite increasingly frantic efforts by Bond and the government to keep it afloat. Charges were laid against key players such as Bond, Connell and a host of executives from Rothwells and the companies it dealt with. The charges have been denied and are still to be heard. The fall-out blighted the political careers of Brian Burke, his successor Peter Dowding, and David Parker, deputy to both. Burke quit as premier while still a young man and was given a plum diplomatic post as ambassador to Ireland and the Vatican.

The hand-in-glove nature of Perth business and politics was hard to detect when money was cheap. Get-rich schemes like Big Deal once glowed like glossy company prospectuses, then stood exposed when cash became tight. Australia had a credit boom between 1983 and 1985, but the days of easy money had faded by 1987. Then came the king wave, the October sharemarket crash. The wave swept up many companies dumping some only as late as last year. The hardier businesses,

those that actually produced something and were not hocked to the eyeballs, are still afloat. The smallness of WA's economy, and its peculiarities, provided a special window on the machinations of big business and government in the 1980s. (Similar scenes were enacted across Australia at the time.)

Cycles of money-fever run through Western Australian history. Prominent among them were the gold rushes of the 1890s, Australia's first commercial oil strikes, the North-West's massive iron ore mines, the Poseidon nickel boom, diamonds at Argyle in 1980s, gold bouncing back and forth many times. The size of the state, its resource wealth and a population of only 1.5 million have meant that all of its governments have lived cheek-by-jowl with business.

Liberal strongman Sir Charles Court was such a firm interventionist that Lang Hancock, the iron-ore magnate, reckoned he was the greatest socialist of all. Meanwhile, over in Queensland, the long-time National Party premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen was famous for caressing business in the Far North during the 1970s and 1980s.

The resurgence of the ALP around Australia in 1982–83 saw the election of John Cain in Victoria. Cain and Treasurer Rob Jolly believed that state-owned bodies such as their Victorian Economic Development Corporation could 'pick winners'. But the corporation ended up losing some $130 million. And the State Bank of Victoria's merchant arm, Tricontinental, went on a $4 billion lending spree that saw losses of about $2.7 billion, and the State Bank sold to the Commonwealth.

Further crashes have cut our politicians' faith in the business community. But it was not always thus. Remember a beaming prime minister Hawke photographed side-by-side with Kerry Packer and Alan Bond? Or Paul Keating praising the benefits of financial deregulation?

In WA, Brian Burke won office in March 1983. Burke was a former journalist who knew how to work the press, a good talker who could charm when he wished, one possessed of great political instincts. He was also suspicious and impatient, tending to revert to Tammany-hall-style tactics when cornered. Like Labor around Australia, Burke set out to win over business. He courted Perth's 'four-on-the floor' entrepreneurs. He set up the John Curtin Foundation, which had ten of WA's business high-fliers as vice-patrons, including Alan Bond and Laurie Connell. Like John Cain, Burke made business the business of government. He set up the Western Australian Development Corporation to 'pick winners'.

Life rolled along in WA as long as the economy stayed buoyant. Living was generally pleasant, unless you happened to be an Aborigine. Burke's Liberal opponents were mostly dills, and people should just give newfangled ideas like the development corporation a fair chance. This sunny air of complacency was helped along by WA's lack of freedom of information laws—which the present premier, Dr Carmen Lawrence, has promised to introduce.

Under Burke, and then Peter Dowding, many things were deemed 'commercially confidential' even though it was taxpayer who was paying. One state secret was the rumoured mega-salary paid to John Horgan, a Perth businessman, as head of the development corporation. Taxpayers could find out how much was paid to a Supreme Court judge, but not what was paid to Horgan.

Consider, too, the media, which were dominated (and still are) by Perth's morning newspaper, *The West Australian*. The paper dominates public life in ways that would be inconceivable in Sydney or Melbourne, but which fit the pattern in Australia's smaller states. *'The West'* is somewhat old-fashioned in tone, parochial, slow to see the wood for the trees and prone to be leaned on by local heavies in times of crisis. The problem was compounded when Alan Bond bought control of Bell Group, owners of the paper. The WA government's insurance office also owned part of Bell Group.

Burke played on journalists' liking for socialising with their own kind and being flattered, or at least being treated with civility (a technique not yet mastered by some Liberal politicians). The doubters were few, and they found that researching stories could be tough, given Perth's narrow channels of information. Projects such as the Burswood casino (under the direction of another Perth entrepreneur, Dallas Dempster) were speedily completed. Alan Bond was unofficially beatified after winning the Americas' Cup (remember Bob Hawke singing his praises and wearing *that* jacket?).

People only want money to be good when it is bad. When it is good, they go for it.

During the good times, the wild men of Perth business attracted attention from interstate because of their background and lifestyle. Bond was a former signwriter and Connell the son of a bus driver. Bond struck a commemorative gold medal for guests at his daughter's wedding, while Connell hired a train for 150 of his closest friends and took them to a country race meeting. Largesse was shared around. It has since emerged that Connell's Paragon Resources NL had donated $250,000 of its shareholders' funds to the Australian Labor Party in July 1987. Paragon, a gold miner, was then 60 per cent-owned by Connell's private company, Oakhill. The truth about donations by business to all sides of politics will probably never be known, because WA's laws on disclosing donations to political parties are hopelessly inadequate, like those in the rest of Australia.

Then the music stopped and Rothwells crashed. It was propped up for a year by the 'rescue', after a frantic passing-the-hat round Australia and overseas one weekend in 1987. The government provided a $150 million guarantee, and later shovelled hundreds of millions into related ventures. But Rothwells sank anyway. A report to Parliament by the old corporate watchdog, the National Companies and Securities Commission, found that a huge number of loans made by Rothwells were to interests associated with Connell. Indeed, a condition of the 'rescue' was that Connell himself should contribute $70 million. The commission later concluded that 'Connell's $70 million personal commitment to the Rothwells rescue, on which the other parties to the rescue relied, was more than covered by fresh loans to Connell's companies from Rothwells'.

PROBABLY THE LAST CHANCE to save Rothwells was a desperate deal allowing Connell to buy $350 million worth of Rothwells' non-performing loans, most of which were to Connell himself. Connell and Dempster were then partners in a petrochemical project at Kwinana, south of Perth. The government gave them a mandate, but the project was still largely in the planning stages when it was bought jointly by the government and Bond Corporation for $400 million. Although Connell and Dempster had been 50/50 partners in the project, Connell was paid $350 million (which he used to buy the $350 million in loans from Rothwells) while Dempster received $50 million.

Alas, the project is still just a great idea. The liquidator of the project's business vehicle told *The Sydney Morning Herald* that he would throw a party if he could get $40 million for the remains. He said: 'It is hard to comprehend that they [the government and Bond] paid $400 million for a project that was still on the drawing boards. It is very difficult to come to grips with how they spent all that money when no one had even put a shovel in the ground.' The collapse of the petrochemical project precipitated a massive falling out between Bond and the WA government. They are now fighting through the courts for compensation from one another.

A new twist on WA Inc surfaced during the trial last year of Robert Smith, a private investigator found guilty of phone-tapping in Perth while Burke was WA premier. Wilson Tuckey, the voluble Liberal MP, has claimed in Federal Parliament that Burke is the 'BB' mentioned in Smith's work diaries, and has called for Burke to be sacked from his diplomatic post. During his trial, Smith denied that Burke was the 'BB' mentioned in the diaries, but they do refer to visits to the Premier's office, to meeting Burke's brother Terry (also a Labor MP at the time) and to the Premier's former driver.

What has sparked most conjecture is a file and other material marked 'GOVT', which was seized by federal police when they raided Smith's office more than two years ago. The federal police pressed on with the matter within their jurisdiction, namely the phone tapping, and then handed the file over to the WA police. One matter leaked from the file concerns a Liberal politician allegedly telling Terry Burke how a local councillor was bribed to vote for a controversial seaside hotel, Observation City, which was built by Bond Corp. The WA Opposition asked the state ombudsman, Eric Freeman, to investigate what the local police had been doing for two years. Freeman did so, and recommended that a royal commission be held into WA Inc.

Dr Lawrence took a short while to consider the recommendation, then called a wide-ranging royal commission to consider government–business dealings going back a decade. Previously she had resisted calls for a commission, but the recommendation from the ombudsman's report opened the floodgates of public opinion. The inquiry into WA Inc was to begin in March. Brian Burke has said he will give evidence, and the commission has appealed for help from the public. Nobody knows where the trail will lead, but where did it start? Probably in greed for money and power, and in some problems that bedevilled all of Australia in the 1980s: limited public access to government decisions, dissembling politicians, grasping businessmen, soppy journalists, a concentrated media and a public too complacent until the very end.

Indeed the public was right in there during the decade of greed, albeit on a smaller scale than the big players. Investors in Rothwells and in the Farrow building societies were there because they received one or two percentage points' interest above that offered by the major banks. These people have since cried out for government protection in their hour of need. Were they going to share the extra interest on their money? To paraphrase John Kenneth Galbraith, people only want money to be good when it is bad. When it is good, they go for it. ■

Mark Skulley was a finance journalist in Perth during the Burke government's term of office. He is now writes for *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

RICHARD CURTAIN

In search of ties that bind

Australia's manufacturing industry is often portrayed as facing a simple choice between 'free trade' and 'protection'. But seeing things that way is part of the problem.

AUSTRALIA'S POOR RECORD in manufacturing stems from a failure to increase exports: we have the world's only industrial economy in which the ratio of exports to production has not increased during the past 30 years. In fact, the proportion of merchandise exports to total output is a third lower than it is in comparable economies [see the Hughes report on Australia's export performance, 1990].

Our failures are illuminated by the economic successes of Germany and Japan, which rest on a subtle balance between competition and cooperation among firms. Such tension is the essence of a dynamic economy. Fundamentally, Australia lacks a culture that fosters collaborative arrangements in industry. We do not have common values that would encourage greater collective responsibility by employers, towards each other and towards their employees. It is not a matter of lifting individual moral standards, or of a return to 'business ethics'; these things would have little effect by themselves. A broader strategy is needed, one that encourages closer cooperation within and between enterprises.

The debate is not about whether governments should intervene, but about how and when to dismantle tariffs and other forms of protection, and about what, if anything, should replace them. Some want to give market forces wider scope, and urge governments to minimise intervention. They describe their strategy as 'creating a level playing field' and ridicule the alternative—helping industry to develop particular products—as 'picking winners'. Supporters of the alternative, however, reply that no manufacturing economy operates on the 'level playing field' model. Australian industry, they say, would be disadvantaged if government support was removed unilaterally.

The car industry typifies the problems in Australian manufacturing. Although 350,000 cars are built here each year, few are exported. Indeed, more were exported 15 years ago. Since then, Japanese car producers have rendered Australian-made cars much less competitive. Japan exports 48 per cent of the cars it builds, and the figures are even more impressive for France (55 per cent), Germany (57 per cent) and Canada (82 per cent). Australia exports only two per cent of its car production. Tariffs mean that an average car costs $4000 more here than it would without tariffs. And each job in the industry receives from the consumer an equivalent subsidy of $25,000.

A focus on short-term profitability is common in Australia (and in many other Western countries), leading to under-investment in goods and practices vital to an industrial economy. Governments can coax, or even coerce, by passing new laws. But their effect will be limited unless business adopts the spirit of the regulatory framework. Government protection merely encourages a defensive inward orientation among managers, and undermines opportunities for cooperation between firms.

In Australia, a sense of collective responsibility and cooperation among firms is essential if manufacturing is to 'get its act together'. Government, unions and

employers need to agree on a strategy for each industry sector. Cooperation is vital in training, research and development, measures to increase job security, and in developing secure networks for the supply of raw materials. If restructuring is left to market forces, Australian manufacturing will probably not survive. Reduction of tariffs alone is a passive policy, and export subsidies do not promote better practices or cooperation within export industries.

In many industrialised countries, the long-term trend in manufacturing is towards fewer employees. By contrast, growth is taking place in service industries—finance and business services, health, education and community services, transport and communications, wholesaling and retailing, and the hospitality trade.

But this shrinking employment base obscures the importance of manufacturing. Many jobs that used to exist in manufacturing firms still continue, but now as specialist services in accounting, drafting and engineering. (Repairs to a fork-lift truck may be handled either by an employee or a subcontractor.) Further, a significant proportion of service sector jobs depend on manufacturing. And the service sector cannot generate sufficient exports to underwrite the high cost of manufactured imports. Tourism is a big foreign exchange earner, but this mainly offsets the huge outflow of dollars caused by Australians travelling overseas. Export of educational and health services to Asia is not likely to be a big export earner. And in any case, service industries need a strong underlying economy.

Primary commodities—wool, wheat and minerals—will continue to be major exports. But their long-term prospects are uncertain. The demand for raw materials is falling as substitutes are found, and their value is falling compared with manufacturing products. For example, it takes 300 tonnes of coking coal to pay for an imported word-processor and other equipment for one manager and a secretary. In a few years, 400 tonnes may be needed, despite the likelihood that the price of the electronic equipment will remain constant or fall. Semi-processing of raw materials, such as bauxite into alumina and iron ore into steel, offers considerable potential for adding value. But such activity depends on a strong manufacturing base to supply and maintain the processing equipment.

Manufacturing offers Australia a chance to participate in the world's leading economies. Provided costs and quality are improved, car exports for niche markets offer good long-term prospects. But this requires us to tap into the research of global car manufacturers. Australia's car industry should become the main car producer in the region—and access to the Australian car market should be conditional on our having access to the supply networks being established in South-East Asia.

INDIVIDUAL FIRMS often under-invest in training, and the result is an economy suffering from a continual skills shortage and a workforce ill-prepared for technological change. Research and development is essential to manufacturing for export. Again, the market fails here. Individual firms have little incentive to invest because investment returns are slow and uncertain. Tax concessions can improve rates of return, but the benefits stay with individual firms. The benefits of research must spread widely and quickly if the economy as a whole is to gain. Public institutions and cooperation among firms are needed to diffuse research results.

Lack of job security is hampering Australia's chances long-term. Market economists have traditionally believed that employee mobility is a good thing; firms believed it gave them greater flexibility. For example, in 1989 the Australian car industry lost 35 per cent of its employees. This was a far higher proportion than in Japan, Europe or North America, where the turnover was less than 10 per cent. It made good sense, once, for car companies to use labour turnover as a buffer against cyclical fluctuations. In an economic downturn, companies had simply to stop recruiting to reduce their workforce. This was cost-effective when employees were interchangeable and few skills were needed on an assembly line. But this is no longer the case. Today, quality is as important as price in selling cars, and teamwork is needed in the new Japanese-style 'lean' production systems. Cutting the workforce runs directly against fostering employee commitment to quality and teamwork—both essential in 'best practice' manufacturing.

Producer–supplier relations provide yet another example of how market forces discourage long-term strategies. Dominant firms pressure suppliers to cut costs, often without regard to the suppliers' survival. Economists often assume that enterprises respond to market signals and automatically adopt the most efficient production techniques. This is the claim of Ross Garnaut in his report, *Australia and the North-East Asian Ascendancy*. According to Garnaut, 'interna-

Research über alles

GERMANY EXEMPLIFIES the collaboration needed to produce world-class manufacturing. The state of Baden-Wurttemberg (population nine million) has Germany's highest concentration of research capacity: 20,000 scientists in nine universities, 23 polytechnics and 27 research institutes. There are 80 technology transfer centres employing 200 scientists. The centres focus on development projects for small and medium-sized firms, and are largely self-financed. They promote cooperation between companies to help spread the costs of developing new products. There are no equivalent facilities in Australia.

If restructuring is left to market forces, Australian manufacturing will probably not survive. Reduction of tariffs alone is a passive policy

Photo: Paul Doherty

tionally-oriented enterprises selling into unprotected markets at home and abroad *invariably* are more effective in keeping abreast of relevant developments in technology, management and consumer tastes. They learn more quickly which new developments have implications for their competitiveness, and they respond more quickly to new information' (Garnaut, p. 207) [emphasis added].

There is much evidence to show that this is not so. Australian enterprises too often respond to short-term market considerations to the detriment of their long-term survival. The market is preoccupied with fast returns on investment, while high interest rates discourage the long-term investment that manufacturing requires. (New tax rules allowing a shorter period for depreciation of capital equipment could modify this situation.)

Exchange rate uncertainties are a particular problem for Australia. Our high dependence on fluctuating commodity prices makes the value of the dollar difficult to predict. This difficulty is compounded when the investment time-scale is five years or more, as it is for manufacturing. A low national savings rate accentuates the problem. High interest rates have to be maintained to attract foreign money, which in turn makes up for the lack of domestic investment capital. National savings are at a low level, partly because of Australians' massive investment in expensive house extensions, and their habit of going upmarket.

Still more damaging to manufacturing prospects is the arms-length relationship between financiers and the companies in which they invest. A study on industrial productivity by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT] shows that this is also a feature of the American economy. The study details quite different arrangements in Germany and Japan, where banks have close ties through direct equity participation in manufacturing and through long-term loans at low interest. Banks are represented on company boards, thus accepting responsibility for the long-term fortunes of their investments.

According to the MIT study, US share markets are organised very differently. Superannuation and insurance companies seek to maximise the value of their portfolios by a rapid turnover of stockholdings. Their fund managers have neither long-term loyalty to the companies in which they invest, nor representation on their boards. Meanwhile, profit-related bonuses

Safe transplant, no rejection

IN THE PAST 10 YEARS, through sheer attention to detail, the Japanese have captured more than 30 per cent of the US new-car market. In the US, Japanese-run assembly plants ('transplants') using American labour and equipment, make cars more efficiently than General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, and the product is more highly prized by consumers. While total US car output declined by 16.8 per cent, production by 'transplants' jumped by 17.8 per cent. In 1989, a Japanese car, the Honda Accord, was the best-selling car in the US.

geared to annual performance encourage management to focus on short-term profits. Hostile takeovers and leveraged buy-outs contribute to this focus.

The MIT study is critical of a preoccupation with reducing costs at the expense of longer-term strategies. German and Japanese markets operate within an institutional framework that supports manufacturing industry. In Australia, government policy, share markets and the banks send out confused signals, creating uncertainty about whether manufacturing is worth support. Investors looking for a quick, low-risk return are reluctant to put money into manufacturing.

The free-trade argument was first articulated almost two centuries ago, with the promise of improving everyone's economic welfare. Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' of the market is still widely proposed as the most efficient way of allocating scarce resources. Certainly benefits have derived from international trade. Between 1945 and 1970 the world experienced the most dramatic and broadly shared economic growth in its history. Even allowing for inflation, real income tripled and world trade quadrupled.

But this success was not the result of free-market policies. It was generated by the new international economic order created after World War II by the Bretton Woods agreement, which fixed exchange rates to minimise currency fluctuations. The system included the International Monetary Fund to ensure liquidity, and the World Bank to direct development finance to areas of need. Finally, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade helped to maintain a clear set of rules to encourage the growth of an open trading system.

At present, economic nationalism is still a brake on the free movement of goods between countries. The barrier to Australian agricultural exports caused by subsidised production in the European Community is one example, but Japan maintains subtle barriers in the form of regulations and closely-knit business networks that restrict foreign entry to its domestic markets. An economist writing in the *Australian Financial Review* has referred to the 'iron law' of comparative advantage. This 'law' advised trading partners (originally England and Portugal in the 19th century) to exchange those commodities in which one is rich and the other needy. Any social scientist who regards a generalisation about human behaviour as an iron law is peddling ideology. The 'law' fails to notice that overcoming inherent disadvantages is the essence of human activity—as Japan showed in overcoming a poor natural-resource base and developing a multifaceted manufacturing industry.

Free-trade strategy also fails by producing little incentive for significant political forces to participate. This applies particularly to the labour movement, which is left with little or no role beyond protecting its members from the worst excesses of cost-cutting. The unions have a proven capacity to resist change, but any attempt to reduce their role thus excludes a large part of society from an active and positive involvement *in* change. Unions can play a key role in convincing their members that change is needed. In Australia there has been union support and involvement in restructuring, notably in the steel, car-making and heavy engineering industries, and in textiles, clothing and footwear. And the unions have been at the forefront of award restructuring. Traditionally, unions have supported high protection in an effort to save jobs and to see that their members share in any windfall gains from higher commodity prices. Their strategy for the future strategy must include a vision for each industry in which they have members, even if substantial job losses are involved.

ECONOMIC NATIONALISM remains an important motivation when sacrifice is needed: when savings must be made through wage restraint and when budget surpluses have to be cut. But the inward-looking economic nationalism of the past needs to be turned outward. Most people, for example, accept that they have to pay taxes beyond levels at which they will benefit personally. They pay because they know that their taxes are spent on measures that will ultimately benefit all who share in the national economy. Such economic nationalism could muster support for a restoration of moral perspectives in the market place and for the change to more productive industries. It should command wide political support and ensure that the sacrifice involved does not fall on the already disadvantaged minority of low-wage earners.

In the long term, a collective response by employers, unions and government is the most effective means of helping industry to improve its performance. The common good, whether in the national economy or the world economy, can only be advanced through common action by the main organised interests in society. ■

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Hard times for local heroes

Free marketeers like to cite the policies followed by the Cain government in Victoria as an example of why 'picking winners' doesn't work.. The architect of those policies, Peter Sheehan, argues that the problem lay in the application, not the vision.

PETER SHEEHAN HUGS HIMSELF as he talks. A big, blue-eyed man, he clasps his arms protectively around his frame and chooses his words with care. He is a hurt man, and he has not been talking much. There has been, he says, 'a lot of hostility around; it has been a very difficult time'.

Since ceasing to be Victoria's most powerful public servant, this philosopher-turned-economist has avoided interviews. Now, seated among the greys and mauves and the pots of tangled willow in the Carlton offices of the Strategic Research Foundation, he talks about the shadow that fell between the Cain Government's economic vision and the political reality. Managing the public sector, he says, is the most difficult job in Australia: 'It is a very constraint-ridden environment. You are managing right in the heart of a very complex democratic process. Most of the public have no perception of the pressures or time commitments.'

Sheehan says that in other countries, such as Japan, bureaucrats are the most valued members of society. He believes their low repute in Australia is part of a broader problem—our failure to achieve consensus about the sort of society we want, and how we want to achieve it. This lack, he says, lies at the heart of the country's economic problems—and at the heart of the crumbling of the Cain government's economic strategy.

'That is the fundamental issue: in the post-war period we haven't developed a clear set of views about where we want the economy to go and how to get there,' he says. 'One of Victoria's problems in the '80s was a lack of consensus about directions, and about whether the government was attempting was sort of thing that governments ought to do. There were clearly differences between the state and Federal Government about that.'

Where is society to find such a vision? Throughout a rigorous and varied intellectual career, Sheehan's own answer has remained fundamentally unchanged. Australian society should be more equal, and we should work on our strengths to remain wealthy and competitive. 'I think Christianity is important. I wouldn't want to emphasise Catholicism as such, but there are deep-seated religious and humanistic traditions that are not necessarily at odds. The main problem is that we don't think or talk much about our fundamental beliefs.'

Few people stamped their ideas so forcefully on a government now extensively derided as did Peter Sheehan. As the head of the Cain government's remodelled Treasury, the Department of Management and Budget, he was the architect of a strategy now in disarray. It was his strategy that led to the burgeoning of the now defunct Victorian Economic Development Corporation, and his was the mind behind the major economic and technical statement that charted the Cain government's course of radical reform.

Sheehan resigned 12 months ago, after the departure of Treasurer Rob Jolly and the scrapping of the Department of Management and Budget, which Sheehan had made the government's engine-room. Commentators saw Sheehan's and Jolly's fall as equivalent to a change of government. Their replacements have abandoned pump priming and visionary government, and brought Victoria into line with non-interventionist economic orthodoxies.

WHILE HE WAS IN FASHION, Sheehan's brilliance was acknowledged by all and envied by many. In the internecine atmosphere of the bureaucracy, the road to promotion in some departments reputedly lay in picking holes in the stream of economic and strategy documents that came steadily down from Management and Budget. Many did not know that Sheehan was an entirely self-trained economist—his academic qualifications are in philosophy. He used to be admired for this diversity. Now his lack of formal economic training is advanced by some to explain his mistakes.

Sheehan: 'I am not bent, not bitter, just older and wiser'.

Before spectacular failures and collapses gave the Opposition easy ammunition, the worst that the Opposition's treasury spokesman, Alan Stockdale, would say of Peter Sheehan was that he was 'a very competent man who has pursued the wrong economic policies'.

Even now, it is acknowledged that his period of management brought an enormous improvement in the economic management of the public sector. Victoria adopted an economic strategy that pinpointed its strengths. Departments, and instrumentalities such as the State Electricity Commission, ceased to be fiefdoms and were made to budget for real rates of return, set proper management objectives and report on their progress. In the early days of the government, Sheehan was involved in finding equity partners for the government in the Portland aluminium smelter. It was the era of the manager as king. The Cain Government had created a Treasury that didn't just say 'no'.

Now, in the wake of the political disasters that overtook his vision, Sheehan admits to some mistakes. The Cain Government, he says, tried to do too much and did not manage individual reforms well enough. Nevertheless, he believes that the fundamental problems that he tried to address have not gone away. The Australian economy still needs to develop internationally competitive industries.

'All the data shows that the big productivity gains in the 1980s were made in the public sector, not the private sector', Sheehan says. 'The irony is that at the end of the 1980s, there is an emphasis on privatisation. As a broad generalisation, I think we have major problems with the management of the private sector in Australia.'

Sheehan still believes the public sector can and ought to play a major role in building on Australia's strengths to create internationally competitive industries. But how is this to be made politically possible, when the consensus among economists is that governments are bad managers. Sheehan says: 'Those issues go to the heart of the way we think about ourselves and our views about how economies work or don't work'. In the absence of vision or consensus about society, 'people are casting about for reasonably fundamental ideas, and the emphasis on privatisation is one way in which Anglo-Saxon societies particularly have tried to find a response. A society that doesn't have some long-term sense of what it wants to achieve will just float from short-term issue to short-term issue.'

Sheehan's ideas are in retreat. One angry Labor supporter, asked about Sheehan, said: 'That man is the ultimate proof that to govern and reform, you need more than just some good ideas. The trouble with him and his team was that they believed their own rhetoric. They thought that because the arguments were right, they couldn't go wrong. And there's more to politics.'

On his resignation, Sheehan publicly admitted that the government's attempts to provide venture capital to small businesses through the development corporation had been a failure. But he also claimed that the failure did not go to the heart of the economic strategy. Today, while he concedes that there was mismanagement, he claims the real problem was not with the ideas but with the politics: 'The venture capital business is inherently risky. If for every ten projects you have one or two successes, three or four failures and a couple of so-sos, you are doing OK. That is what business would expect. But politically it is hopeless. In our political culture, that is not sustainable.'

Sheehan agrees that the Cain Government was too optimistic about what was politically possible. It was not fully aware of the difficulties and tried too much too quickly. And that contributed to mismanagement. 'I don't think there is any doubt that there was mismanagement in the VEDC.' While declining to comment on individuals, Sheehan says that part of the problem is that we do not hire, reward and motivate the best people to manage public affairs. 'We learned that it was harder than we thought, so we would have been better doing a smaller number of things and putting more management resources and more supervision into them.'

Responding to criticism that he was too much of a visionary and not enough of an administrator, he says: 'In things I have a direct responsibility for, my style has always been to go into the details. In some things we exercised detailed control. In the last seven or eight years Victoria has seen tighter control of public expenditure than anywhere.'

'I don't think mismanagement goes to the heart of the issue. Even with the best possible management, in the aftermath of the stock market crash and with rising interest rates and general collapse, there would have been substantial losses. So the fundamental problem with governments providing venture capital would still have arisen—that failure is not politically acceptable or sustainable.'

The problem of attempting too much too quickly has bedevilled Labor governments from Whitlam's onwards. Sheehan says: 'In what I like to call our adversarial society, it is always easy to overestimate what can be done and to underestimate the difficulties. That is true not just of Labor governments but of all people who in one way or another want to change things.'

In spite of a career spent questioning orthodoxies, the fundamentals of Sheehan's personal views have not changed. His intellectually varied and adventurous life has been about building on the 'incredibly rich working-class Irish Catholic tradition', rather than departing from it. An intellectual cosmopolitan, twenty-five years ago he was better known for analyses of Aquinas and speculations on the nature of reality than for crunching numbers. 'I have always been interested in intellectual matters and policy matters, and always had a tendency to look at a problem as a whole without caring much which category it fell into—philosophical, educational, whatever.' He is torn about the Federal Government's present emphasis on vocationalism in universities. Though as an economist he is intensely aware of the need for a skilled workforce, he still believes the best education is a general one.

PETER SHEEHAN WAS BORN and brought up in the Melbourne suburb of Windsor, then a working-class district. His father, a commercial traveller, died when he was five; he was raised by his schoolteacher mother with the help of a large extended family. After an education from the Christian Brothers at St Kilda, Peter became the first of the family to go to university.

He says: 'It was new and exciting, but I didn't have any very clear sense of what I wanted to do there.' In fact he completed a science degree with a large mathematics component, and became involved in the Newman Society and the Athenian Society. The Newman Society, then a major feature of campus life, was where the best and brightest Catholic students met, talked and formulated a sense of faith within the university environment. There Sheehan met 'an extraordinarily clever and exciting bunch of people', including poet and teacher Vincent Buckley. Influenced by the two societies, and with a growing interest in the nature of science, his attention turned to philosophy. He did a masters degree in that discipline, meanwhile supporting himself by tutoring in maths. In 1965 Sheehan went to Oxford, and in long walks and talks in the old town, conceived the idea of marrying his philosophical training with an interest in political and social affairs. He began to study economics.

On his return, he took a philosophy post at the Australian National University, but found increasingly that his debating fellows were economists. Articles he wrote attracted the interest of Professor Ronald Henderson, who in the early 1970s recruited him to the Melbourne University's Institute for Applied Economic and Social Research. Sheehan says: 'Under Henderson it was the most exciting policy-related place in the country, involved in all the important reforms: Medibank, the securities commission, the prices and incomes accord. It changed direction about the time Henderson left, and I left about then too.'

By then, Sheehan was regularly advising the ACTU and the Victorian ALP, then in Opposition. In 1981, he wrote a report for the Public Bodies Review Committee, and when Labor came to power in the following year, it harnessed the Sheehan vision to a reformist machine.

In spite of eight years at the heart of the bureaucracy, Sheehan has remained in essence an academic. In spite of the hurt and disappointment at being thrust out of the heart of power, he speaks with enthusiasm of his excitement at finding out what his academic colleagues have been doing 'while I was away'.He now divides his time between Melbourne University and other activities such as the Strategic Research Foundation. The foundation is exploring projects in which government can work with business to exploit Australia's research strengths. Its successes include setting up projects in biomolecular research and computing.

The big productivity gains in the 1980s were made in the public sector, not the private sector

The foundation sounds similar to a development corporation-type venture, but Sheehan insists that they are quite different. 'I am not necessarily pursuing any particular ideas I held in the past; but yes, I am still engaged in trying to help Victoria address the deep-seated problems. I think we share these in different ways with many other democratic countries. The fundamental problem is to find ways in a democratic society to address the important long-term issues, and to do so on a sustained basis, while learning from the problems and the failures.

'The pressures in the system, which are extraordinary, are all on the short-term: today's problems, today's crisis.' The media are partly to blame for this, according to Sheehan, because of their focus on the immediate and tendency to swing with political fashions. This is all part of 'an incredibly destructive process. We have all been so caught up in that process—polling the week before an election campaign to find out what the issues are so that we can address them—and doing that each week of the campaign. All parties do this, so the whole process is devoted to what we can achieve next week.' Are these problems inevitable? Sheehan smiles. 'I don't see anything bad as inevitable. I am not bent, not bitter, just older and wiser.' ■

Margaret Simons is a freelance journalist.

The road to ruin  is now debt-free

THERE WAS A TIME when choosing one's path in life meant deciding between diligence, and the amassing of riches and public esteem on the one hand, and spendthrift indulgence and the amassing of debts and public contempt on the other. (All right, I cannot say exactly *when* this time was, but quibbling about dates has no part in the writing of Quixotic history.) The odds were not stacked against the second option as much as they might seem to have been. If you chose to be a wastrel, there was the compensation of being the subject of much poetry and folk song, whether celebratory or cautionary. Not much of a compensation, perhaps. After all, who eats poetry? But at least the wastrel was offered a kind of immortality denied to those whose highest ambition in life was to be comfortable.

Further, if the wastrel had the wit for it he could ensure this immortality by writing a ballad or two himself. (I regret the gender-specific language, but in those days literary vagabondage seems to have been chiefly a male occupation.) Thus we have the distinguished example of my Quixotic cousin, the vagabond poet François Villon. And there emerged a whole genre of wastrel writing, the picaresque. No one coined a term for writing that extolled the lives of prosperous merchants and bankers, for there wasn't much to speak of. There still isn't, except for television series about Texan oil millionaires, who usually have to be depicted as closet wastrels to appear interesting anyway. Who ever heard of a poem or novel described as 'mercatoresque'?

But consider how devious and decadent moderns have upset the balance that once existed between wastrel fame and comfortable obscurity. In the Quixotic past, the comfortable were recognised by their solvency: they paid their way, keeping smugly out of debt. Wastrels, by contrast, were constantly evading creditors. Today, to be comfortable one needs to be *in* debt, or in a kind of debt. This is the age of the credit rating, when it is difficult even to establish one's identity except by proferring a plastic card that proclaims willingness to live in debt.

By a baffling inversion of values, such willingness has become a proof of respectability. To offer cash in exchange for goods or services is to invite an upraised eyebrow, for only someone who wishes to vanish without trace—traditionally the prerogative of the wastrel—would use cash. An honest person, it is assumed, will have all transactions recorded, and checked against a distinctly un-Quixotic measure known as a credit limit. The upright walk proudly in the shadow of the credit limit, spending without exceeding it but forever bound to their credit provider.

I write out of pique, of course. Not because I have been refused finance for some Quixotic project, such as a crusade against the Moors. It is not even that a supercilious headwaiter has rejected my credit card—none could, for I don't have one. No, the event that raised my ire was more commonplace than either of these, yet its very banality emphasised the threat facing wastrels everywhere. I have been refused the right to hire a videocassette.

Yes, a video. For just as my spiritual progenitor, the great Don himself, spent his leisure reading escapist romances, so I too am sometimes in need of a fiction to blunt reality. And in search of the same I had joined a great throng of moderns in the local video store.

I had not come unprepared. There were multiple proofs of identity: certificates of birth, vaccination, baptism, first communion, confirmation and graduation. There was a passport, a student card and a union card. There was a letter from Benazir Bhutto, rejecting my offer of marriage. And to certify that I, too, understood the importance of living in debt, there were importunate letters from my landlord, Telecom and the Tax Office. Finally, in deference to the rule of the credit limit, there was a bank statement indicating that I could satisfy all these demands and still scrape up enough cash to hire a video.

This mound of paperwork will no doubt impress future biographers, but it had no effect on the churl in charge of the video store. He pushed them aside and demanded a piece of plastic instead. I even had to rescue the manuscript bearing the Blessed Benazir's signature from his unhallowed floor. An attempt to reason and cajole proved useless. In vain did I point out that he was denying me, a fully-documented human being, the right to borrow a chivalric romance or two, while happily handing over lurid exposés of juvenile chain-saw massacres to persons bearing only a piece of plastic.

The great Don, of course, would have challenged the miscreant to settle the matter on the field of honour. But there is no honour in plastic cards or credit limits. I shall continue to seek it elsewhere. ■

Ray Cassin is production editor of *Eureka Street*

Sanctuary too far away

Refugees from war and persecution may seem to be always with us. But we give up too easily if we assume a solution will be always beyond our grasp.

New Afghan arrivals, Peshawar, Pakistan (UNHCR photo)

FROM MY TEN YEARS' WORK with refugees in Asian camps, one incident stands out. In 'Site 2' camp in Thailand (then holding some 180,000 Khmer refugees), a little girl was struck by lightning. For once it was a tragedy from natural causes.

Typically the suffering of Khmer refugees derives from human decisions—political decisions, border trade decisions and the people's own decisions about where to run to escape danger. At 'Site 2', Khmer people were placed, by decision, within a zone of conflict.

The Cold War systems that for decades infused local conflicts with their own irrationality are, perhaps, melting. Yet on the ground we refugee workers wait disbelievingly, since the Afghan, Ethiopian, Mozambican and Cambodian wars continue and the Gulf war is fresh in memory. Industrialised countries and their armaments industries fuel the wars that lead to refugee flows.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] acknowledges some 15 million refugees throughout the world today, compared with 7.5 million in 1980. Given major difficulties in defining who is a refugee, figures are approximate at best. But someone should be counting, and statisticians need criteria that reflect human experience correctly. The great majority of today's refugees have fled situations so complex as to make it virtually impossible to distinguish factors such as extreme poverty, famine, political repression, armed conflict and other forms of violence—including torture. To be recognised as a political refugee a person must prove 'well founded fear of persecution'. This is often a fearful process on which the refugee's own life (and those of his or her family) may depend.

'Refugees' include many whose lives were physically endangered—as well as many who simply could not breathe intellectually. I am intuitively certain that there is a refugee experience that marks a person. Its features are psychological, social, political. A refugee's life is changed forever. For others, that life contains a vast area of human experience worthy of respect.

As the Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel remarked, the refugee becomes a judge—of our values, our society. It may be simply that 'the apple does not have the same taste here as it did in Thailand or in Hungary'. Wiesel adds: 'The person who has lived for a time stripped of nationality, profession, identity, perhaps of wife or children, and savings—this person looks differently at the world. Coming to settle in a new society, refugees have the right to ask "What are you doing with the knowledge that we brought you?".'

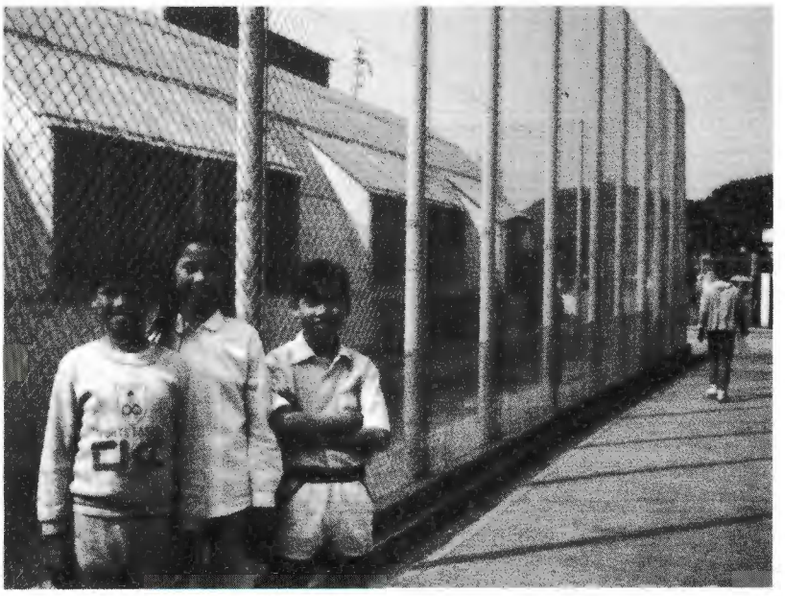
Asylum implies more than a safe haven

A few years ago, the film *Sanctuary* was commissioned by the World Council of Churches. It examines a refugee family's experiences at particular moments on their journey. As the scene changes, for instance from Central America to Africa, the family changes from a Central American family to an African family. (Here I add experiences of my own, particularly with Burmese, Cambodian and Vietnamese people.)

Scene One: Why people become refugees

In the opening scene, a Central American father speaks about his one desire—to live in his own home and community. Yet he and his family are forced to flee.

To understand why people become refugees, one should first ask, 'What explanation do they themselves give?'. For example, many Afghan refugees calls themselves *mohajir*, a title the Prophet gave himself during his own flight. They interpret their experience religiously, as an attack on body and spirit by an atheistic ideology and war machine. One begins to understand, too, how the Afghan conflict was 'Islamicised'.



Vietnamese boys, Tuen Mun Camp, Hong Kong.

A refugee, then, is someone in search of food, safety, identity and belonging. He, she, or they run to:

- Escape civil war or internecine strife
- Escape foreign invasion, political or religious persecution, national disintegration or economic restructuring
- Seek greater opportunities
- Lead a life free of persecution
- Join a foreign-based liberation movement
- Escape fighting caused by territorial disputes.

The May 1990 San Remo Round Table, sponsored by the International Institute of Humanitarian Law and the International Organisation for Migration, agreed about the inadequacy of the present definition of 'refugee'. The conference itself spoke of 'movements resulting from generalised violence, internal armed conflicts or other severely adverse social, economic and political conditions'.

What responses are likely to be effective?

Research is vital. Identifying the 'root causes' of refugee flows is a task that should accompany intelligent direct aid to refugees. And close contact with the people affected is essential if research is to be useful. Some form of typology of factors that produce refugees might warn those with eyes to see. Then all responses that are both ethical and feasible should be vigorously explored.

Monitoring can provide early warning of situations likely to lead to mass displacement of people. Monitoring requires well-honed skills and is best done hand in hand with operational agencies. During 1988, agencies based in Bangkok were in regular communication with one another about developments in Burma. They stood ready either for a new openness within Burma (implying a need for development assistance after the years of neglect), or for a crisis leading to a flow of refugees and the need for emergency aid.

Accurate information can help protect people. Making known the troubles of refugees requires research skills, accurate information and reliable channels of dissemination. It also demands courage. I recall one Thai academic researching the abuses suffered by Vietnamese boat people at the hands of Thai pirates. He worked in fear of his life.

Scene Two: Immediate needs and beyond

The film scene shifts to Africa and to the refugee's immediate need of health care, sustenance and shelter. When these necessities are provided, new needs emerge: for asylum, and for skills to cope with being herded together in mass confinement.

One Jesuit Refugee Service [JRS] worker describes refugees as 'kneeling people', people cut down in size. All that they once possessed to identify themselves and claim social status is taken away. They are now former housewives, former farmers, former doctors, former soldiers. Accepting help is difficult. Everything reminds them of their dependent status. To consider refugees is to consider the individual and his or her family. (So of-

ten we are dealing with detached children, and women alone or with children.). We must also be alert to the needs of whole societies uprooted. And aware, too, that in 90 per cent of cases, especially in Africa, the burden of hosting refugees is carried by the poorest countries.

The following practical responses are needed:

• Agencies involved in emergency work require people with specialist training. Voluntary agencies currently rely on young graduates from the West who go home after two years, or even after six months. There is little or no transfer of experience, no adequate knowledge of other languages and cultures. Training in management techniques is also urgently required. And ways of delivering assistance quickly and effectively should be studied further.

• Methods that different countries use in handling asylum-seekers require research. There is now available 15 years' experience of receiving Vietnamese asylum-seekers. A study of detention conditions in various camps might convince local officials that inhumane conditions simply create problems for all.

• Alternatives to camps should be promoted, e.g. conferring temporary refugee status during a limited crisis. Identity cards, travel permits and work permits offer ways of retaining some control over an incoming refugee population. Tanzania and Pakistan permit refugees opportunities for local employment, through which they contribute to the local economy.

• Asylum implies more than a safe haven. A refugee needs more than charity. The receiving country needs international support.

• A further reflection is occasioned by our contacts with the Karen and Kachin people. When groups of these refugees began arriving in Thailand from Burma, we went looking for them in the jungle to evaluate their needs. We found that their first action after erecting shelter for the night was to set up schools for their children. After 41 years of war, these ethnic minorities have adapted to being pushed around constantly. They see their survival as a people as depending on preserving their culture and language. And their plan is working.

Scene Three: Living in a refugee camp

Set in the Middle East (the latest scene of refugee flows), *Sanctuary's* next scene dramatises the effects of prolonged stays in camps. Millions have been in this situation for years. There is little to do beyond daily chores. Returning home remains a stubborn hope. In time a chance may come to begin life again in a third country. But even departures create problems by dividing families, weakening social institutions and developing unrealistic hopes.

Classically, the UNHCR proposes three durable solutions. Yet a fourth seems prevalent, namely continuing residence in a refugee camp. There some UN body provides basic food and assistance, but few other resources. No agency has answers to the deep-seated mental health problems created by boredom, loss of morale and inactivity. Worse still, one senior UNHCR official described the Thai-Cambodian border arrangements as 'the political use of human suffering'.

Moral and strategic questions remain for those who still have faith in the UN's role as a provider of moral leadership. The UN appears to be suffering a crisis of morale. In the case of Cambodia, several member states (notably the United States and China), have used the conflict for their own ends. The country and its people suffer, not least the refugees.

JRS personnel have reflected seriously on our involvement with the Khmer people. The discussion goes like this: Agencies came to do good, but now see their efforts as, in effect, reinforcing injustices in the camp's social structure; humanitarianism now appears inadequate, even counter-productive.

One option is simply to leave. A more striking option is to leave publicly, meanwhile protesting at the UN's failures. But this option contains the same moral flaw as that of which we complain, namely instrumentalising the refugees.

LEFT: Womens's sleeping quarters, Tuen Mun.
BELOW: Married men, held for seven years in Tuen Mun.

Refugee workers have indeed been helped by researchers who came to study aspects of camp life. The best are those with several disciplines, who are also attuned to the people's feelings and to the political realities.

Mental health studies are essential, since the number who have suffered trauma is high. Studies have helped our workers understand more clearly why a camp is a destructive place for everyone concerned. Yet while camps do exist, we will seek to be present and to serve the people. We know, too, that those who wait are resourceful and can be creative.

Often asylum-seekers cannot prove *that they have 'a fear of persecution'. Yet the onus is on them to do so*

In South-East Asia JRS emphasises education, offering four kinds of activity: on-site teaching, distance learning, scholarships and non-formal education. The UN concentrates on primary teaching. This includes teacher-training, as well as management training that helps the people to run their own affairs.

The distance-learning program involves 75 retired teachers in another country, each having four or five students in a camp with whom they correspond frequently, helping them complete set curricula. Scholarships are possible if the people are 'citizens' of a government recognised by Thailand: they can be sent abroad for special courses, say in rural community development. They return and offer significant leadership within the camp. 'Non-formal education' includes weaving, silk production and sculpture.

Scene Four: Who is, and who is not, a refugee?

The scene shifts to a frontier immigration office of a Western country, where the process in progress is 'status determination' or 'screening procedure'. *Sanctuary* underlines the extreme difficulty of setting up fair ways of deciding who are 'genuine' refugees.

No one claims that the 1951 convention definition is adequate. Presently, seeking a change of definition is not tactically advisable. But those concerned must continue to demonstrate that the Convention is inadequate and itself creates injustices.

Determining refugee status remains the prerogative of sovereign states. Often asylum-seekers cannot *prove* that they have 'a fear of persecution'. Yet the onus is on them to do so. Meanwhile, there continue to be many life-threatening causes of statelessness, for example, civil conflict, foreign aggression, discriminatoryagrarian policy, ecological factors,home territory raqvaged by land mines, and sheer poverty. Legal mechanisms must be found, both international and national, to protect uprooted people.

Generally, only refugees in the strict sense are considered for resettlement. Others wait in limbo, granted only temporary asylum. Many Sri Lankan Tamils live suspended in this way. And legal instruments are lacking to protect such people as the East Timorese in Indonesia, and the internally displaced in El Salvador.

Heated discussion continues for and against the mandatory repatriation of screened-out boat people from Hong Kong and other first asylum countries, and about the morality of using this process to deter others. Such discussions are not generally supported by enough reliable data or by rational argument.

Scene Five: New life, culture shock

Moving to a Western country, the film focuses on resettlement, a process fraught with risks—discrimination, culture shock, racism, exploitation. Only five per cent of refugees have an opportunity for resettlement; in general, adequate research is being done on their needs. However, some governments support research in their own country, but not internationally.

Scene Six: Sponsorship and sanctuary

An urgent question facing churches in North America and elsewhere is whether to offer protection to undocumented persons. Both Jews and Christians have long traditions of providing sanctuary for those who reach the door of church or synagogue. Sizeable communities are being led in conscience to offer refuge that requires breaking a law they consider unjust.

Non-government organisations [NGOs] do not see the whole picture, but we are seeing more and more of it. Governments and international organisations are now excluded from many of the fields they used to 'co-ordinate'. International organisations cannot work at the Thai-Burma border, nor can they enter Tigray or Eritrea. Private agencies carry the burden. In other countries, too, NGOs do the bulk of the work. They are more flexible, more lightly structured and less costly than government-sponsored agencies.

But they do need support. Sometimes they lack experience, infrastructure and sound judgement. For these reasons especially, partnerships between research and teaching institutes on the one hand, and voluntary agencies on the other, are potentially most valuable.

Studies of refugee phenomena reveal a shift of attitude during the last ten years. A decade ago we spoke of crises, the assumption being that these were short-term. We thought that massive injections of cash, spontaneous and dramatic interventions and emergency assistance would 'fix' the situation. Now we know the reality. And we need much better information than we presently possess about ways to relieve the distress of masses of people.

The creation of refugees is no longer acceptable. In fact, it never was. ■

Mark Raper SJ is director of the Jesuit Refugee Service, a voluntary organisation serving refugees and displaced persons in thirty countries.

Photo: Henry Jolles

The once and future bookie

IN A SHED at the end of a lane off Murray Street, the Hobart Bookmakers' Club had its handy, unsalubrious premises. Many a frustrated and curious childhood hour I spent outside, as my father wandered from stall to stall, mumbling to himself, meeting an old acquaintance, placing his small bets.

He might wager on four placed horses, or have five shillings each way something, all up something else. Here you could take doubles so exotic that they were said to be the envy of punters throughout the rest of Australia: a horse in Melbourne into a dog at that night's meeting at the TCA ground on the Domain.

Now, apparently, it's only in Darwin that you can do the same. Often my father was accommodated by 'Increase Your Roll, Bet With Noel' Coleman, hardly an Olympian figure, and one who invariably wore hand-warmers. There were no Waterhouses or Terry Pages in Hobart. The Bookmakers' Club looked and was mainly a small-time, though busy, operation. Not exclusively a male preserve, it was still dominated by men in hats and gabardine overcoats.

The club has long since been levelled for a shopping mall. Tasmanian bookmaking was in decline even while it stood. It was a state-wide scandal in the early 1970s when a premier, foolish enough to agree to a televised question-and-answer session for his cabinet, saw one of his ministers asked by a lanky Launceston poet if he had taken bribes to delay the introduction of the TAB. But the TAB duly came, numbers of bookmakers went, and the minister ended up as state premier. All the same, if the bookies who fielded at the picnic race meeting at St Mary's in north-eastern Tasmania this New Year's Day are an indication of the state of the art, then the decline of the Australian bookmaker is nothing to lament. Betting to ludicrous markets framed to 220 (130 is thought fair dealing), the few who turned up to twiddle knobs, and who included the former Collingwood footballer John Greening, succeeded in the unlikely task of rendering the totalisator, installed in a caravan, a more attractive proposition with which to punt.

Yet not so long ago, what a source of perverse pride for the Australian racegoer bookmakers were—all protestations of ritual contempt for them aside. I remember the nationalistic disdain that I felt for the poky upstairs betting shops in England (an English friend of mine, shown an Australian TAB, mistook it for a bank). Still more despicable were the timorous English bookmakers. On bleak National Hunt courses

such as Newbury in winter, operating with blackboard and chalk, the English bookies' elbows would often conveniently erase the figures, and they wouldn't bet on some races at all. What a contrast was this to the fearless bookies of Australian legend, which cast them as anti-heroic gamblers fighting the odds, while they confronted such 'leviathan' punters as Perc Calea.

Where are they now? In Stephen Brassell's recent book, *A Portrait of Racing*, bookmakers are relegated to one short, lifeless paragraph in 300 pages. Only Frank Hardy of post-war novelists and yarn-spinners has kept the bookie alive. Even then, his tales of John West's tote and of 'the four-legged lottery' were written decades ago. Worse, the presence of the bookmaker is fading out of colloquial speech and from common recollection. One looks almost in vain for references to bookies in Australian dictionaries of quotations. From the latest Australian encyclopaedia they are altogether banished. Retired bookmaker Dominic Beirne, who in his last year had a turnover of sixty million dollars and employed a staff of two dozen, foresees the day when a single, corporate bookmaker will be allowed to compete for a small share of the ever more diverse gambling market. But for his part, Beirne is out of the game and into the furniture business.

The decline of the Australian bookmaker is put all too cruelly on show simply by attending the races. For the throngs that once surrounded bookmakers' stands are gone. Now bookmakers are exposed in all their frailty. Computerised tickets, odds offered on Australian Rules football matches, even anxious civility can't disguise the loss of nerve and belief of so many of them. Markets are kept miserably tight. Binoculars follow not so much the horses but each other's odds. Few of them gamble. Some are even reluctant to pay out until they've started to take on the next race. Few make independent judgments in a way that would lead the ring. Most are sufficiently shamefaced not even to gesture at the colourful days which they can still remember.

For bookmakers, as we've all heard, are meant to provide not only a betting facility, but excitement and variety, to Australian horseracing. Do punters want an all-tote system? That's the rhetorical question often posed in bookies' defence. Who'd want to imitate dolorous New Zealand? In this comparison, the more vibrant examples of tote-only French and American racing are overlooked. The justification is, in any case, shaky and negatively-grounded. Bookmakers are already disappearing and this is on top of the estimated 80 per cent who routinely go broke. There is less and less attraction in betting with them, and the two per cent turnover tax on all their transactions (including their own losses) necessarily reduces bookmakers' own incentive to bet. Thus the process of attrition will continue.

Nor can racing clubs expect bookmakers to stay in business principally as sideshow spruikers while most punters bet with the machine. Denied the volume of mug money that once came regularly through the racecourse gates, lacking facilities to bet on course by telephone and robbed of a chance to compete with illegal SP bookmaking operations, bookmakers are being strangled slowly. At the same time, lip-service is paid to their distinctive contribution to Australian racing. While legal bookmaking is likely to have all but disappeared by the end of the century, there is little reason to suppose that SP operations will not be thriving. The biggest and most blatant such set-up I ever saw was in a hotel diagonally across Taylor Square from the Darlinghurst Court House.

When, at the Victoria Club in Melbourne on 21 April 1976, bookmakers were robbed of millions of dollars of their takings, many laughed and few sympathised. This is partly explained by a residual folk attitude that sees them as predators—wreckers of home as surely as is the bottle. Yet, some notorious recent exceptions apart, bookmakers have more often been the victims than the perpetrators of criminal activity in horseracing. No bookies profited when the rung-in Regal Vista won the Muntham Handicap at Casterton, hard held. Fine Cotton may have been a different story.

Any pleas for the survival of the Australian bookmaker must in large measure be sentimental. The service that bookies provide can no longer be as good as it was, so one can abandon efforts to ask them to be colourful. Nor are they allowed to compete in extended, brainless gambling arenas such as Melbourne's Tabaret. But some of them are repositories of folk memories that are beyond price or calculation. Without VDTs they can cunningly access a range of stories, exculpations, disasters and triumphs that deserve to be maintained and not just preserved. A gambling, chancing culture in Australia may be headed for the museum, but if bookies were kept alive in ways more vital than oral history series on ABC radio, then the dire amnesia that threatens this society might, at least at one point, be stemmed. ■

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Swords into  peaceshares

Thank God for Iraq. Someone had to say it, but no one says it more fervently than the Australian Defence Force. With a bit of luck, the lessons of Iraq will rescue the armed forces from the peace dividend. With no Cold War any more, there ought to be a fundamental reassessment of the considerable sums that defence costs.

Not that Iraq has much, of itself, to tell us. It was not in Australia's region, and the cost of the Australian contribution (about $100 million) was the merest drop in the bucket of our defence spending—scarcely twice the cost of running free restaurants for peacetime soldiers. But defence people are quick to cite the crisis as proof that regional disputes can arise quickly – and to argue, of course, that caution now might pay dividends later.

In fact, Australia's annual defence spending of $9 billion exceeds the combined total of its island neighbours in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and is matched in the neighbourhood only by India (about $10 billion), China ($6 billion), North Korea ($5 billion), South Korea ($5 billion) and Japan ($30 billion). Indonesia spends $2 billion, which includes the cost of running its police force, Pakistan $3 billion, Vietnam perhaps $2 billion and Taiwan $7 billion.

The fact that $1 million might buy a few more ground troops in Indonesia or Vietnam disguises Australia's technological edge. Indonesia, for example, has nearly 300,000 men under arms and reserves of about 800,000, compared with Australia's 70,000 or so active service personnel and reserves of fewer than 30,000. But Australia also has $30 billion of defence capital that is a generation ahead of Indonesia's, and increases its edge by about $3 billion a year. Australia also has access via the US alliance, to satellite early warning intelligence that the Indonesians could not duplicate. These facilities allow Australia to monitor virtually all the diplomatic and military communications it desires.

Still, the prognosis over the next decade is for more rather than less Australian spending, while other areas of Commonwealth administration suffer real cuts. How can this be so when super power tensions appear to have virtually disappeared, and the outlook in Asia is, to say the least, fairly benign?

There are a number of answers. First, the Australian defence organisation has very little to do, as such, with the Western alliance or the Anzus pact. Australia is a substantial, if not specially significant, member of the Western alliance (it sits next to Israel as the 18th highest military spender in the world). Our main concession to the alliance is taking care to buy compatible equipment. Our pattern of purchasing assumes that Australia is primarily on its own.

The second answer, following from this, is that Australian spending (before as well as after the Dibb report) is regionally oriented and based upon the idea of denial. The notional enemy is Asian; it might be Indonesia, it could conceivably be Japan. An enemy might defeat us in the long run, but the cost would make it not worth the effort. Australian plans for even more spending—submarine purchases, for example—are designed to raise the stakes even higher.

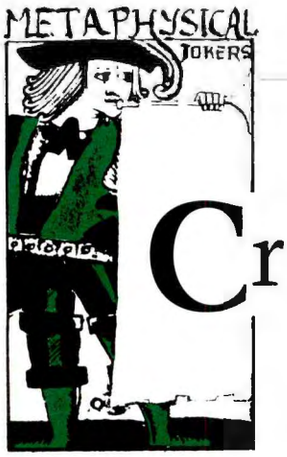
Because a considerable proportion of this expenditure is plainly defensive, criticism from Australia's neighbours who might otherwise be suspicious of our large defence establishment is muted. Nonetheless, the regional attack capacity of the air force and the submarine fleet lets them know that Australia possesses swords as well as shields – even if its army could make little of any gains achieved.

A more fundamental answer, however, is that there is no constituency in Australia questioning the size of Australian defence expenditure. Defence avoids having to compete with welfare, social security and other major areas of government expenditure. At times it has taken token cuts, but few Australians put the cost of schools against new frigates or submarines. The constituency is, in fact, all the other way. There is no shortage of Returned Services League officials, retired admirals and the like pressing for more money, or of electorally significant army bases needing fresh facilities, or even unions seeking work for their members.

The natural constituency that might ask whether Australia could do with less hardly ever questions defence spending. Instead, it is obsessed with American intelligence and command bases in Australia. Whatever these do—and there is an argument that they serve a world peace-keeping function as well as giving Australia regional intelligence on the cheap—they do not cost Australia much and have little to do with our defence posture.

Meanwhile, $350 per head for every Australian goes unquestioned towards saving us from a fairly remote prospect of attack. Indeed, many of those most adamant about getting US bases off Australian soil appear to accept the present level of spending as about right, or (if Australia is to become more neutralist) perhaps not quite enough. Their voices will be missing when the defence boffins argue for still more spending. The boffins see a high profile for Australia as a regional policeman in the new world order, preparing for a greater risk of confrontation now that the restraint that super power rivalry exercised has disappeared. This argument most will weakly accept. ■

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



Crossr

MORAG FRASER

Leu

'I ONCE DID THIS THING when I was a kid, playing football. I ran into an open goal with the ball in my hand. I could have scored—no way I could have missed. But instead I saw a moment, I saw an opportunity to provide my team-mates with a wonderful comical moment. So I just ran through the open goal, fumbled it all, because you see it was too easy—I felt enormously oppressed by the inevitability of what I had to do. Everyone's seen a goal before but not many have seen someone not kick a goal when they could have. And that to me was fresh act. There is a perversity inbuilt in me. Just when the thing is sitting in my hands, just when I have got the perfect punchlime for a joke, I'll throw it away and look for something beyond punchline.'
'It's a wonder they didn't kill you.'
'They nearly did.'

Photo: Henry Jolles

TODAY, MICHAEL LEUNIG'S AUDIENCE is more likely to mythologise him than kill him for failing to deliver, but it remains true that no one knows quite what to expect of him next. He is Australia's best known cartoonist, widely read, appreciated, loved and plagiarised, both here and abroad. Leunig drawings festoon kitchens and offices the way biblical maxims, fly paper and embroidery samplers once did. He is both comfort and goad—a man gifted and burdened with the impulse to tell the truth

In conversation Leunig is intense, deeply focussed but also hesitant, pondering questions as if they were small creatures, prodding, turning them over, checking noses, counting toes. He says he used to be very inarticulate. 'I had an appalling formal education and that made me feel inadequate and a bit humiliated.' He is still free of any rhetorical slick on him, but the inarticulateness has gone, replaced by an explorer's vocabulary: 'I wonder...yes...maybe...perhaps...do you understand what I mean?' And sometimes there are hints of formality, prophetic rhythms that come out of a past which included church and a present which provokes him into speak out publicly. But there is more than that: Leunig also has the verbal assurance of a professional who has been painting and drawing for a lifetime. 'I am talking about a bit of work that *touches*,' he will say, 'I am not

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talking about the bits that don't work.' That air of practised certainty, and a readiness to discard the dross is what gives his voice its weight. Metaphysical speculation, for Leunig, is grounded in what he knows. It is also driven by a relentless curiosity, the curiosity of childhood, with its great energy, its capacity for delight, its impishness and its vulnerability. Vulnerable because the curiosity entails openness. If you look under stones as Leunig still does then you will sometimes find black spiders.

There is an enormous amount of joy in what you draw.
Oh I'm glad to hear that.
But sometimes the joy ,or the delight seems to be a delight in incongruity, in things rasping against one another.
Delight in that happening do you mean?
Yes. In the existence of difference, incompatibiltity. And sometimes in the blackness. For example, in the Awful aspects of spring cartoon—new dog digging up the old dog—that for me has a quality of delight in abrasion, abrasive thought. It also suggests connections between things, and a kind of inclusivness. Even of awkward facts.

Yes. Yes, indeed. I think I am trying to keep alive within myself the capacity to be able to contemplate the dark, to see it. I think we have become a squeamish society in many ways; we have idealised notions of everything. You know—that this is a happy thing and that is an unhappy thing, or that is a good thing and that is a bad. This squeamishness appals me, and it seems so limiting. You can't go into certain areas...
Like death?
Like death. That's one, at the most extreme.
Or one's own violence ...
Yes. I believe we should be able to go into them. I want to. I have a compulsion. I always have had a fascination to look under the rock or to dissect a frog. To understand. There are many different moments in life, and they all seem to have a part. And to turn away from any of them seems to be foolish to me, or limiting.
Does the notion of evil mean anything to you?
Well I've never really understood it entirely. But I am fascinated by it. I suspect that we are now living in a very evil world, a long way from our goodness as a society and probably as individuals. There is a definition of evil which says that it is the absence of love. Maybe it is as simple as that. But maybe the emptiness we create is also a kind of evil. We build cruel cities, we build cruel suburbs, we create cruel machines which turn roads into hurtling pieces of

Awful aspects of Spring. The new dog digs up the old dog.

metal. We consume, we watch hours on end of violence and banal nonsence. If this isn't a vision of evil, some vision of hell, then I don't what is.

And yet that is the material you use. So much of what you draw comes out of a friction with what you see around you.

Indeed, because it is my sorry lot to have to bounce off that.*[a weary, wry grin]* I think in any world I found myself in I would respond. It enables me. But why am I so drawn? Why am I so affected by these things? Where one person sees a wonderful highway another person sees the growth of madness. Why do I? Some people are quite happy about these things.

A related question, about your drawings: anyone who follows them from week to week knows that sometimes they are very down, sometimes up. How do you drive your car between the two?

I think again that has something to do with accepting all the parts of yourself. To leave anything out is, again, to be squeamish. You have to have the full spectrum of expression, don't you, the full range, and keep balancing it. It's exhausting, running up and down between the two but you just have to hold the line a bit. Maintain the line—all that old stuff. Jung

says that it is only about 40 per cent of the population that is stable and that 40 per cent holds it together. 60 per cent are basically morbid and a bit sick so when the 40 drops to 35 per cent cataclysm develops and you get the rise of nazism etc. I suppose it is like love—you just have to maintain it. And you have restore the traditions of critical thought, of democratic tradition and intellectual life. Yes, and patience. Another old thing. I heard a lovely story on radio. A woman from Scotland, an expert on reading difficulties, was asked what do you do when a child simply will not respond. And she said,'Well, you be patient.' And I thought gee that's a wise thing to say. Because the interviewer was wanting the trick. And there is no trick. But of course you have got to charm people too. You've got to do that.

The about-turn is characteristic. Leunig still has some of the residue of sixties' cool about him. 'Don't take me too seriously,' he'll say. So 'charm' is a subtle and complex factor in his operations. He is in fact deeply and strenuously serious, but just when you think you have him pinned down (or he has you nailed into sombre reflection) he'll flash with glee, pull out the rug and destabilise your complacencies. It happens in his cartoons. He sets you up or sets the world up and then tips everything over. It is, as he would have it, a creative principle.

I think that is the great creative moment when things can be reborn. That's the process of making a leap.

It's also a recipe for a hard life. What happens if the point of departure presents you with a quandary you can't resolve?

You are at the crossroads? Yes. Well I reckon you have to be prepared to make the wrong decision and rescue it. You could never paint unless you were prepared to mess up. Painting demonstrates this principle about life very well. You have got to be prepared to make a mistake, lose it all, and in the act of losing it, in the chaos, you see the possibility of the new thing, the fresh thing within the ruins of yourself. I know this works in painting. But it is a painful process. It involves utter disappointment and a feeling of worthlesssness. I know this to be true, not just in my work but in my life. And there is much sadness, not just the sadness of things that happen but a sadness woven into life, and a letting go all the time and a letting go. I think I have had a lot of that. It is interesting about the Christian thing, too—it is on about pain and suffering. And people find this unattractive. But you have got to lay the groundwork in your life for the miracles of transformation.

So how, when it is all on the floor in bits in front of you, which is a terrible moment...

All your rules have collapsed, yes, and you are feeling worthless...

That's right, you feel appalling. How do you get through? Or is it out beyond you by then? Maybe I am asking you about God.

Well I think that is the God. How I get through to the next stage, if and when I do, would be by being mindful of that process. Do not panic. Do not despair. Have faith. Just stay there. Or else—that's when you have got to call on your mad streak, you divine crazy streak.

The perverse bit?

Yes, the perverse bit. The joy in that, taking delight when something goes wrong. There has got to be disappointment but there also has to be a playful dimension, a child dimension. But I don't know how you keep that alive and nourished.

Whether he knows how to nourish it or not, the playful, 'child' dimension is powerful in Leunig, and in his work. Mr Curly and Vasco Pyjama with his direction finding duck are among its products, and they are irresistible symbols of what we miss in life, what we reach out for, or back towards. But for a man who can conjure innocent worlds, Leunig is extremely preoccupied at the moment with what it means to be grown up, what it means to be masculine, what masculinity itself means. He returns to it time and again as we talk. Men, he believes, are 'pretty broken as a gender.' He himself is a surprisingly tall man, dextrous (a word he uses repeatedly) and craftsmanlike, very different from the 'ageless, genderless human character' of many of his drawings. When a banshee spring wind made our conversation impossible he jumped up and wedged an old jumper between the panes of glass. Deft, effective. Leunig grew up, he says, in a typical post war, western suburbs schoolboy' culture, obsessed by the rational world, the great need to.measure and weigh and prove. Every young boy had science books and notions of going to the moon.

Was that in you, or the culture? Do you see it now as a particularly masculine experience? A boy's experience? Formative?
Yes. But a lot of that dream, a lot of that illusion of control has crumbled. You get a world now of ecological concerns, a sense of finite resources. This is a shocking thing to men. Science no longer seems to have the answers. Politics doesn't seem to. There is no agreement on economic systems. There is bewilderment. I think men have become confused, intoxicated by their own illusions. As a gender they are depressed. I guess I'm projecting—I mean who hasn't been depressed and confused?—but I think men particularly have. There is a process of humiliation going on, of oppression by an impossible system which exhausts men, robs them of their sense of meaning and makes them insane. It is dehumanising men. It is dehumanising all of us. And men become pompous. They become arrogant instead of strong. They have lost power but they cling to an illusion. And they now revert to fantasy notions of their own masculinity—to be aggressive, to be warriors. I see the psychological component of this at the moment because I look among my fellows. They say this is a terrible thing you know but do it we must. And their eyes twinkle. This is disturbing to me. Men have these terrible fantasies and I think they come from when you are a little boy. I suppose this leads us to the war, doesn't it?
I suppose it does. But what are you saying? That conflict, that war is inevitable because we haven't found ways of channelling men's potentially destructive energy? People don't 'make' enough so they make war instead?
I think those things are related. If you get a culture of men who are increasingly haunted by a notion of powerlessness because they simply don't come home tired at the end of the day—they come home tense—then this will create trouble. And if you feed that with a fantasy of power, of a gun, of a sudden expression of power rather than the slow, ongoing , realistic integration with physicality which absorbs and harnesses all,—well—men explode into violence. Idle hands need expression.

Photo: Henry Jolles

War, painting, Christianity, suffering, drawing—all are lines in the pattern. Leunig likes pattern, ritual, restatement, seasonal rhythms, putting time aside in a common culture, 'paying your respects by noticing that the wheat harvest goes on in the north no matter what the state of the economy,' as he puts it. And if ritual and ceremony have their embarrassing moments then all the better: 'Once you are embarrassed then you are on to a truth.' A profound critic of our cultural appetite for novelty and originality, he likes connections, 'old things'. As a child he wanted to know whether he was connected to all forms of life or whether he was alone. Now,'the older you get the more you realise things cross reference pretty well.'

For a shy man he is now a very public figure. I wondered if he found the responsibility of speaking for people a burdensome thing. 'No. I am happy about that, although I have never really got to the bottom of it. And all sorts of people—people I would respect and think I could not sit down at the table and talk to—know my work. There is a sense that I am valid. I grew up thinking I wasn't valid you know. But even as a child I did like the notion that you spoke to all your fellows in some way, that there was a role. I wanted to be part of that, both as someone who responded and as someone who threw something into the big pool. I like that. But maybe when you think you have earned the right to say something that's just when you should give up.' ■

• An exhibition of paintings by Michael Leunig opens at the National Gallery of Victoria on 1 April.

Morag Fraser is associate editor of *Eureka Street*

FORUM

Crossing Over

school to beyond

A long-serving university medical officer used to claim there is more growing up to be done between 17 and 21 than between birth and 17. ***Kate Lindsey*** *and* ***Adrian Lyons*** *explore the passage from school to beyond in interviews with a tertiary student, a parent, a teacher, a school counsellor and an American writer on education.*

The Year 12 experience

'You look back to when you started Year 12 and think, "Was I really that young and silly?". Not that I'm old and mature now.' The speaker with the lively smile is Michelle McCarty, a second year arts student. University is an exciting change from the rural city where she grew up. 'Getting to university was always a bit of a dream of mine. I guess I thought of getting out there in the real world—and of living a completely different life.'

Why choose an arts degree? For Michelle, any career choice counts as a difficult and demanding task, especially since it has to be done so young. 'You need to experience life a bit before you make a decision. Time is an important factor.' She would encourage young people to have a dream. 'It's good to have hopes even if they are not realised in the short term. Otherwise you're left with nothing to strive for.'

Looking back, Michelle recalls favourite memories—old friends, uniforms, bells ringing between classes—all the things most of us associate with school. 'And the exams!', she gasps in mock horror. 'It seemed a bit surreal finally doing the English exam. There you were doing the big one—it was dream-like, in fact more like a nightmare. You lived for months under all that pressure and finally it was over.'

A parent sees the final school year in different dimensions. 'Year 12 should not be given too much emphasis', says Sarah O'Shea, a quietly-spoken, elegant woman who is mother of eight. In the lounge where we speak, children wander in and out to say hello, deliver coffee and biscuits and ask advice. Sarah's pride in them is obvious. She has thought long and often about the transition from Year 12 to beyond. Six of hers have reached and negotiated that threshold.

The advisers

Ian Cribb, a secondary teacher who is also a Jesuit brother, spoke to *Eureka Street* before leaving for an overseas study tour. Like Michelle, Ian believes that time is a necessary element for reaching the kind of self-possession you need to make good life choices. 'It's important to create space and silence for students, to allow them to get in touch with their feelings and learn to articulate them. That's the road to reflectiveness, something that develops slowly. I try to allow time for discovery.

'When there are choices to make, especially in Year 12, I try to get my students to think through the *pros* and *cons*. If they fail, or have a car crash, there's lots to think through and lots to learn. They need to appreciate that their decisions have consequences. I suggest they sit down and write about themselves. It's a good way to make their own discoveries.'

Ian feels that too much is asked too early. 'What greater pressure is there than choosing a career? It can be demanding, even traumatic. Few Year 12s have any idea what their chosen profession will be.'

Jan Wilson, careers and guidance counsellor, understands the problem only too well. 'At the beginning of the year I interview the Year 12s, and if 20 per cent have any real sense of direction that is a high proportion. There are so many factors. If someone walks in my office and says, "I want to do medicine", that person is making a very real statement. To speak like that, they have to be very sure of themselves; then they've got to get the marks.' Not surprisingly, few Year 12s have that much confidence.

As Michelle McCarty found, most adults ask, 'Have you decided what you're going to do when you leave school?'. And the pressure to give them an answer is so great. 'I know I never knew what I wanted to do. But if you don't give them an answer they look at you as if to say "Get some direction in your life".' Michelle finally resorted to venturing that she wanted to be a neurosurgeon!

Michelle McCarty: 'I guess it's all part of the experiment'.

Then what actually assists students at Year 12 level? Ian Cribb is convinced that what most of them need and appreciate is being listened to. 'As a teacher, I try to use the language of the kids—use it and challenge them in it.' Ian lived for a number of years in an open house where the main focus was building friendships. He tries to stay in touch with those he knows once they leave school, but it is not easy. 'Even for someone who has a pretty good rapport with Year 12s, it's not easy to relate to the post-school culture. It's quite different and I often feel inadequate in it. But the main thing seems to be just being there, being a friend. Going to 21st birthdays is important. It signals that you're ready to listen. Lets them feel you do care and you do love them.'

Jan Wilson's counselling role also keeps her in touch with former students, and in very practical terms: 'I see some who are out of school three years. I have also seen two-thirds of last year's group already this year'.

Jan illustrates a follow-up contact. 'One girl's mother rang when she was in third year university, very worried about her. The mother said her daughter wouldn't see anyone but me. Now it wasn't actually me she wanted to see (I checked my cards and found I hadn't seen her since Year 10), but for her the school was one place she had felt secure. I think that is significant: students see this total place as somewhere they can come back to. The girl was someone whose family had all moved in one direction and it didn't suit her. She was aware of it from first year out. By third year she was very disturbed.' Now, following counselling, the young woman is 'back on track' and moving in a different direction.

The tasks

One of Jan Wilson's tasks is to address the new Year 10 class each year and outline the developmental tasks belonging to adolescence:

- separating from parents
- establishing your own value system
- establishing your own sexuality (in the complete sense of the word)
- and making a vocational choice.

Jan is acutely aware that most 17 year-olds are still working through these areas. 'Yet you're taking them out of school and forcing them to make a decision about vocation.' Michelle has her own intriguing way of commenting about leaving home. 'I suppose my cord isn't really broken, rather it's stretched. I've moved from my parents' country home to the city. The farm is still my home and the university college is my home away from home.' It was in many ways a difficult move, though both she and her parents realised it was necessary.

Sarah O'Shea believes, as a parent, that well before leaving school young adults need to be treated as such. 'To prepare for the future they need to learn responsibility for themselves and for others.' Jobs like baby-sitting, where they are responsible to another adult, not just to their parents, are important experiences. Sarah believes that if young people learn responsibility early the transition is less harrowing.

William O'Malley, a Jesuit teacher of theology and English at Fordham Preparatory School in New York's Bronx, has written extensively on developmental issues. He likes to highlight the distinction between personality and character—one he sees as crucial for understanding the road to maturity. 'Young people can readily comprehend the difference between "She's got a lot of personality" and "She's got a lot of character",' he says. 'Personality has to do with charm; character has to do with courage, with obstacles overcome. Personality reflects our reactions to the opinions of others; character reflects *values*, ethics, conscience. Having a personality is inevitable; having character takes work.'

O'Malley agrees with psychologist Eric Erikson that each of the natural crises—birth, weaning, play years, school—is an invitation to reach out to a wider and richer radius of awareness. 'Each disequilibrium costs effort and suffering, losing something very good in the hope of finding something far better. Adolescence, as Erikson sees it, is an invitation away from narcissistic self-absorption towards becoming the hero or heroine of a unique and coherent storyline.'

O'Malley elaborates: 'Our personality traits are both assets and liabilities. Adolescence allows us to find out precisely which is which, and to turn personality into character. A person of character, one who understands and possesses the self, can use these traits, control them, make them productive. There is no need to fake personality with clothes or earrings or some cosmetic mask. The self he or she has is just fine, for the moment.'

Studies confirm one's commonsense guess that parents exert the greatest influence on career choice. Often, even with the best of intentions, they add to the burden of choice. Jan Wilson cites the case of 'a beautiful child' who, left to himself, would have chosen 'a different path than those his parents could live with'. The social stigma of 'male-oriented' and 'female-oriented' careers still hangs in the air. It is still difficult for a young man to become a nurse or a girl an apprentice plumber.

Sarah concurs: 'Many pressures arise from social expectations'. In her view, 'there should not be any pressure from parents either to excel or to decide immediately on a career path.'

Jan Wilson views such conflicts in terms of conflicting dreams, those of parents *versus* those of the school-leaver. 'Some would say it's reality', she adds. Jan is a great believer in trying to discover each person's vocation (she uses the word broadly and with much significance).

'Some counsellors would say you should just look at a student's academic results and work out for yourself what course he or she should get into. But when the pressure is on, the majority of students actually "move up"—they perform better.' She is against underestimating anyone's abilities.

William O'Malley also speaks against parental pressure. 'A major difficulty in dealing with the fragile young is leading them to understand and accept the polar tension between contentment and ambition, between a genuine satisfaction with what one has done and a drive to do something better next time. If there is one burden too many that parents lay on their children's immature shoulders, it is "You can do better than that", when the child has done the best he or she could *now*. What the child needs is *praise*.'

Jan Wilson confirms O'Malley's view, offering an example of the power of encouragement: A few years ago a student came into her office and said, 'I'm going to do law'. Jan said, 'Fine, but you will need to get the runs on the board'. So he applied for law at two different universities. In January he returned with his girlfriend and said, 'I made it!'. He added that Jan was the only one who hadn't 'put him down'. His mother and father and even his tutor had discouraged his ambition. 'But you've just got to give Year 12s that sense of hope. And if that works for one person only, then it is all worth-

while', comments Jan. Sarah confirms the effect that hope can have on self-confidence. 'Young adults need confidence in their own abilities and in making decisions. Parental support, not pressure, is what's needed.'

The guidelines Sarah and her husband have negotiated with their older children embody trust *and* responsibility. 'We don't put curfews on our children, but in the morning we discuss what time they arrived home and whether it was suitable. I have heard our children's friends say that their parents won't let them stay out late, and to compensate they have to lie. But you have to allow your children to develop their own sense of right and wrong.'

Party time, or pressure?

As a parent, Sarah has come to know the end-of-school problems well. 'The change of pace, the new atmosphere, often a whole new lifestyle, it can be a very confusing period. But if the young person is responsible and aware, he or she can cope.' She believes that most Year 12s in fact have misconceptions about life after school. 'They believe that life at university is all party and no pressure. They're too young to know.

'And of course young people are so easily influenced, especially if they are lonely. In the early 1980s, many got in too deep and found it difficult to climb out. And there are always those who are quick to take advantage of a naïf. Young people may see only a need to express their individuality by taking risks, but they can backfire.'

From a student's point of view, the transition can be disconcerting, even terrifying, as Michelle found. 'What is being independent? What's my role? Am I supposed to be one hundred per cent responsible? Eventually you realise you can only survive on three hours' sleep for so many nights in a row. Alcohol and drugs are out in the open now and a lot of people go overboard. Its difficult to find a happy medium, to be responsible for yourself while not having someone around to say "Enough!". And there are other pitfalls: bank balances, credit card limits, getting your licence. A driver's licence is a sign of the leap to maturity you're expected to make.'

For Michelle, the move away from home provided a special air of adventure. 'People laugh when I say, "Ohh, it's a big transition from the country to the big smoke. Attitudes and issues you have to confront are different ." But it's true, and I'm not quite sure anything can prepare you for it.' Pausing, she adds, 'I guess it's all part of the experiment'.

By no means do all school-leavers go on to higher education, though the proportion has risen recently. Accepting a study place when it is offered can be a major decision. 'You're not really sure what you want to do', says Michelle. 'You're just testing the water. Eventually you become aware of your strengths and weaknesses. But after a year I think I have established myself as independent.'

Jan Wilson, too, is concerned about the age at which young Australians must make life-determining decisions. 'I was in the US three or four years ago, and mentioned that I had to be back in time to assist the Year 12s with their preferences. People looked at me in horror. "Do you mean those students have to make a decision about their career at 17?" In America, youngsters go to college and do a basic science or arts degree, and *then* make a choice, at 21 or 22. So they have three or four more years' maturity than ours.

'If the economic situation was different, we could encourage school-leavers to do some sort of service—national service or social service—for two years. That would be a sensible alternative.'

In some respects admission to higher education has become more flexible, in others it has not. Those at university in the 1960s and 1970s remember contemporaries who attempted two or even three courses before settling on a vocational choice. This is not always possible now, and that concerns Jan. (She herself began medicine, found the course boring and changed to psychology). She remembers one particular student who came to see her in third year arts, saying, 'This isn't really me. I want to be a doctor'. The young woman went back to do Year 12 maths and science and gained A's. But the universities said, 'Sorry, you had your chance', because she already had a degree.

William O'Malley: 'Having a personality is inevitable. Having character takes work'

Jan Wilson: 'If you don't ask them to put that impossible dream first, you've lost them'

The fragile ego

Assuming that a young adult overcomes parental, social and peer pressures, passes exams and finally chooses a suitable course and career, how is he or she likely to cope with the experience of rejection? In many courses demand grossly outweighs supply. Or the course turns out to be uncongenial. The result? A major dent in a young person's confidence.

William O'Malley insists on the central role of self-esteem, which he regards as a very proper kind of pride. 'In 29 years of dealing with young people, I have never encountered a problem that wasn't reducible to a single cause: the agony of trying to prove the self *despite* the hated self.

'Most young people validate themselves from outside: competition, peer acceptance, grades, appearance. "I am what others think of me", not "I am what *I* think of me", and surely not "I am what I *am*". Certainly we form an idea of self by using others as mirrors. But until

our young accept and esteem themselves as they are, they will never treat that self with the respect it deserves.' Jan Wilson has her own angle on building confidence. She acknowledges O'Malley's ideals but affirms that young people need to unearth their dreams. 'When my students come in January to alter their preferences, I always say to them: "Write down two impossible dreams first. Then four others around the mark you've gained (which they know by then). And two preferences 20 or 30 points below their mark.

'If you don't ask them to put that impossible dream first,' says Jan, 'you've lost them. It's not an easy time, but over that period they become more realistic. I believe that students have a right to dream, to have some kind of hope, through Year 12. People will argue against that, but I believe it gives them a lift and encourages them to move forward.'

Quite simply, Jan believes, Year 12s need to understand the tasks ahead and begin imagining them. 'Not just to let life come to them, because it won't', she continues. 'I can picture one of the Year 12s who didn't get into the course he wanted. There were special reasons. So I asked him to get a letter confirming what had happened.' Jan suggested he go and see the person in charge and 'sell' his case. The young man didn't think he could.

Jan explained that he had already rehearsed all that was needed while conversing with her. 'He went with the letter and he got in.' Sarah agrees that affirmation is vital in maintaining a young adult's confidence. 'Some young people need more time than others. But they all need confidence to make tough decisions, and that comes from parental and teacher support.'

Ian Cribb: 'There is a real place for something like a temporary religious vocation'.

It troubles William O'Malley that few young people get much help in understanding 'the self they have been stranded with'. So they resort to defensive and offensive games. He identifies the *defensive* evasions as:

• scapegoating, 'blaming everything I am on someone or something else'. (The opposite is 'taking responsibility for who I am, what I do, what I say'.)

•minimalism, which in school shows up as listless listening, cramming at the end, and just getting by; and

• withdrawal, 'burying your head in the sand, deny-ing that there is a problem at all. Ostriches withdraw from precisely the conflicts they need to conquer in order to have character and develop self-esteem'.

Offensive evasions include:

• masks: such as outrageous clothes and jewellery 'with nobody home inside'

• competition of the kind that attempts to wrench approval and esteem from the outside to compensate for a lack of them on the inside, and

• perfectionism: 'Human beings are not perfectable, only endlessly improvable'.

O'Malley sums up his advice this way: 'If we mentors, instead of becoming more vigilant proctors and more eagle-eyed disciplinarians, set our goals on finding ways to build young people's self-esteem, we would have a happier, more peaceful school, family, city, world. The young are already pitifully aware of their faults. If we made them aware of their assets, they might just start making something of them. To their joy and ours.'

Does a religious sense play a major role in most Year 12s' career choices? 'Not explicitly', says Jan, 'though sometimes you can sense with particular students that the spiritual side is very much a part of them. But they won't mention it. A career like nursing has to be vocational in the full sense. But in this era our students don't use religious terms spontaneously.' Ian Cribb believes that some experience of ministry (explicitly religious or not) helps young people to focus where they are heading. 'Many seem to have a real need of something like a service group: to experience helping at a soup kitchen or something like that. It's a great help and leads them to reflect more fruitfully

on life directions. In our school we try to make sure that social awareness activities get a high profile, so that public praise goes to those as well as sport.'

'What's amazing now', continues Ian, 'is the high rate of involvement in school retreats. We get the Year 11s to give retreats to Year 7s and 8s. That way they're getting an early experience of service and ministry in a religious context. And after community awareness programs they come back and say, "That was fantastic!". I think there's a real place for something like a temporary religious vocation: a year or two's experience of community and service in the years after school.'

A few years back, leaving school often meant abandoning regular church attendance (assuming that hadn't happened before). But for Michelle church turned out to be a strength in time of transition. 'Moving from the country to the city, it was the same God we took with us. And it's a bit of a comfort to have that, the church and the sameness. When you leave school, religion is up to you. This year I found people more willing to talk about religion because it's part of life now, not just a subject at school.'

Ian, from his vantage point as teacher, also notices the change of climate, but describes it differently: 'I find young adults less preoccupied than before with belonging to the hierarchical church on a regular basis. They're not so guided by habit. But when there's a special occasion, say the death of one of their class mates, their underlying faith comes to the fore. There's nothing shallow about their involvement in the Eucharist at times like that.' Sarah is critical of her church's inattention, for the most part, to the post-school age-group: 'I don't believe they completely abandon their religion. God (in the church's sense) may be shelved for a time. But for the most part the Catholic Church doesn't seem to cater for young people. Other churches, such as the Baptists, are more attractive.'

Which raises a concern for Ian: 'Our students are so vulnerable to fundamentalists. I think we need to be more 'up front' about our religion and our approach to life. Perhaps under pressure from fundamentalism, our kids are now asking for more information about Christianity as Catholics understand it.'

Ian notices that Year 12s find it hard to make a connection between the gospels and the church. 'In the film *Jesus of Montreal* what appealed to them were the values, the drama of acceptance and rejection, and the critique of the church establishment.' Their images of God contain contradictions. 'They say they don't believe, and yet they find a sense of God in nature—in trees, sunsets and the stars. But in talk about God they resist human representations. What appeals about God is that, ultimately, I'm not alone. There's One much greater than me who loves me.'

The passage from school to the afterlife is bound to be dramatic—in social, emotional, intellectual, practical and spiritual terms. Asked for a word of general advice, Jan Wilson says, 'Prepare! As with any transition, the more work you put in, the less traumatic it will be. Anticipate new situations, visualise yourself in them—and do it all positively.' ■

Beckett after Bair

A reading of the new edition of Deirdre Bair's biography of Samuel Beckett, and a visit to Ireland, prompted ***M.J. Crennan*** *to look again at one of this century's most provoking writers.*

Photo: Jerry Bauer

Deirdre Bair, **Samuel Beckett: A Biography,** Vintage paperback edition, 1990.
ISBN 009 980070 5 RRP $16.95

SERIOUS LITERARY CRITICS have always expressed the gravest reservations about the value of literary biographies—and read them avidly. It may be the attraction of the new: writers' lives are so unlike those of the academics who study them—but would novelists, by parity of reasoning, be equally enthralled by the life stories of readers in English, or associate professors of philosophy?

(Well-researched biographies are at least an improvement on the *ex hypothesi* reasoning of pure literary gossip: sophisticated undergraduates of my generation believed to a person that Camus' death in a car accident was plainly a kind of suicide [so appropriate]. His biography revealed that he was a back seat passenger at the relevant time).

There are in fact good and long-recognised reasons for caution in applying biographical data to the reading of literature. Whether we say trust the tale and not the teller, talk of the personal heresy or the intentionalist fallacy, or deploy the extravagant neologisms of contemporary literary theory, a similar caveat is invoked.

In the case of a dramatist, biography may contain, as Bair's does, in-

valuable information about production history, and the contribution of the author to theatrical traditions. In the case of a writer whose creations are both quotidian and utterly unfamiliar, readers cannot help but be relieved by learning that in some sense the raw material of Beckett's life may be detected there in the work. However illusory, the sense of recognition settles the mind enough to concentrate on the real unfamiliarities. Secondly, in the case of a writer as enigmatic as Beckett, it is at least interesting to begin with the clues he offers from time to time, and, on the level of biography, we wonder how so bleak an imagination found a home in the world.

As to clues offered, as one might expect, what this writer offers are anti-clues. Beckett frequently repeats the complaint that his plays mean just what they say, and that what he liked to call 'the professors' had needlessly complicated them. This I find a perfectly illuminating remark. The first urge when facing the unfamiliar is to interpret it by reference to the familiar, and critics did rather tend to do so by means of allegorical readings, which assumed that the plays simply *hid* meanings. Thus Godot is God, and the set of *Endgame* is the interior of a human skull.

Beckett's advice is a variant of Keats': a love of allegorical readings may also be called an irritable reaching after fact and reason. If we suspend our disbelief that characters called by these odd names can really be in these odd situations, then the plays can do their work on us. If we prematurely 'interpret' them they may pass us by. Once we assume and accept the spatial and social premisses of the play, we begin to wonder how they could have spoken in any other way.

On the question of meaning, Beckett gives a stern warning in the late *What Where,* in which characters are sent off the stage one by one in a serial interrogation. That the report of a failure to confess is anything but a lie is never admitted, because the result of the confession is predetermined. The will to impose meaning is equated with political torture:

(Continued page 37)

INTERVIEW
MORAG FRASER

'Samuel Beckett did, it is true, permit a biography to be written, but only on the strict condition that he was not in it.' (Malcolm Bradbury, *Mensonge*)

They seek him here, they seek him there ... Samuel Beckett continues to be one of the most complex and intriguing writers of the 20th century, and Bradbury is only one of many who have promoted the myth of his elusiveness. Deirdre Bair herself gave some credence to that myth in the first edition of her biography. But, as she volunteered in conversation, Beckett was often more accessible and familial than his reputation and writings led us to believe.

Morag Fraser: *When you were writing the Beckett biography, as I understand it, you met with Samuel Beckett in Paris but he was not forthcoming. He would , as you put it, 'neither help nor hinder you'.*
Deirdre Bair: That's not true. All the while that I was seeing him he was terribly concerned about people like Ellmann and Kenner who also wanted to write the book. He was such a gentle person, he didn't want to offend anybody, and he knew that by cooperating with me he would offend other people. But in fact every time I went to Paris we met routinely and regularly, almost as regularly as I met with Simone de Beauvoir.

That is not the impression you give in the biography. You don't tell us that.
He asked me not to. I have a new introduction which makes it a bit clearer *(1990 edition)*. In fact I did have a great deal of input and conversation from him. Otherwise, there was just so much that I wouldn't have known. And—this is the interesting point for me—after I started writing the de Beauvoir biography, it never failed that when I'd get off the Metro to go and see her I'd run into him. *(Beckett and de Beauvoir lived at opposite ends of what is essentially the same street.)* This never happened when I was writing about Beckett. But once I started writing about her I was always running into him. And they cordially detested each other. You see, Beckett really had the feeling that once you wrote about him you were a sort of disciple and would continue to write about him or to teach his work. The fact that I had gone to Simone de Beauvoir was like desertion! Heresy! Traitor! He'd say 'Off to see her, are you?" So it put me in an awkward position.

That is very interesting, because the biography does convey a very intimate sense of the man, and yet when you report him as saying 'I won't help and I won't hinder you' one gets the sense that you were working almost entirely from other sources.
No, I was working from him as well as other sources. But there is an interesting thing about that phrase which comes through in the relationship that I had with him. You see we never had a dinner or a drunken evening. We'd meet in the afternoon, and have coffee or drinks. Sometimes we'd have a light meal, but never a full scale evening together. And at the time I thought 'Gosh, here are all these other people saying, "Well I was in Paris and Sam and I got drunk," and I'm calling him Mr Beckett and I'm not getting drunk.' Half of these stories, I realised, were lies. Beckett often wasn't in Paris when these drunken evenings supposedly took place. And when I came to write the book I was so grateful for that distance, grateful he was Mr. Beckett and I was Mrs. Bair, because it gave me the objectivity to say, 'I really need to write this,' rather than 'Oh I don't want to put it in—Sam might be unhappy.'

Deirdre Bair

You have written very substantial biographies of two of the most influential writers and complex human beings alive in the twentieth century. What on earth made you do it? You don't like the quiet life?
Well, with the Beckett I cannot believe I did it. I was a journalist for ten years and really burnt out, so I decided to make a change. Through writing about James Joyce I came to Beckett and I was intrigued. Of course I knew a lot about Ireland before I started, and I couldn't understand the existing Beckett criticism because it did seem to me that everything the man wrote was strongly rooted in an Irish past, even though he lived in France. So, I decided to write a critical dissertation on Beckett. It was a sort of make-work thing that I have since sealed and won't let anybody read—it's *that* bad.

You see, I was straining toward biography, and the university was saying no, you must remain within criticism. After I got the PhD I decided I didn't care what academic life would hold for me but I had to do this biography. I wrote Beckett a letter—an embarrassing letter, now, frankly, filled with great missionary zeal. He replied very quickly.in neat handwriting, 'Dear Mrs. Bair, my life is dull and without interest. The professors know more about it than I do. It is best left unchampioned.' And then across the page—it seemed to me it was either after reflection or in an oh-what-the-hell attitude—he scrawled, 'Any biographical information I possess is at your disposal. If you come to Paris I will see you.' So, of course, I went. And from that the book began.

As I recall it had a stormy critical reception and some damning with faint praise: 'worthy endeavour, American work ethic' etc.
Right. I *do* work. I work five days a week, but I hate it when people think I am this workaholic. When the book came out I thought it would have a good scholarly life. I assumed everyone would be happy because now we knew about Beckett. What I didn't realise was that many scholars have huge egos and I had trampled on a number of significant toes Other people thought that they should have been the ones to write this book. So it had a really rocky beginning. But now it has been out there for twelve years and the reputation that has lasted, to my great delight and pleasure, is that it is an enormously important source book. And of course it won the prize [*National Book Award in Biography*], which legitimised everything I had done.

And it has had a significant effect on American literary biography?
It has had an effect not only on Beckett scholarship, throughout the world, but on biography generally. Other people have looked to it as the model of what biography could be. Sometimes it really surprised me. Some of my heroes, in effect, have come to me and said, 'Can you tell me how to write a biography.'

Also, I think that many of the things that we now believe should be included in lives of women I also include in the life of this man. Men come up to me and say, 'I wish I had paid more attention to the emotional life of my subject, and I certainly will in the next book.' So, I think, if I have had any influence, it's that.

In constructing a biography what constraints do you work under? What are your principles of selection ? I take it there are things you choose not to write about, things you suppress, details about which you exercise judgment?
I don't really do that . I don't suppress. You know I like that expression of Desmond MacCarthy's—the biographer is the artist under oath. When you undertake to write a life I believe that you undertake to give as full and accurate a presentation as possible with the knowledge at your disposal. It is a terrible responsibility. If I didn't have a large extended family and support network I doubt I could be a biographer. [*Bair is married, has two children, an extended family, two houses, three dogs, does needlepoint, watches television soaps, supports the New York Mets, sleeps seven hours a night and never works on Sunday.*] Most biographers I know have very strong family lives. And I think that might have something to do with the biographer's ability to handle aspects of another person's life that are personal.

That is interesting, because one of the things which came out most strongly for me in the Beckett biography was that this man was inter-related. If the plays are you original point of access you get the sense of an isolate, someone solitary, stark, out there on his own.
Yes that's right , and he's not at all. The cousins are always there and he's always got to take care of somebody's kid. His life was just filled with people.

With de Beauvoir and Beckett you were working with people who came out of a very formative Christian cultural tradition. For de Beauvoir that heritage was in many ways negative. How did it manifest in Beckett?
Well certainly in Beckett the Christian heritage left him with a strong sense of personal morality which I think is almost Christ-like. And in his writing there are aspects of Christianity. Beckett uses Milton using the bible for example. And there are the old hymns. So there is the literary heritage that he took from Christianity. But at the same time there was a personal code of ethics. There is a fundamental Christianity in Beckett, I think, although he truly did reject formal religion.

I wouldn't say that Beckett was an atheist, certainly not. He was a healthy agnostic. I think he believed in a higher being; he just wasn't sure what form that being took,certainly no specific religious form. He rejected what he considered the false pieties of his mother's Church of Ireland, but the Christian underpinning remains very strong in the man's code of ethics.

Beckett really was a shining example of integrity. He went *against*. He risked ostracism, he risked all sorts of insult, and pain. But he was always true to himself. He really was a shining model. ■

(From page 35)

Time passes.
That is all.
Make sense who may.

Thus abjured, must the critic (Crrrritic!) lapse into obedient silence? I think not. *Krapp's Last Tape,* to take a clear example, positively invites the play of intelligence on the part of the audience. It requires reading, but not *a* reading. The tape recorder that brings Krapp's earlier voice to his older presence, and to ours, is a great *coup de théâtre,* and would of itself establish Beckett as the genius he was, but it should not blur the great difficulties of the play. Does it hold in unweighted contrast different bundles of priorities, values and rhetoric from different periods of Krapp's life, or is there an intelligible whole? Krapp's insouciance with the past ('Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back.') ends the play, but is not the last thing Krapp says. It is not even his last tape, since we have seen him dictating more.

Commentators, Bair amongst them, have noted that this is Beckett's most personal play, replete with allusion to incidents in his life. It is unsurprising that it is also Beckett's most Joycean play in many respects. Sitting under the dying woman's window could be from *Dubliners,* and the sexual trance of the river scene recalls Molly Bloom on Howth. The emotional freight of the play (and, for Beckett, Joycean elements were a mark of the profoundest personal reaches of his life) makes the successive frames of Krapp's life all the more Olympian in effect.

Beckett's suspicion of interpretation refers principally to a suspicion about the domestication of his plays into a lexicon of great thoughts or eternal verities. It is a temptation especially enticing to the pedagogue. To see what is wrong with such an approach we do not need to invoke any index of proscribed critical approaches, but to observe a simple truth about all the major plays: properly attended to, and produced, they can speak with utter directness to their audience, and within their own terms make perfectly good sense. If you ask, irritably as Keats might say, what does it mean, then the answers might not be helpful. If, on the other hand, you enquire why it is so engrossing, then more might be revealed.

Bair comments *[see interview]* that Beckett took both a sense of ethics and a literary heritage from Christianity. She refers to the Bible and to Milton. This raises an important aspect of the plays, namely their language. It is possible to track down all sorts of motifs, quotations and cadences, with their origins in this or that source or style. But what I have in mind is even more basal, and that is the fact that the plays, whatever their bleaknesses and blind passages of the spirit, are driven forward as surely as are Shakespeare's by means that must be called poetic.

Just as pattern—the nervy *stichomythia,* the winding repetitions—forms and holds the crucial suspensions of the plays, so too does rhythm—the overall pace of the plays, the retardations and releases—permit the depths of utterance, whether Lucky's speech or Krapp's spots of time. The surface of the dialogue sometimes seems like finely incised marble, but in fact the sources of incident, colour and cadence are unusually eclectic and the emotional turns of the action are correspondingly diverse and supple.

Beckett was a great dramatist. One way of saying that is to say that he possessed an exemplary moral courage which is shown in his willingness to look into the darkness and bring back a true report. Yet the possession of such courage, however exemplary, is no more than an antecedent step to the creation of plays in which the implications of such a vision come to life.

It is a truism that no biography can account for the existence of genius, but if we put aside that arid caution, some remarks may be made onthe lessons in Bair's biography. A question asked at the beginning of these reflections was how so bleak an imagination as Beckett's found a home in the world. It should surprise only the defiantly literal-minded that Beckett was in many respects a highly moral and indeed kind man. More than that, he played a hero's role in occupied France. These are not trivial facts and should put us on our guard against facile rejections of Beckett's 'philosophy'. ■

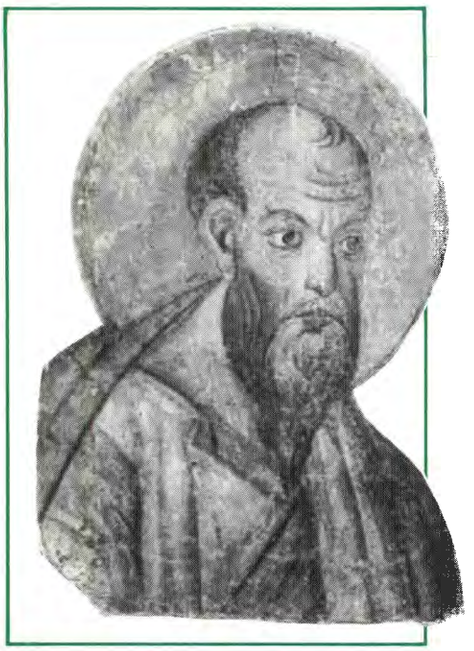
M.J.Crennan is a Melbourne barrister.

Winds drain, mosses chill
the deepest fuels of the body.
Nothing brings good or ill.
I have reached Li Po's age
and feel immortal.

That would be worth it:
friend without envy,
love without bile,
a life's work without guilt,
a poetry without attitudes.

Vincent Buckley

From **Last Poems**, McPhee Gribble, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, April 1991



ERIC HODGENS

Paul the pragmatist

Brendan Byrne SJ, **Inheriting the Earth: The Pauline basis of a spirituality for our time**, St Paul Publications, 1990. ISBN 0 949080 85 3. RRP $8.95.
Tony Kelly CSSR, **A New Imagining: Towards an Australian Spirituality**, Collins Dove, 1990. ISBN 0 85924 828 3. RRP $14.95.

WE FILTER EVERYTHING we learn through our own mental and emotional grid. All that we read from the past is judged by that set of presumptions, and try as we might, we read our own biases and preoccupations back into past writings. Anachronism is built into our knowing and reinforced by our education. This is particularly so with doctrine, and that large, amorphous lump of knowledge, affectivity and prejudice that we call 'spirituality'.

Twentieth-century archaeology and literary investigation has uncovered for us both the worlds in which the ancient writers lived and the presumptions they brought to their writing, all of which leads into one of the most exciting aspects of learning this century—our *un*learning of old presumptions and discovering of the ways in which texts really make sense.

Scripture scholars have been in the front line of this kind of education. Brendan Byrne, for one, has that talent, and here invites his readers to make sense of Genesis 1–3, and some of Paul's concepts. Reading this latest book you sense his own fantastic journey—towards getting inside the mind of another. The reader feels that Byrne's quest is successful because the new interpretations he offers make sense. The first three chapters, for instance, help to throw new light on Paul's key terms such as 'image', 'righteousness', 'justification', 'sin' and 'faith'.

His treatment of God's loving faithfulness, and of faith as the believer's response, is wonderful— an excellent corrective to the bargaining with God that was so characteristic of catechesis in the past.

In the chapter on 'the plight of the world', Byrne allows that his own reflections go well beyond Paul's thought. Yet Paul would be pleased, I am certain, that his writings have stimulated such a lively response—as indeed would any serious writer. Still, questions remain at each point about whether we are following on from Paul, or reading back our own present preoccupations into the text.

The later chapters—on 'Christian obedience', 'Christian freedom', Hope for the world', and 'Life in the body'—read like a spiritual treatise. Their ingredients include central Pauline concepts such as Jesus' obedience, and the Spirit and life 'in Christ'. Byrne assumes that we know what Paul meant by these terms. All have acquired heavy connotations from the spiritualities of the past few centuries.

'Spirituality' can be a term with motherhood and apple pie overtones—one you dare not criticise. But the word itself poses difficulties for a faith that is solidly incarnational. Moreover, there are many spiritualities. The sort my own generation was nurtured on was often discouraging in the 'try harder' sense, and vague, irresponsibly submissive and individualistic in the 'find God within' sense. For a leftlober like myself, such spirituality can be a 'dreadful doom' (to quote Chesterton). I like to think of Paul as pragmatic above all else, and end up wondering whether he was really so introspective. If I am right, the Pauline sense of those 'spiritual' terms needs teasing out.

Brendan Byrne has many devotees whose faith he has fostered through his teaching and writings. They will not be disappointed with this new offering.

THE BEST THING about Tony Kelly's new book is that is has been written. It is a significant contribution to reflection on how the specifically Australian story reveals the truth about God, human beings and their relationship. Kelly's background for this task is extraordinarily rich. He is able to call on an extensive range of poets and authors who have reflected on Australian life. That said, it is his own contribution that is the worth of the book.

Kelly is a skilled story-teller in his own right. His chapter, 'Imagining Our Past', is my favourite.

Through stories, it enabled me to sense how close the Australian experience is to being ready to accept Jesus' vision of life and God. Ironically, the God that Bert Facey rejects so emphatically (in *A Fortunate Life*) is not the God of Jesus either—as Tony Kelly points out in his lovely summation chapter. Yet Facey's ability to sense the wonder and excitement of life as 'fortunate', despite its terrible difficulties, is so Jesus-like it knocks you over.

In fact, Facey's cynicism about God and religion (which is typically 'Aussie') may be the best gift Australia can offer to the task of redrafting the Christian message. The converted tend to see religion as addressing ultimate questions—the myth, the mysticism, the faith. But the Bert Faceys see the structure, the law, the power-play, the coercion, the self-righteousness, the divisiveness, the moralising, the churchy talk and the ritual. These off-putting qualities are also part and parcel of religion. It is not faith that Facey and his like lack, but the ability to recognise how close to the real Jesus they are—and how much further along the track he can take them. The hopeful insights in these two chapters contrast with a readiness to accept a dark view of Australia in Kelly's earlier chapters.

The early philosophical/theological reflections I found difficult—and abstract. Yet even here the ingredients are right, as is the starting point: the presumption that the seat of faith is the creative imagination. Perhaps we have become too used to having our faith prompted by story and images. I for one am less at home now with universal concepts and with the rather platonic world in which they live. It is hard to pin down 'culture', 'the spiritual', 'the metaphysical', 'the transcendent'. Yet how else do you theologise, when that is called for?

Tony Kelly is convinced that Australian Christians have something distinctive to add to the old things and new that a scribe trained for the kingdom draws out from his or her treasure. This book should prompt other Australian scribes to go rummaging. ■

Eric Hodgens is parish priest of Holy Saviour Church, Vermont South, Victoria.

REPORT

WILLIAM SCOBIE

Papal manoeuveres

THE GULF WAR spawned an extraodinary alliance between the Pope and Italy's Party of the Democratic Left (the renamed communists), and brought about the most serious rift between the Church and the ruling Christian Democrats since World War II. And it all stemmed from the Vatican's role in the sacking of Italy's naval commander in the Gulf, Vice-Admiral Mario Buracchia.

It is a curious story. At the outset of the war the admiral invited five conservative journalists aboard the flagship of Italy's five-vessel Gulf fleet, and among them was the correspondent of *Famiglia Cristiana* [Christian Family], a Vatican-funded magazine with the biggest circulation in Italy. They stayed aboard five days. But only to the *Famiglia Christiana* correspondent did the relaxed, unsuspecting admiral reveal that he thought war could have been avoided 'with a little more wisdom' and a continuation of economic sanctions. When he denied all, *Famiglia Cristiana* released the interview tape to Italian radio, and the government had no choice but to order his resignation. The Vatican's peace drive had scored.

Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti and the upper echelons of the Christian Democrats were deeply disturbed. 'It is easy to cry peace', said Andreotti, 'and also useless'. But the Pope cried on, condemning the 'deplorable' bombing of civilians in Iraq. After praying the Angelus with pilgrims in St Peter's Square, he berated 'the terrible logic of war' and called for a peace conference to resolve Middle Eastern problems, including the Palestinian question. In letters to President Bush and Saddam Hussein, he described the war as 'a tragic adventure with no way back', and after the war he renewed his call for a Palestinian during a meeting of Middle East church leaders at the Vatican.

Liberal bishops, left-wing Christian Democrats and Catholic lay groups took the Pope's stance as a cue for agitation against the war. In Rome, Catholic schools closed for a day to allow 90,000 children to march on parliament, chanting anti-war slogans. The Pax Christi lobby group began a drive to unseat Christian Democrat MPs who supported the war, and there was regular contact between the Pope's office and that of the communist leader, Achille Occhetto.

Occhetto, who had been calling for the withdrawal of Italian forces from the Gulf, said: 'Our critics claim we are isolated in opposing the war. Not so! I align myself with the highest spiritual authority.' When Occhetto made his 'Italy out!' call, he had chosen to do so in *Il Sabato*, a weekly published by Comunione e Liberazione, a Catholic ginger group active among left-wing Christian Democrats.

Predictably, the Pope's comments angered Italian Jews. Rome's Chief Rabbi, Elio Toaff, said the papal line was 'an invitation to anti-semitism ... politically unsustainable and morally unjustified'.

What is the Pope up to in all this? Theories abound, but the consensus is that his new direction results from the collapse of the communist empire in Eastern Europe, which makes American support less essential. It opens the way for his strategy in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where lie vast fields for proselytism. ■

— The Observer

ANN JUNGMAN

The experience of imprisonment has produced some of the great literature of fantasy and social comment. Cervantes and John Bunyan turned their confinement to advantage, and so has Salman Rushdie.

Telling stories

Salman Rushdie, **Haroun and the Sea of Stories**, Granta Books, London, 1990. ISBN 0 140 14223. RRP $24.99.

IN THIS, HIS FIRST BOOK SINCE *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie has written a wonderfully incisive escapist fantasy for his son, Zafar. Ostensibly it is a children's book, but *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, drawing heavily on the tradition of the Islamic classic of storytelling, *The Thousand and One Nights*, is also political satire and a heartfelt statement of the absolute necessity for stories to be allowed to flow freely from the storyteller.

Inevitably one starts to look for any passages that might relate to Rushdie's unique and tragic situation. Certainly the story starts with a boy, Haroun, whose father Rashid (Rushdie?) is a storyteller. Like Rushdie, Rashid has his admirers and his detractors. Enthusiasts call him 'The Ocean of Notions', while those less impressed dismiss him as the 'Shah of Blah'. Haroun is endlessly fascinated by his father's capacity to dream up new stories: 'Where did all these stories come from?', he puzzled. 'It seemed that all Rashid had to do was to part his lips in a plump, red smile, and out would pop some brand-new saga, complete with sorcery, love-interest, princesses, wicked uncles, fat aunts ... [and] mustachioed gangsters in yellow check pants.'

Haroun and Rashid live in the sad city of Alifbay, which is full of machines and smoke and unhappy people, and surrounded by a sea full of glumfish. Any modern industrial city, Rushdie seems to be implying. In all this gloom, Rashid and his stories and Soraya, his singing wife, are a glimmer of light.

As in any good story, life for Rashid and Haroun goes on predictably until,

quite unexpectedly, their idyll evaporates and, like Rushdie, Rashid is suddenly plunged into a world of horror. '...luck has a way of running out without the slightest warning. One minute you've got a lucky star watching over you and the next instant it's done a bunk.' Rashid finds that his wife has run off with the neighbour, Mr Sengupta, a joyless clerk who commits the great blasphemy of asking, 'What is the use of stories that aren't even true?' In agonies of self-doubt, Rashid loses his wonderful gift of storytelling. What indeed is the use of stories that aren't even true? Maybe Rushdie has asked himself the same question during his strange incarceration.

The rest of the book is a brilliant, passionate, witty, entertaining, magical affirmation of language and fiction that decisively defeats the attempts of all the Senguptas in the world to destroy freedom and magic and imagination and laughter.

Despite his personal distress, Rashid is committed to telling stories at political gatherings. Here Rushdie takes an opportunity to mock politicians (a corrupt and dishonest lot). The huge crowds that gathered knew that a politician's truth is a lie, 'But everyone had complete faith in Rashid, because he always admitted that everything he told them was completely untrue and made up out of his own head'.

However, when Rashid opens his mouth at one particular political rally all that comes out is 'Ark, Ark, Ark!'

In danger of his life, Rashid, with Haroun, is hidden in a luxury house boat ('Arabian Nights plus One') by another political crook, Snooty Buttoo. (Echoes of a certain famous Pakistani political dynasty?) Rashid finds himself in the classical predicament: if he fails to come up with a story for Snooty Buttoo, he is finished. In despair the Rashid/Rushdie storyteller describes the real enemy to his son: 'Khattam-Schud is the Arch-Enemy of all Stories, even of Language itself. He is the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech'. Khattam Schud rules over a bleak land of darkness and silence, the land of Chup. Here 'wild devotees . . . work themselves up into great frenzies and sew their lips together . . . so they slowly die of hunger and thirst'. A chilling depiction of the worst excesses of fundamentalism?

Haroun decides that he must rescue his father's storytelling powers from the attack of Prince of Silence by taking a trip in the Great Sea of Stories. He finds himself in the delightful city of Gup with a magical set of new friends. Gup has a silly king, an absurd prince and a ridiculous princess who can't stop singing. However, the real rulers of the kingdom are the wise Walrus and the Eggheads. In Gup,

everyone discusses everything and feels free to criticise anyone. Haroun is irritated and wonders how anything ever gets done. However, as in all good stories, he is in for a surprise. Gup in fact seems to be a social democracy, muddling along but ultimately winning through. In these scenes the author is giving a huge vote of confidence to the system that has defended him.

To his horror, Haroun discovers that Khattam-Schud plans to pollute the Sea of Stories. (Oil slicks in the Gulf?) Rushing to thwart the evil plan, Haroun and his friends meet Mudra, one of Khattam Schud's warriors, who can only make sounds and dance. Rashid turns up and recognises the language of gesture. Not all expression has to be in words.

To stop the poisoning of the Sea of Stories, the armies of Gup face the Chupwala army of Khattam-Schud. Sceptical Rashid is convinced the Guppees won't stand a chance and is amazed to discover that all the discussion and dispute that took place prior to the battle created 'a force with a common purpose. All those arguments and debates, all that openness, had created powerful bonds of fellowship between them. The Chupwalas, on the other hand, turned out to be a disunited rabble'. Rashid's conclusion is that democracy and free speech will ultimately triumph over totalitarianism and fanaticism. A peace is quickly negotiated: 'The New Government of the Land of Chup...announced its desire for a long and lasting peace with Gup, a peace in which Night and Day, Speech and Silence would no longer be separated into Zones'. Peace is restored by harmony and tolerance, an acceptance that both dark and light have beauty, both speech and silence have value.

Haroun and his oddly assorted gang, meanwhile, are busy preventing the poisoning of the sea and of course, because this is a fairy story, they succeed. Stories of every kind will continue to fill the Ocean and be available to all storytellers for ever. Father and son can now return home, where they discover that Soraya has returned to Rashid, who immediately rediscovers his amazing ability to tell stories. Haroun prepares to live happily ever after.

What can we get out of this book politically? A passionate defence of freedom of speech. As Butt the Hoopoe asks: 'What is the point of giving persons Freedom of Speech if you then say they must not utilize the same. And is not the Power of Speech the greatest power of all? Then surely it must be exercised to the full'. Is *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* a children's book? Probably not, but it would certainly be a magical book to read out loud to children, who would be enchanted by the fantasies and the vitality of the language and the variety of the characters. Is it an allegory? Who knows. Certainly it is a book to be read, because it is, in the words of Snooty Buttoo the politician, 'Super-Marvelloso,Incredibable, wholly Fantastick!'. ■

Ann Jungman is an English children's writer. She is the author of the *Vlad the Drac* series.

I wrote a letter to Seamus
but Seamus never replied.
I think it's possible Seamus is Irish.
'O he is! He is! They cried.

I wrote a letter to Seamus
and Seamus said not a word.
It's better to write on a Saturday night
and send it by way of a bird.

I wrote a letter to Seamus
and Seamus sent back a note;
'A chara, I'm sorry, I didn't
get any of the letters you wrote.'

I wrote a letter to Seamus,
Seamus was having a drink.
He said, 'Oh dear! We can't have him here!
What will the neighbours think?'

I sent a letter to Seamus
And what did Seamus say?
He said, 'In each season, for whatever reason,
I'm going to be away.'

Vincent Buckley

From **Last Poems**, McPhee Gribble, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, April 1991

BRUCE WILLIAMS

The ABC of opera

OPERA IS BOOMING. Houses are full, videos proliferate. There is a new market for extravaganzas at exorbitant prices and in unlikely places: *Aïda* at the Sydney Showgrounds, *Carmen* in the Tennis Centre in Melbourne, Dame Kiri te Kanawa battling high winds at Mitchelton winery. The 1980s saw the release of two new series of opera guides, a rash of books, and even the promise of a major encyclopaedia.

Yet the door to the opera house today still leads to the 19th century. Rituals first: the orchestra-pit with its white-tailed baton-waver presiding over serried ranks, reassuringly evokes the company dinner and the formal ball. This is, unquestionably, Art—Degas has painted it—but it is also safe. The pit acts as a bulwark between audience and stage. By looking only at the stage, one can enjoy the illusion that the music plays itself. Thus, at the fully-charged moments, when Butterfly sings 'One Fine Day' or Tosca pleads with Scarpia, the huge reinforcement of the vocal line can become All Nature, answering to the soprano's passion. Alternatively, a glance at the pit with its scraping and puffing and pounding not only yields the pleasure of watching other people work, but reminds us that this magic is under our control, through our deputy, the conductor.

Or consider the sequence at the curtain-calls. First the chorus, opera's proletariat. Then the soloists, graded from apprentices, all in a row, through middle-management (those whose names one can't remember) to the luminaries for whom the house rises. (Or, rather chillingly, does not.) The parade of singing phenomena steps back, and here is the conductor, in winter or summer all palpable sweat. He (overwhelmingly, he) is at once an image of Authority and of Work, and he is the signal for a different quality of applause.

Here at last, another section of the audience tells itself, is the Representative of Music. Singers, however beloved, are givers of treacherously extreme pleasure. Conductors, however, remind us that the risky, guilt-edged enterprise of opera is underwritten by the respectable old house of Bach and Beethoven. With the appearance of the conductor, properly dressed, the after-show reception has begun.

If all this strikes the reader as too semiotic altogether, consider instead the repertoire. This year, Melbourne opera-goers (with large purses) could see a dozen works—I am counting here only the main productions of the Victoria State Opera [VSO] and the Australian Opera [AO]. Six are actual 19th century works by Donizetti, Rossini, Verdi, Gounod, G&S. Two by Puccini are apparent exceptions, but although *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot* have 20th century dates they are in stylistic essence *fin de siècle*. We are to hear three works by Mozart, all in the State Theatre, on a scale and with sonorities quite foreign to their 18th century conventions. The only work whose musical language is unequivocally of the 20th century is Britten's *Death in Venice*, and if past experience is any guide, this (much-praised) Australian Opera production will do lousy business.

So far as mainhouse productions are concerned, it's mostly the same the whole world over. Francis Robinson of the Metropolitan Opera, New York, refers to the ABC of opera: *Aïda*, *Bohème* and *Carmen*. (We've just seen, or are about to see, all three in Melbourne.) Meirion and Susie Harries, in their survey of the international scene, *Opera Today* [1986], list the two dozen works reckoned by managements to be sure-fire successes at the box office: 21 of them are from the 19th century.

But elsewhere there are differences, of the kind that make a difference. In England and Germany there is a far wider spread of works that are 'non-standard' repertory, not only earlier opera (Monteverdi, Handel, Cavalli, Gluck, Rameau) but the operas of our own time (Henze, Berio, Philip Glass). A plaintive spokesperson for the Australian Opera was heard to say recently that he would love to do Berg's *Lulu*, but the patrons wouldn't wear it. *Lulu* was premiered in 1937. Meanwhile, the English National Opera has man-

aged to present Ligeti's *Le grand macabre*, Penderecki's *Devils of Loudun* and Szymanowski's *King Roger*. In the United States, outside the four main houses there is a vast amount of operatic activity in part-time companies on campuses and at various festivals. There is scarcely an opera, however obscure, that does not get done somewhere. During the 1984 Santa Fe Festival (report M. and S. Harries) a patron could have seen Korngold's *Violanta*, Zemlinsky's *Eine Florentinische Tragödie* and Henze's *We Come to the River*, all receiving their US professional premieres.

AUSTRALIA STICKS TO the dullest possible route through the most familiar countryside. Managements invariably defend themselves with the claim that the public will stand for nothing else. And I think it should be remembered, as mitigation, that operatic production on any real scale is largely the creation of the past 20 years. Audiences are still coming to terms with the basics. Nor have managements in the opera world anything like as much freedom as they might like. The supply of first-rate—or, for that matter, second-rate—singers is limited, and they tend to want to sing what they already know. The government's determination to force companies to rely more on private sponsorship inevitably leads to the choice of works with tunes the members of the board can whistle.

So we could go on, but that institutional logic gets enough coverage. The fact remains that the Australian Opera (let's go for the aircraft carrier) receives a very fat sum from the public purse, and its current policies seem at variance with the usual justifications for subsidy. Let's look at a standard and influential defence of funding in *Opera/Music Theatre in Australia* [1980], a report to the Australia Council. Its authors invoke three arguments: music makes us more truly human; the opera repertoire is part of the human heritage; and finally, 'it is desirable for a country to foster its national identity (and pride) through encouragement of local composers and include their works in the repertoires of Australian companies.' The AO (and the VSO, *pari passu*) are giving us a thin version of heritage, neglecting the achievements of our own time and are doing virtually nothing (in the main house) for the Australian composer.

The oddity of the situation is more fully seen by comparison with the situation of the Australian playwright. Twenty years ago an Australian play was still a controversial and unusual event. Today, about a third of the plays staged in Australia are by Australians. Whole major theatre companies (the Playbox, for example) specialise in local plays.

I can hear the managements leaping into defensive postures. Come on, what about *Voss*? That got the full treatment. And what about all the children's operas commissioned from local composers by the VSO, and the youth work done by the AO, and the one-off smaller scale events like.... To all of this, I make reply: it is worthy, it is well-meant, but it is marginal. It is funded miserably by comparison with what goes into the main seasons and, above all, it is not the point. The point is that so long as the companies continue to offer a steady diet of 19th century works, they will continue to exclude not only the other 300 years of opera's history but also the creativity of our own moment.

When Stalin appointed his culture minister, Zhdanov, to develop the doctrine of socialist realism, he condemned the Russian artist for the next 50 years to inhabit the thought-world of the late 19th century. Much the same could be said of our opera managements today.

But managements could not do this unless there were massive support for their policies. Why is the opera audience so different from that for drama, or for painting—imagine if the galleries stopped at the Impressionists? Are our minds still in the 19th century. The cult of *The Phantom of the Opera* suggests that they may be. ■

Next month: the *Phantom of the Opera* phenomenon.

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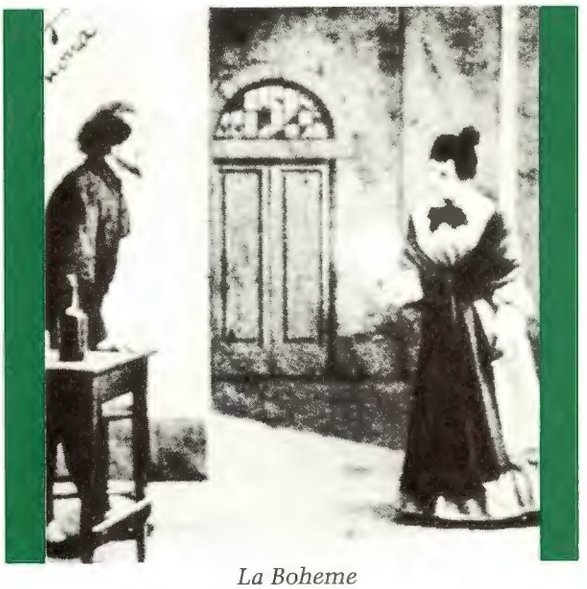
Aida



La Boheme

Carmen

GERARD WINDSOR

For whom the Bell?

EVERYBODY, ONE PRESUMES, wants the Bell Shakespeare Company to succeed. Regular productions by a highly professional troupe, on a touring basis, of Shakespearean and Jacobean classics, is a practice devoutly to be honoured in the consummation, etc. Further, there is no person Australian theatre owes more to than John Bell, and there must be a strong desire that his latest venture should prosper. Partly, perhaps, for sentimental reasons, but largely because we stand to be the beneficiaries from the continued healthy life of anything he's connected with.

How is the enterprise looking now that it has opened its initial productions, Hamlet and The Merchant of Venice? Problematic, I would suggest and, even at birth, in the throes of an identity crisis. A populist creature, or a being of high, and glamorous, art?

John Bell as Shylock: 'O Father Abram, what these Christians are.

An exegesis of the program is revealing. It reproduces the format, size and gloss of an Australian Opera program. For $6 you get a list of the company, a double page spread of 'thoughts of William Shakespeare', a forgettable (not to put too fine a point on it) poem, 'Shakespeare' by Martin Sorescu, 'a note' from John Bell, another from Adam Salzer of the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, six short quotes from Hamlet (Freud, Camus, Germaine Greer, etc.) a sentence or two from six Australians who have played Hamlet between 1963 and 1988, a synopsis, a cast list, and illustrated biographies of the company. For your money you also get a piece ofbarbed-wire entanglement on the cover, a photo of tanks advancing down a street (presumably Tian'anmen Square), another of some riot police running riot, and some ads for an airline, gin, handbags, hotels and Saabs. What you don't get is any mention of *The Merchant of Venice*, the company's itinerary or even its short-term plans.

You pay another $6 for a program for *The Merchant*, and you get a virtually identical package. Sonnet 87 and notes from the director, Carol Woodrow, replace specifically *Hamlet* material, but otherwise you might feel your $6 was less than gainfully employed. (Disconcertingly, the Sydney performances are being staged in the Showground's Hall of Industries, the home of the sample bag, that notorious package of nothing very much.)

The sense from the program is that the company is aiming at something close to the Shakespearean illiterate. Opera-goers who might be tempted by the corporate backing, the unusual venue? (Yet an Australian Opera program can be far more substantial—see the current long discussion of the history, status, worth, etc., of *La Clemenza di Tito.*) John Bell's 'note' is disappointingly thin, banal even: 'We believe the plays are among the greatest plays ever written'. And Carol Woodrow does not raise the standard noticeably: '*The Merchant of Venice* relates to today's society'. I would like to believe that a youth or blue-collar audience is being sought—the star-studded circus tent makes this plausible—but seat prices of $32.90 and $40.90 (with rubber cushions) rather blow that hope out of the water.

The same lack of secure identity and direction is evident elsewhere. Except for himself and his wife, Anna Volska, Bell has eschewed (or possibly didn't attract) big name actors for the company. On the contrary he has cast a virtually unknown 23 year-old as Hamlet and given employment to four very recent graduates of NIDA and other drama schools. All supportive selection is praiseworthy, but the glaring reality is that the standard of acting is embarrassingly uneven. A national touring company can't afford that. *Hamlet* is the worse affected. Critical consensus is that *The Merchant of Venice* is a great success, and so a general relief to the critical community who desperately wanted to avoid saying that this company had scored two duds out of two. Bell and Susan Lyons (Shylock and Portia) both give commanding performan-ces, subtly varied, sensitively spoken, brimful of motivation and personality. Whereas of John Polson's Hamlet, not only the rest, but what comes before the rest, should be silence.

A newspaper feature on the whole enterprise told what might ambivalently be a winning tale or a horror story of how Bell asked Polson if he'd seen or read *Hamlet.* No, he hadn't. Well then, he knew the story? No, he didn't. Bell sent him home to read it. He bounced back a few days later announcing 'Hamlet is me'. If so, John Polson has a dreary monochromatic personality with a tendency to swallow his words and scamper about like a pepped-up Estragon. The cult of *naïveté* and the *tabula rasa* should have limits.

THERE SEEMS NO CENTRE to this *Hamlet*, no unified, coherent direction. Gertrude, a lookalike for Rod Stewart (admittedly on one of his balmier days) has two sharply distinct, all-consuming phases—the lascivious and the depressed. How could anyone ever have called her 'my most seeming virtuous queen'? Patrick Dickson (consistently one of the real assets of the company) plays Polonius with a Scottish (or is it a Geordie?) accent. This is funny, but where does it fit into any overall interpretation? The First Player is done with a Polish accent, but this would appear to be the actor's natural speaking voice. What is the point of one Pole and one dodderer from North Britain among a residue of more or less refined Australians?

The identity problem recurs. As everybody knows, circus seating is in raised tiers. This apparently was the aim of the Bell Company, but money shortages forced them into rows of plastic chairs on the level. The stage is a black, raised, apronless platform, with a painted circular centrepiece. The whole is reminiscent of a trampoline, and when the audience's eyes are at actors' ankle level, and the Nimrod Shakespearean tradition (essentially an accelerated, athletic one) of rapid, often run-on entrances and exits is in full cry, a performance that lacks an interpretative centre or strong leads is going to look like a complicated aerobics routine.

The Bell Company is minimalist—the set is functional, props and costumes scant. The fun-and-games image has had its smile contracted severely by heat, crude seating arrangements, guy ropes and stanchions getting the best view and, above all, the price of tickets. A heavy responsibility is cast on to the quality of the acting, the coherence of the production and Shakespeare's words. This *Hamlet* staggers under that weight. This *Merchant* bears up magnificently. Yet, oddly, extra performances of *Hamlet* have now been scheduled for Sydney (school's back, set text?), whereas the initial season of *The Merchant* is already advertising 'good seats available at the door'—always an ominous sign. The contrary omen is the good will.

Australia's British cultural heritage is hardly the flavour of the decade. The bias is towards the indigenous, the multicultural and the regional. Will Shakespeare escape this discrimination? So far he seems to have been excepted. (Why exactly?) But the day must come when he's no longer *de rigueur* as a set text at either school or university. He'll be on his own. Or a philosophically secure, consistently good Bell company could be his ticket to continued life in Australia. ■

•The Bell Shakespeare Company opens its Brisbane season on 4 April.

Gerard Windsor is a Sydney writer. His books include *The Harlots Enter First*, *Memories of the Assassination Attempt* and *That Fierce Virgin*.

Photo: Adrian Lyons SJ

Keep 'em guessing (Carlton, Victoria)

Game's up, bishop!

The 1901 *Catholic Encyclopedia*, in discussing Easter customs, notes that in France and Germany ball games were part of the customary amusement. 'The ball may represent the sun, which is believed to take three leaps in rising on Easter morning. Bishops, priests and monks, after the strict discipline of Lent, used to play ball during Easter week. The ball game was connected with a dance in which even bishops and abbots took part. Afterwards a banquet was given, during which a homily on the feast was read. All these customs disappeared for obvious reasons.'

Obvious reasons?

Monument to misrule

Former Philippines first lady Imelda Marcos is immortalised by a church mural in the coastal town of Agoo, 250 km north of Manila. The mural, in the Shrine of Our Lady of Charity, depicts her among angels. The parish dates from 1578 but the 6000-seat basilica was rebuilt during the rule of former President Ferdinand Marcos, who raised monuments to himself and his wifeand named roads, bridges and parks after their families. Marcos was accused of embezzling US$100 million from government funds to buy art and real estate in New York, but died before facing court. During the Marcos era, Cardinal Sebastian Baggio, then prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Bishops in Rome, rededicated the Agoo shrine. Stained-glass religious artwork and glittering gold-plated chandeliers decorate the church, and visitors pose in front of the basilica for souvenir photos.
Well, they would, wouldn't they?

Spelling it out

The *Eureka Street* computer used for composing text is equipped with a spell-check. When it locates a spelling not found in its dictionary, the computer suggests an alternative. It suggested replacing 'Hewson' with 'Hussein', and 'Keating' with 'Cheating'. The software is being checked for bias.

Ulterior Motifs welcomes pithy contributions from readers. Address to: The editor, *Eureka Street*, **PO Box 553, Richmond 3121.**

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