

EUREKA STREET

Vol. 8 No. 7 September 1998

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of celebration

— Peter Steele on Seamus Heaney

of the unimaginable

— Damien Broderick on the nano-future

of Henry Handel Richardson

— John S. J. goes on a literary pilgrimage

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Modernism's History

Tegan Bennett reviews
Matthew Condon's *The Pillow Fight*

Ivor Indyk reviews
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Cover: Alan Oldfield, 'The voyage, first day', oil and acrylic on canvas and board. Collection of the artist. One of a series of eight paintings on the story of Mary Watson, from the exhibition *Escape Artists, Modernists in the Tropics*, curated by Gavin Wilson. Slide and permission courtesy the Cairns Regional Gallery.

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Art history lessons

THIS MONTH'S COVER PAINTING tells an intriguing and complex tale about Australia. Some North Queenslanders will be familiar with it. The rest of us, less blessed with coral atolls and myth, will have to go in search.

The painting, by Sydney artist Alan Oldfield, is part of a series, completed over the decade 1986-96 and based on the life and death of Mary Beatrice Watson. As Oldfield's epic rendering suggests, Mrs Watson's 19th-century story reaches into myth, but it is also firmly lodged in the tragic conflicts we are still rehearsing 100 years later.

Mary Watson, née Phillips, was born in Cornwall, in 1860. She died when she was still a young woman, of thirst, on a coral atoll near Lizard Island off the far North Queensland coast. With her died her infant son, Ferrier, and a Chinese manservant, called Ah Sam. They had fled Lizard Island after an attack by Aborigines. The attack seems to have been provoked by the Watsons' building on land that was a sacred site.

Mary Watson kept a diary of her last days, found with her body and kept now in the Cooktown Library. It is written in the unassailable moral shorthand of the desperate. This is her final entry:

October 11, 1881

Still all alive. Ferrier very much better this morning. Self feeling very weak. I think it will rain today; clouds very heavy; wind not quite so hard. No rain. Morning fine weather. Ah Sam preparing to die, have not seen him since 9th. Ferrier more cheerful. Self not feeling at all well. Have not seen any boat of any description. No water. Nearly dead with thirst.

Alan Oldfield found a version of Mary Watson's story when he staying in a small sugar town north of Port Douglas in 1985. Over the next ten years he constructed a visual libretto for her, and for those people—Aboriginal, English, Australian and Chinese—with whom she came into contact during her brief life. Eight of the paintings are currently on show in the Cairns Regional Gallery, in a wonderful exhibition called *Escape Artists, Modernists in the Tropics*, curated by Gavin Wilson. I saw it during the days when the tax package was being tied up in Canberra. That same week Michael Leunig drew a cartoon in the Fairfax press which pondered the universality of 'packaging'. Another Fairfax journalist, Ross Gittins, a self-confessed economics enthusiast, pondered the predominance of economics. Was there not a bigger picture, he lamented. I wished I could have bought them both a ticket to Cairns.



Mary Watson's story can't be neatly packaged.

In Cooktown she met and married Captain R.F. Watson, who made his living fishing for sea slugs (little wonder their French name, *bêche de mer*, is retained). With their Chinese servants, they moved to Lizard Island and built there. It is not easy to recover intention or cause. The Aboriginal attack which followed was met with white retribution from the mainland.

These are the bare shards. Mary's diaries, with their brief reference to 'the natives', don't detail the reasons for the attack, or indeed anything about the natives except that they are 'the other'. Nor do they reveal much about the nature of the relationship between English mistress and Chinese servants in the fish business 100 years ago. Ah Sam escaped from Lizard Island with Mary, in the *bêche de mer* pot they used for boiling the sea creatures. Her other manservant, Ah Leong, was killed a

quarter mile from the Watson's cottage, according to her diary (... *Ah Sam found his hat, which is the only proof*).

Oldfield has taken potent emblems and built them into a visual narrative that traverses the territory of paradox we have to contend with still. His *bêche de mer* pot has the weird resonance of Sidney Nolan's mask for Ned Kelly. Metal in landscape. Chinese hats in lizard country. Salt water and death by thirst.

Australia. ■

—Morag Fraser

Escape Artists: Modernists in the Tropics *can be seen at the Cairns Regional Gallery until 30 August; then in Rockhampton City Art Gallery, late September–October; Brisbane City Gallery in November; Mosman Regional Gallery, NSW, in January–February 1999; Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, VIC, in March–May 1999, and the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, in May–June 1999.*

COMMENT: 2

LINCOLN WRIGHT

'O The Washington machine

'OF COURSE THE ALLIANCE with the United States is on track,' Ambassador Andrew Peacock wryly remarked as he stood on the steps of the Sydney Opera House.

In town for the annual Australia–US Ministerial talkfest, the thin, well-dressed Peacock looked dignified and knowledgeable, and even smiled a little after Madeleine Albright's rather limp speech to an audience of Sydney's well-heeled.

As the US secret service whisked away the Secretary of State—a sort of restrained female Henry Kissinger—Peacock absorbed the cool atmosphere of the Harbour, so very different from the frenetic rush of Washington DC.

No longer the pained and faintly absurd would-be Liberal Prime Minister, Peacock seems to have found his *métier* as Australia's top man in Washington, as the socially prominent Scotch College boy made good at the centre of world power.

And quite understandably so: for Peacock's role as the defender of our faith in the American alliance is not a difficult one. Indeed, quite the opposite. The only serious arguments made against the alliance during the AUSMIN talks were by disgruntled Americans writing in the opinion pages of Australian newspapers.

Concerned about the money spent on keeping US forces in Asia, their basic point was that a forward presence in Asia was unnecessary; and that nations like Australia can pay their own way, with the US acting as a distant balancer in the region.

During AUSMIN, there was a sullen dispute over US wheat aid to Indonesia, but no Australian stepped forward with a strategic argument against the alliance, only the inevitable tactical demands for trade concessions.

Why, after the Cold War, does Australia still back the US? And, more importantly, why does the US seem to need Australia even more?

A clue to the American side is to be found in the cosmopolitan German journalist Josef Joffe, who also works at Harvard University's Olin Institute of Strategic Studies. Joffe argues that as the only superpower, the US can maintain its global clout by choosing between two strategies.

At the price of greater instability, it can adopt the British Empire's method of controlling powerful nations through balance-of-power tactics. Or it can follow German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck who, when faced with encirclement in a hostile Europe last century, divided his enemies by making them dependent on German success.

In Bismarck's scheme, all European countries except France were tied to Germany as spokes to a hub. The aim was to make their relations with Germany more important than their relations with each other. By dividing potential enemies with favours, this minimised the chance of hostile coalitions forming.

Australia is a spoke in the hub of American power, as are most Asian nations, including Japan and down the track a bit possibly even China. Our relations with the US are more important than any other, so that we would be very unlikely to join a future coalition of powers to undermine US predominance.

And as the AUSMIN talks revealed, our defence establishment receives favours from the US to stay in touch with the computer-based Revolution in Military Affairs, as well as ongoing intelligence data.

If the attention lavished on Peacock by American journalists is a measure of anything, life in Washington is sweet for the last Liberal of John Howard's generation with anything like charisma. ■

Lincoln Wright is the economics correspondent at Federal Parliament for the *Canberra Times*.

Howard's fundamental test

IF BIG BUSINESSES ARE CHEERING, it's no good for me.' With these words a Canberra cabbie dismissed the Government's just-released tax plan. Apart from anything else, his response reveals the tribal nature of tax debates. The Howard Government (any government for that matter) needs to appeal to the community's sense of fair play if it wants its tax measures accepted. It must substantiate its claims that the plan is fair and will promote the national interest.

Early analysis indicates it will be an uphill battle.

Public opinion polling has consistently registered massive community suspicion, if not rejection, of a goods and services tax. Even though the Prime Minister has called for sober analysis of his package, polls conducted days after the release reveal that Australians remain suspicious, if not cynical, of the tax benefits.

The Government, economic purists, and the 'GST industry' implore the community to recognise the efficiency gains, employment incentives, savings mechanisms and safety nets contained in the package. But a reform program of this magnitude must not escape the fundamental test of fairness. It must offer more than reduced costs for big business. Also, a package predicated on dispensing charity will fail. It is totally unsatisfactory to rely on handouts to the poor when in fact they are owed a fairer share of the cake in the first place.

Naturally, citizens will want to see their standard of living improve. They will also welcome relief from some taxes. However, those with a capacity to pay should do so. The fairness of the tax package rests on this principle.

As is the way with complex issues, the devil is in the detail. Oddly, the 200-page package lacks important information. Assumptions about the growth rates for the economy, the cost of living estimates and the differential price impacts invite rigorous scrutiny. The extent of 'GST free' concessions to health, aged care and social services is uncertain. The distributional impacts on the lifestyles and circumstances for low-income people, the elderly, the disabled and the long-term unemployed are debatable. In other words, the gap between the poor and even the average in the community threatens to widen if these proposals are implemented.

On the jobs front, the scenario is patchy. Incentives for work in and outside the home have improved. Other tax changes threaten foreign investment in Australian jobs. Domestic industry's costs have been reduced in the hope that new jobs will flow rather than businesses pocketing the windfall gains.

But will the wealth distribution in the community shift for the better? Certainly there are personal tax breaks: high-income singles, for example, outstrip low-income people by an astounding \$60 per week. High-income families receive almost double the weekly benefit of middle-income households and four times that of low-income families.

The regressive tax-mix shift from income to consumption was always going to be precarious. It seems that the Government has relied more on the shift than they previously indicated. Estimates show that consumption taxes will fund the approximately

\$13 billion income tax cuts to the tune of \$4.8 billion. The budget surplus will deliver \$7.2 billion a year to fund the remainder.

Regressive state taxes go only if the community accepts the GST. The Government's efforts on closing income tax loopholes appear timid. The essentials of life, including food and clothing, are taxed. Allowances and benefits are raised, yet at rates not commensurate with estimated price rises. Treasury figures anticipate food price rises of 5 per cent across the board. Other reputable analysis places the rise at 7.2 per cent. Low-income people and the elderly, even with 4 per cent increases in benefits, will understandably be wary.

This is the nub of the problem. Economic models vary in their assumptions, calculations and projections. The Government has applied a 1.9 per cent cost-of-living increase across the entire community. Yet low-income people, the disabled and pensioners regularly purchase different combinations of goods and services to meet their daily needs. Their cost-of-living expenses could easily inflate beyond Government expectations.

This sounds the biggest alarm bell for the package. Since the Government has opted for handouts to the less well-off rather than aggressively amending the income tax system, will the money be available to compensate middle and low-income people into the future?

Many economic commentators have already raised concerns over the optimistic economic growth forecasts. The package contains no adjustment for any downturn in growth due to the Asian recession. If the Government continues to raid the budget surplus and the economy slows, there will be few alternatives other than to rely even further on consumption revenue, including taxes on life's essentials, to keep well-off Australians comfortable.

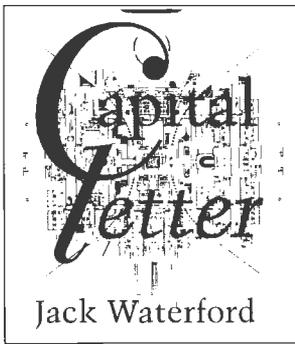
Probably the most dubious assumption is that low-income people will be protected by political management. The size of tax cuts and maintenance of the safety net is often beyond governments. It's recognised that the present budget surplus was delivered through massive cuts to public expenditure in health, aged care, disability, employment and youth services. These were offset with regressive and harsh 'user pays' programs. History can repeat itself.

If the economy contracts and growth slows, pressure groups will want concessions. We know from past political decisions how easily once-discarded tariffs can reappear, and how readily business and middle-class welfare can be delivered. The tax package has already delivered a \$5 billion windfall to the private health insurance industry—this in the absence of any means test or obligation on the part of at least the well-off to use their insurance. Any more of this and there's no guarantee that social service expenditures will be maintained or more user charges will not be introduced. There is a distinct risk that the standard of living for the less well-off will deteriorate.

* Maybe the Canberra cabbie was unfair to be so dismissive of the plan. Or perhaps he's spoken to too many politicians! ■



Francis Sullivan is Executive Director of the Australian Catholic Health Care Association.



C Bad precedents

Jack Waterford

CONNOISSEURS of irony will find two especially delicious things about the embarrassment in which Ian Callinan, once the hope of the side, now finds himself. The unethical conduct of which he stands accused—and by a Federal Court judge at that—is something of which many lawyers are suspected but in which it is almost impossible to be found out.

When Mr Callinan was a barrister, he was, according to Justice Goldberg of the Federal Court, at the least a witting conniver, possibly even the architect, of a strategy in which a rich man (who knew he was in the wrong and who knew he did not have a leg to stand on) decided to use the processes of the court to buy time, perhaps to force from the other party a compromise. In other words, less than that to which he was entitled.

A statement of claim was prepared asserting facts which lawyers for the client had no reason to believe to be true. A series of complicating and delaying strategies were devised and carried out. At various stages, the man frankly proclaimed by the politicians who chose him for the High Court as one likely to bring true conservative approaches and standards back to the court, wrote letters showing that he knew what was going on.

So what? some of his defenders, including the editor of the *Australian* in a cogent editorial, have asked. We know that lawyers do this all the time. Yes, but they do not often get caught at it. The reason why they don't is that what passes between lawyer and client is privileged, and cannot be disclosed except with the client's consent.

The problem for Justice Callinan, and the solicitors who instructed him, is that the rich man ultimately went bankrupt, leaving the other person (and others) to whistle for his money properly due to him. The irony was that the creditor went to the receiver in bankruptcy and offered him \$1500 for all of the documents associated with the litigation. It was now the receiver's property and privilege, and he sold.

It was a profitable investment. The creditor now has a judgment (albeit one under appeal) against the solicitors for abuse of the processes of the court, and there was no more damning evidence against them than the advices emanating from Ian Callinan.

There is a second irony. During the 1980s, Ian Callinan prosecuted Lionel Murphy, and did so with great skill and professionalism. But he did one unusual thing during the trial which caused considerable comment.

Lionel Murphy produced a number of character witnesses to tell the jury that he was a splendid chap with a wonderful record. Character evidence is of little probative value and is usually allowed to go by without being cross-examined. But one of the character witnesses was Justice Michael Kirby, then a justice of the Industrial Court. Callinan set out to discredit him with some offensive questions suggesting, in effect, that the man owed his judicial appointment and his fame to patronage from Lionel Murphy when Murphy was in government. Implicitly, the jury was being told, he would say such nice things about the man who had given him undeserved jobs.

Leave entirely aside any delicious but highly unworthy speculation about what Justice Kirby, now also on the High Court, might feel in the unfortunate event that the conduct of Mr Callinan arose there. The real irony is that it might be by just the same

implicit standards that Ian Callinan is judged in other forums: even, possibly, the bar of Parliament.

Does the case of Ian Callinan matter very much against the background of tax breaks, election euphoria, One Nation and sales of Telstra? It might, if only as yet another issue of standards, public duty and leadership.

If John Howard has his way, an election will be fought about government fiscal rectitude, about claims that not only is the economy humming because of his good management but that it will act as a magic pudding providing more services at lower cost, and, of course, about tax breaks for everyone.

Kim Beazley, by contrast, would like the election to be fought about jobs, Labor's own version of tax cuts, and general issues of the Government's credibility. He has ample material based on the Government's record with which to attack it, but that attack will inevitably be blunted by his party's own record of corruption of power.

Tax cuts, even with goods and services taxes, might be attractive enough in a mere auction for votes. But there are ample signs that the electorate would rather be wooed by some vision of the nation, even perhaps by some notion of common sacrifice rather than booty, if the end seemed worthwhile. And if, of course, the politicians on both sides are in such odour that neither party is much trusted or thought to inspire. Voting for Pauline Hanson at least delivers a loud raspberry to politicians who do little to inspire any sense of community, who hardly ever evoke notions of the common good, who use the public administration and public purse for partisan or personal purposes, and who have been engaged, with bipartisan zeal, in stripping the public sector of whatever declining capacity it has to protect any popular sovereignty. That she is devoid of answers—and very nasty in focusing her politics of blame on Aborigines, migrants and other vulnerable sectors of the community—many of her supporters will recognise, possibly more quickly than her detractors will recognise that mainstream politics does not have answers that satisfy either.

ONE MIGHT BE CYNICAL about Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke's records as Prime Ministers, but they were the last in long lines of politicians who recognised that a government's reputation for integrity was critical for survival. Paul Keating's tribal loyalties undermined his capacity to govern as surely as his habit of shortcutting political processes by making deals with interest groups.

John Howard, in opposition, talked an old language of fundamental decencies, but in government has never seemed as unconvincing as when he has had to defend his inaction on clear breaches of standards. On this, the *prima facie* case against Ian Callinan is at least as clear as travel rorting, incapacity to understand notions of conflict of interest, and the use of the public service as if it were held on freehold rather than leasehold.

Normally, in an election period, the cautious voter would be wondering which party is most likely to live up to its rhetoric. Perhaps even asking what rhetoric most inspires the head or the heart. This time around, I'd just be happy with rhetoric, if only as proof that someone, somewhere, has standards they are bound to fail to reach. ■

Jack Waterford is editor of the *Canberra Times*.

Rainbow worriers

From Michael B. Kelly, spokesperson for the Rainbow Sash movement.

A picture, they say, is worth a thousand words. On Pentecost Sunday the Church was offered a startling image. That day the Archbishop of Melbourne publicly refused communion to 50 people who were wearing brilliant rainbow-coloured sashes. Old and young, gay and straight, celibate and sexually active—all were refused. The Archbishop then formally rebuked them, and the congregation applauded. This vivid image continues to disturb hearts and minds both inside and outside the Church.

Daniel Madigan, in his article, 'Telling it straight', (*Eureka Street*, July/August 1998) is clearly disturbed by it all. Like many liberal Catholics he shows considerable sympathy for gay and lesbian Catholics facing discrimination, and yet—well, this is the 'family dinner table'. You don't arrive 'spoiling' for an 'argument'. This is not the time 'to turn up, fight with your parents and dare them not to feed you'. Many people have echoed these sentiments: 'We support what you're trying to do, but we don't like your methods.' Well, what about our methods?

The 'methods' the Rainbow Sash Movement uses are simple, dignified, reverent and clear. We attend Mass. During the opening hymn we put on our rainbow sashes, which proclaim that 'we are gay and lesbian people who embrace and celebrate our sexuality as a Sacred Gift'. We then take part in the liturgy like everyone else. At communion we go up and quietly, but resolutely, claim our place at the 'family dinner table'. We are refused communion. We return to our places and stand silently. Family members and friends wear the sashes with us, becoming 'lesbian and gay for a day', enduring our rejection for the sake of love and justice. (If Madigan wants to deepen his family/church analogy I suggest he look no further.) People who are not Catholics wear the sash and stand silently with us. After Mass we talk honestly about what has happened and about our call to the Church. That's it. These are our 'methods'.

Archbishop Pell calls such methods an 'inappropriate ideological demonstration'; Cardinal Clancy says they are 'futile'; Daniel Madigan suggests they will 'set back the cause

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of gay people in the Church'. We disagree.

The Catholic Church is not a discussion group, a theological academy or a debating society. It is a Church, and its lifeblood is the Eucharist. All that we are and all that we do finds its 'source and summit' in this sacred meal. 'The Church makes the Eucharist; the Eucharist makes the Church', as the early Christians put it. To 're-make' this meal is to 're-make' the Church, which is why the bishops guard their control of it, why women are marginalised at it, why openly gay people are refused a share in it.

Yet this meal is meant to express the depths of who we are as a Gospel community of love and justice. The Eucharist, then, must be accountable to love and justice. It must be answerable to the Gospel. The very idea of an unjust or oppressive Eucharist is a betrayal of everything

Christ stood for. We have lived with just such a betrayal for far too long.

It is true that the Eucharist 'celebrates the unity that underlies our diversity', as Madigan says. However, at this table we celebrate heterosexual marriages, wedding anniversaries, religious professions, priestly ordinations, the legal profession, the racing fraternity, ethnic cultures and football teams. Everyone dresses up and celebrates! Yet gay people must not wear rainbows. No symbols, prayers or processions for us. We must be anonymous, lest we disturb the 'unity'. The silence and invisibility demanded of us at the Eucharist reflect, deepen and perpetuate the discrimination we face in the rest of Church life. This is the place where we must make our call for justice. This is the heart of the Church, a heart that needs radical conversion.

Well then, are our methods 'futile'? Firstly, no action on behalf of love and justice is ever futile. Secondly, as Madigan points out, 'Church moral teachings do in fact change'. Central to this process of change is the challenge and lived experience of those the Church refuses to hear. These people must speak. In our 'Pentecost letter' we call on the Church to 'honour our wisdom and experience', to seek with us a 'new appreciation of human sexuality in all of its diversity and beauty' and to work towards an Ecumenical Council with this focus. However, there are no public forums, no 'structures of listening' in our increasingly authoritarian Church. How are we to be heard? Within two weeks our movement had engaged six Archbishops, made headlines around the nation and provoked intense discussions in the media, in homes, schools and parishes. Bishop Power in Canberra has even begun to explore open dialogue with gay people in his diocese. Our methods are not futile. The furore they have caused suggests, rather, that we have indeed touched the very heart of the matter.

Furores, of course, can also cause damage. Have we 'set back the cause of gay people in the Church'? A woman outside St Patrick's thought so. My sister, a heterosexual mother of six, was still wearing her sash when she heard an exclamation behind her: 'Whatever sympathy I had for gay people is gone now!' My sister snapped back, 'This isn't about sympathy, it's about justice!' Precisely. Polite discussions in closed rooms have their

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This month, the writer of each letter we publish will receive a pack of postcards featuring cartoons and graphics, by *Eureka Street* regulars, Dean Moore, Siobhan Jackson and Tim Metherall.

place, but so do clear strong actions. We have held up a mirror in which the Church must face the ugliness of what it is doing to gay people. Even more importantly, the Rainbow Sash offers a 'call to consciousness', as feminist theologian Carter Heyward commented, 'that things really are as bad as they seem. The only ethical way to be a Catholic in that kind of situation is to be a resistor.' This is the painful experience of 'Conscientisation', that first crucial step on the road to liberation. Gay people are waking up and standing up for ourselves after many centuries of persecution. We refuse to be 'non-persons', rejecting that fate which liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez claims is the worst oppression of all. This 'waking up' is the only true way forward.

The real question in all this is not how gay people can dare to upset the Eucharistic meal. It is how our brothers and sisters can continue to eat at this table when we are refused. Yet there was another woman on Pentecost Sunday who drew my mother aside. Mum had worn the sash and was still shaking from the palpable rejection. 'I am so sorry,' she said, 'but I want you to know that when I saw you rainbow-sash people being refused I said to the priest, "Well in that case I won't take communion either!"' We must make the journey to justice together. Please, join us.

Michael B. Kelly
Rye, VIC

Table talk

From David McKenna

Daniel Madigan's Comment—'Telling It Straight' (*Eureka Street*, July/August 1998) has some very sensible and enlightened things to say about the

issue of homosexuality and the Church.

May I just focus on one very important issue which he raises in dealing with the activities of the Rainbow Sash Movement. Madigan queries the propriety of the demonstration of the sash at the moment of communion. He says that this is 'the moment in which we celebrate the unity which underlies our diversity ... around the table set for us by a loving God' etc.

Firstly, let me say that Jesus himself felt no such diffidence at the first Eucharist. There was, in fact, no genuine unity around that table. Jesus had no hesitation in pointing that out in very blunt language to Judas (Luke 22, 21–23).

Secondly, Jesus felt no reticence in making his presence felt inside the Temple.

He preached his radical message there much to the chagrin of the religious establishment. He was even more vigorous in dealing with the entrepreneurs of the day who were in that place for their unworthy purposes (Luke 19:45–46).

It is ironic that Madigan should use the analogy of keeping the peace at the family Christmas dinner. I suspect that he has never had the experience of having his very identity rejected by members of his own family. If he had, I suggest that he would never use such an analogy.

I wonder if Jesus would sit around at such an occasion drinking and politely discussing the weather and the football?

The Eucharist is indeed the family table. It is entirely appropriate that those family members who have been oppressed and persecuted should, when they approach that table, give some clear sign to the family that if unity around that table is to be genuine, then their pain needs to be addressed.

I do not wish to hurt Daniel Madigan's feelings, but may I say to him that those of us who are confronted daily by the wreckage of human lives caused by the Church's teachings and institutional response to homosexuality will find his attitude a bit precious.

I sometimes wonder if this really is a Church that was founded by one who was a courageous and outspoken dissident and who was finally put to death by the religious establishment of the day.

David McKenna
East Kew, VIC

Credit where credit's due

From Peter Graves

Thanks for the good news on where some of our foreign aid is going—successfully alleviating rural poverty among pig farmers in China ('Even Eden Goes to Market', *Eureka Street*, July/August 1998).

The timely pioneering work on micro-credit by Bangladesh's Grameen Bank is being successfully replicated and has resulted in 14 million of our world's poor having access to this important form of small loans. Equally important, the founder of the Grameen Bank, Professor Yunus, has been advising the World Bank since 1995 on similar lending practices now adopted by that Bank.

So important has this financing become that an international Micro-credit Summit was held in Washington in February 1997 to spread the good news. Representatives there from 137 countries made a commitment to extend these small loans to 100 million of the poorest of the poor by 2005. This would enable 500 million people to move out of poverty.

To its credit, the Australian Government joined this commitment and has since increased its financial support by an extra \$2 million in 1997/98. However, the budget papers on our foreign aid for 1998/99 do not appear to continue this strong and practical

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commitment. At 0.27 per cent of GDP, our foreign aid unfortunately continues to be well below the UN target of 0.7 per cent.

Our aid needs one clear objective: poverty reduction through sustainable development. As your article demonstrated, micro-credit could be an important way of successfully alleviating rural poverty for hundreds of millions of our world's poor. It's the right kind of foreign aid too—a hand-up, not a hand-out.

Peter Graves
Campbell, ACT

Title fight

From Fr Brenden T. Walters

I was surprised to see my name being bandied around in an article by Fr Frank Brennan SJ in the July edition of the Jesuit magazine *Eureka Street*. The article is an account of his adventures and obviously written to a sympathetic audience. This response, submitted to *Eureka Street*, is (I hope) an opportunity for me to put my point of view across and perhaps reply to a couple of the comments made by Fr Brennan.

Fr Brennan quotes from one of my articles thus: 'There appears to be no sympathy in the Catholic Church for the fact that the pastoralists stand to lose their livelihood and their homes.' He then makes this curious comment: 'This was an explosive message circulated, as it was, during the Queensland election.' My criticism of the position of the Catholic bishops on native title was in no way politically motivated. I have always been critical of the Catholic bishops for taking the side of the Aborigines against the pastoralists in the native title campaign. Is Fr Brennan suggesting my comment is incorrect? Is he saying he has some sympathy for the pastoralists? Is he blaming me for the result of the Queensland election?

Fr Brennan says he rang me to learn of my concerns. He then goes on to give his version of part of that conversation. He says he discovered that my view was that Wik was wrong, the Native Title Act was wrong, and even Mabo was wrong. When I said I thought the decision in Wik was wrong, Fr Brennan replied 'I agree with you.' I told him I thought the Native Title Act was wrong because it recognised, for the purposes of native title, people of mixed Aboriginal descent. I said of the Mabo decision: 'We are stuck with it.'

The decision in Mabo was that the common law recognised native title to land according to *their tribal law and custom*. It is *their* law. Native tribal law applies to those tribal Aborigines who have both an initiated mother and father and who have been through the law. It does not apply to people of mixed Aboriginal/European descent any more than it applies to a person of Irish/English descent. People of

mixed Aboriginal descent have their Aboriginality recognised by *our* law and they don't qualify for native title rights under tribal law and custom. The fact that the Federal Parliament permits persons of mixed Aboriginal descent to apply as native title claimants simply means that instead of applying *their law and custom*, the Parliament has applied *our law*.

The argument that tribal law adapts to modern times is spurious. Tribal law is given from the spirits; it cannot be changed. The adaptation spoken of may allow the substitution of a gun for a spear in some circumstances but it would not allow for the inclusion of non-members of the tribe into full membership. Any argument suggesting otherwise is simply not correct and probably self-serving.

The only Aboriginal people who have a right to native title to land are those who have been through tribal law in the tradition consistent with Aboriginal law at the point of white settlement—are full members of the tribe—fully initiated. Unless this fact is recognised and put into effect, there will never be reconciliation. The situation at the moment is that people of mixed Aboriginal descent are demanding legal rights to which they are not entitled.

No decent person would deny the provision of social justice to people of mixed Aboriginal descent but that can never be achieved at the expense of the pastoralists. If the decision in Mabo had been faithfully applied, the Aboriginal claimants would have been limited to those people subject to tribal law. The 'flood gates' were opened by the Federal Parliament when it enacted the Native Title Act and related Acts. Any blame levelled at the High Court for this predicament is, in my view, misdirected.

The pastoralists are not asking the Catholic bishops to back them against the Aboriginal people. The pastoralists would have been quite happy if the bishops had remained neutral. But the Catholic bishops saw fit to apply their considerable moral influence and their vast resources and personnel to promote the Aboriginal side of the native title campaign. As a result of this very effective campaign, many Catholics are now firmly committed to native title rights for people of mixed Aboriginal descent. That amounts, in my view, to a firm commitment to something which is false. There is little doubt that pastoralists are entitled to feel angry and betrayed, especially as their own financial contributions helped fund the unjust campaign being waged against them.

The native title campaign has caused serious division in the bush between Aboriginal people and other Australians. Where there was peace now there is unrest and disharmony. The economic uncertainty brought on by native title is a source of great heartache to country people.

It would be a mistake for the Catholic bishops to equate Aboriginal social justice and welfare with an Aboriginal political agenda. Whilst it may be politically expedient to do so, it is factually incorrect and not conducive to the best interests of all Aboriginal people. Nevertheless, that is what has happened. Those people who have successfully used the Catholic social justice organisations to advance the Aboriginal political cause have acted beyond their authority. They have taken the Catholic bishops down an inappropriate and divisive path. The only proper course of action is for the Catholic bishops officially to disassociate themselves from Aboriginal politics and to make it clear that Fr Brennan does not speak on behalf of the Catholic Church.

Brenden T. Walters
Kensington, NSW

More than symbols

From Greg Mansell

Andrew Hamilton writes in his article 'The Clash of Symbols' (*Eureka Street*, June 1998) that 'symbols are the lifeblood of churches'. What an extraordinary statement! If I was thirsty would you give me water or a picture of a cup? Unfortunately the secret is out—the church, at least according to Andrew, would opt for the picture!

Now this may all sound facile, but of course it isn't. The Catholic Church rightly discerns that there are non-negotiable stands that it must take on matters of faith. It is therefore quite right to be concerned that those who share together with them in communion are indeed of the same faith, one body. The real problem however is not whether they are collectively one body, but whether they are one body in communion with Christ.

Christendom has been splintered asunder and it would be folly, an act of madness, to declare that this fractured, divided, rebellious house was indeed Christ's body. If the Second Vatican Council is rightly quoted as saying that what Christians have in common is their baptism and their following of Christ, then it must be asked was the Council right in saying this? I am sure you will find in scripture that we were all baptised into one body. If this is indeed so, and if we are all following Christ as the Council states, then where is there division? Aren't we united? Why aren't we all sharing communion?

The answer is of course obvious and unpalatably so. For if in fact all who say they are following Christ are not necessarily following Him, then the question must be asked, who is? And who would want to raise that question totally, frankly, honestly with themselves before God, let alone in the midst of an ecumenical assembly?

The unfortunate reality is that it all has become merely symbol. One man is born a Catholic so he is a Catholic, another man is born a Protestant so he is a Protestant. Is the Catholic more righteous than the non-Catholic or vice versa? We can all point the



finger, but are any of us closer to God? For surely this is the only point of faith.

The questions raised concerning Kennett and Clinton pale into insignificance compared with the weight of the questions our divisions raise.

When Jesus said 'unless you eat of my body and drink of my blood you have no life in yourself', did He really mean it, or was He merely speaking symbolically?

Greg Mansell
Golden Valley, TAS

Lives at risk

From Gavan Breen

Is it possible for a top politician to save his (or her) soul? How, for example, can a person maintain Christian or other religious principles while being a leading part of a government that condones genocide?

How, as a more specific example, can a member of a government that recognises Tibet as part of China enjoy a clear conscience, knowing that Chinese rule will eventually result in the destruction of the Tibetans as a people and the total sinicisation of their country? (A process that is being carried out with great brutality, as our politicians well know.)

Think, as another example, of the situation of the Kurds. Any government that recognises, without qualification, the governments of Iran, Iraq and Turkey, and so implicitly recognises their national boundaries, is conniving at a situation in which the

Kurds have no country of their own, and are condemned to remain oppressed and rebellious minorities in countries which do not have respect for the rights of minorities. As a result, there is no prospect of peace in that region; there seem to be only two ways in which it could be achieved: wholesale killing of Kurds so as either to eliminate them altogether or reduce them to a totally crushed minority (and could you call a state achieved that way 'peace'?) or redrawing of national boundaries to give them unity and autonomy. The latter is probably even more unthinkable in our world of greed and rivalry than the former.

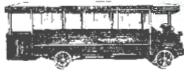
Maybe some Christian politician could explain to me how their consciences cope with such facts.

Talking about national boundaries, I wonder how national leaders feel about

theirs being in so many cases creations of Western colonialism. What could be a more obvious, arbitrary and artificial imposition of colonialism than the line that divides the island of New Guinea into two halves? Do leaders like Suharto always just accept them, I wonder, or do they sometimes think about the implication: if the boundaries imposed by Western colonialism are sacrosanct does it not follow that Western colonialism must have been right and proper? (I guess they are sacrosanct only when the alternative is drawing back from them, not when the possibility is of expanding beyond them.)

Finally, to bring a hotch-potch of a letter to a close, I will ask for comments on my definition of an international diplomat: a person who would let a million lives be put at risk rather than openly doubt the word of a leader of a 'friendly country' (or trading partner).

Gavan Breen
Alice Springs, NT



The Month's Traffic



Hun Sen's score

SATURDAY, 1 AUGUST was the most democratic day that Cambodia had experienced in a year by most observers' reckoning. Over 90 per cent of eligible voters cast their ballots in the overdue elections, under the eyes of 500 observers from 35 countries. Despite claims of electoral fraud by Funcinpec and the Sam Rainsy party, the United Nations has accepted that the elections were generally free and fair. Yet questions are still being asked. So are people dubious simply because in their view the wrong person won or because the election was undermined long before the first Saturday in August?

Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) was out-pollled by the combined vote for Prince Ranariddh's Funcinpec and the Sam Rainsy party. But with only 41 per cent of the vote nationwide, CPP looks to have secured 64 of the 122 seats. A change in the seat allocation formula in June favoured them greatly. The performance of the opposition groups was remarkable, considering their restricted access to radio and television during the campaign, and the fact that the National Election Committee supervising the poll is stacked with Hun Sen cronies. There has also been violence and intimidation visited upon opposition figures since last year's coup, evidenced by the scores of people who came to Phnom Penh for protection immediately following the election.

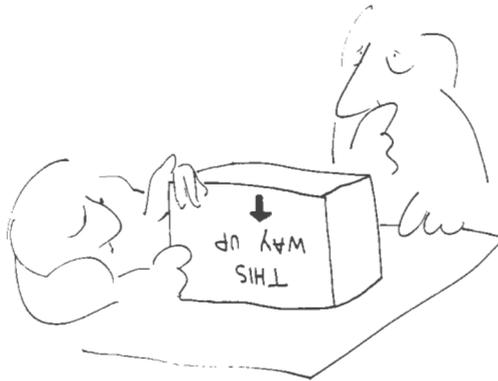
The proposition that a culture of fear in the provinces influenced the result is a hard one to dismiss. Hun Sen has an aroma about him that has offended the Cambodian nose since his time as Vietnam's puppet ruler. Yet by claiming the rural vote he managed to reverse the 71 per cent vote against him registered in Phnom Penh.

Two months after last year's coup, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights released a report detailing the extra-judicial killings of opposition figures. Despite repeated assurances that the killings would be investigated, Hun Sen has yet to launch an inquiry into the allegations of murder and harassment.

The CPP, since it seized control of government, has been selective about where

and how it distributed government monies and projects. Accusations of vote-buying have accompanied the building of schools and hospitals, and, in one case, even the distribution to villagers of bags full of monosodium glutamate. To be fair, if all governments were restrained from pork-barrelling, every democracy on the face of the earth would be without its current administration. But then it's unlikely that many of them would demand the return of water pumps from people who voted against them, as is rumoured to be the case in some Cambodian villages.

The lack of hard evidence of abuses in Cambodia's outer provinces in the lead-up to last month's elections is indicative of the



institutional weakness of Cambodia's fledgling democracy under which principles of justice are compromised by power structures that border on the feudal. Cambodians are used to doing what they are told. This has allowed Hun Sen to win an election despite his unpopularity, and permitted an international community tired of trying to fix Cambodia's problems to ignore the question marks and legitimise the result.

There is a view that any result was a good result in Cambodia if it provided the stability needed for the delivery of much-needed aid to the people. This certainly seems to have played a part in the thinking of Australia's former ambassador to Cambodia, Tony Kevin. He led a team of independent volunteer observers of the Cambodian election (VOCE). The purpose of the trip was made clear prior to going with a communiqué that outlined the priorities. One of the primary goals of the mission was to 'encourage international public opinion to give the election appropriate credibility'.

One wonders how widespread this attitude might have been among other observers there. JIOG, the main election observation body, comprised of government representatives from around the world, gave its cautious seal of approval two days after the election—that is, before the National Election Committee was prepared to indicate which way the count was going. The American representatives, observing independently of JIOG, stated on the eve of the election that the process was fundamentally flawed. Yet by the following Tuesday they had experienced a change of heart and declared the election to be basically fair. As the opposition's chief concern was with the propriety of the count, this raises serious doubts over the result. After the event, there seemed to be few people (former Treasurer Ralph Willis being an exception) prepared to include more than the events of polling day in their analysis of the election process.

It is hard not to have sympathy with the view, expressed by Tony Kevin and others, that we do the best we can, as an international community, to establish free and open government but aid *must* resume before Cambodia gets any worse. The ascription of the 'free and fair' label by JIOG came with this end in mind. It will also help smooth the way for Cambodia's entry into ASEAN. However, with the administration that will emerge—which CPP will control despite failing to secure a two thirds majority—there is no ironclad guarantee that the dollars will help.

But more importantly, this election was a missed opportunity to let Cambodians feel that, after decades of war and oppression, they had some control over their collective destiny through peaceful means. It is not so much that the opportunity was missed on polling day but that it was not there for the taking in the first place. Perhaps the defining moment in the lead-up to the election was the visit by Mary Robinson, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, in late January. Hun Sen put her on the back foot immediately by attacking Cambodia's UN human rights representative, Thomas Hammarberg, for bias and untruthful reporting. Instead of repeating demands that Hun Sen launch his promised inquiry into the extra-judicial killings, Robinson had to spend nearly her entire trip defending the UN's reputation.

Whether through Hun Sen's political acumen, or lack of sufficient international will, Cambodia has been let down. The power grab of last July has been laundered in last month's election.

—Jon Greenaway

Coburg college

FADED LETTERING identifies the pub nearest to Pentridge as Brown's Hotel. These days, this brick pile in Melbourne's northern suburbs is more cheerily styled Summerworld. On an afternoon of hail, sleet, grim grey scudding clouds, a temperature in single figures and fallen leaves slippery under foot, the pub's name is choicely incongruous. After a two-hour tour of one of Australia's most renowned prison sites, we repair to the warmth of the Summerworld, for an Abbot's Stout from the oldest barman still pouring grog in the city.

For a short season all who wished could see 'Pentridge Prison Unlocked'. Many children were brought along by their parents or guardians. Perhaps they were visiting in the same spirit as they would the Old Melbourne Gaol. But while 'D' Division is still replete with the horrors of 19th-century penology—heavy wooden doors, narrow cells, cold stone—the maximum security wing called Jika Jika (which opened as recently as 1980) lacks the patina of time past to obscure or sentimentalise its horrors.

Before reaching Jika Jika, tourists go through the area in which prisoners received their official visits. There are minatory notices concerning the sharing of needles, and the exchange of contraband. Once granted the privilege of visits, prisoners had to don green security overalls which were without pockets, and were sealed at the neck. The sartorial precautions didn't impede drug traffic.

From the visitors' area one moved to the recreation yards. This is a desolate space. The green baize of the upended pool table was slashed long ago. A garden seat lies in the empty swimming pool. The wind howls through the broken windows of the main recreation block. This is a world of signs, to be vigilantly interpreted. Some interdict rebellion. Others subvert authority. No Rough Play is permitted by the pool, as if it were in any Australian suburb. At Coburg, though, Nudity Will Not Be Tolerated At Any Time. There is, of course, No Smoking, Eating or Drinking in the Library. Neither are there any books, in the alcove now labelled Kev's Bottle Shop. On one wall of

this building a wag has pinned an illustrated page by a physiotherapist about remedial exercises for the sportsman or sportswoman. It is mordantly titled 'Doing a Stretch'.

The signs in Jika Jika, to which the white painted pathway next leads one, are altogether grimmer, because more boldly jesting. In this 'electronic zoo', with its 'aviary-like yards' (the guidebook's apt description), five prisoners died of asphyxiation in 1987 because of a fire that they had lit themselves in protest against the conditions in Jika Jika. Illuminated by flickering fluorescent tubes, the cell blocks fan out like the spokes of a wheel. Each cell has a double bunk. Some stained and torn mattresses have been left, as if for verisimilitude, together with runners, television sets and innocuous magazines. Some of the cells sport stickers that read variously: Welcome to Our Smokefree Home/Club/Car.

In a large open area of Jika Jika, one gazes through glass at confiscated items: sharpened toothbrushes, combs and plastic rulers refashioned as weapons; tattoo machines; re-sewn tennis balls that had been thrown over the prison walls with drugs inside them. Facing Contraband, at the other end of the room, is an exhibit of warders' equipment: clubs, birches, handcuffs, guns, spiked collars. Nearby are the remnants of a library where some books have been preserved: *Social Service Made Simple*, Watergate veteran Charles Colson's *Born Again*, Scientist L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, Martin Boyd's *A Difficult Young Man*.

There are signs of the dead in Pentridge. The graves of Ronald Ryan and nine others lie in a small, fenced-off grass enclosure. Further on is a plaque to Warder Hodson, for whose murder—allegedly committed during his successful escape from the jail in December 1965—Ryan was executed. He was hanged in Pentridge. On the way to the gallows from the point of his escape, one encounters unexpectedly sinister sights. The laundry was housed in the oldest remaining building of the prison, which dates from the 1850s. Evidently, black-painted drying racks were used to snap many a bone, as prisoners revenged themselves against one another. The tersest and most chilling of all the graffiti in the jail is here too, promising only this: 'One Day Noddy'.

Eleven people were hanged at Pentridge. First was David Bennett, on 26 September 1932, for 'carnally knowing and abusing a girl'. The 'Brown-Out Murderer', US

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serviceman Edward Leonski, was hanged in 1942. Three went to the gallows on 19 February 1951: two men who had murdered an SP bookie in Carlton, and Jenny Lee, who died sitting in a chair because she could not stand. Lee was the last woman to hang in Australia. On 3 February 1967, Ryan was the last man. The prison guide directs attention to the gully trap, one floor below the gallows, into which the executed prisoners' excrement was washed. But, properly, he gives Ryan his famous, game last words: 'God bless you. Make it quick.'

Last stop on the tour—for coffee, souvenirs or Victoria Bitter—is the Pentridge Prison Unlocked Café. One then escapes with relief on to Sydney Road.

There has been much of legend, little of imaginative literature about Pentridge. Garry Disher's crime novel, *The Fallout* (1997) described the jail as a place 'where the world seemed to darken, all light and goodness swallowed up by the bluestone walls'. Some of the men sight-seeing with us were evidently revisiting familiar places and their associations. What 'Pentridge' means for a younger generation that has been deprived of its history by educational neglect, is more problematic. For the older visitor, or voyeur, this is a site where all is 'cheerless, dark and deadly', a statement in stone and in stains of the denial of hope.

—Peter Pierce

Home on the Ranger

AT FIRST GLANCE, Yvonne Margarula appears an unlikely candidate to be leading the battle against one of Australia's largest mining companies.

A shy, 36-year-old Aboriginal woman, Margarula was born in the bush of the South Alligator region of the Northern Territory's vast Kakadu National Park. She is the senior elder of a local Aboriginal clan, the Mirrar Gagudju. Responsible for the welfare of the 27 Mirrar adults and many children, she is also the legal titleholder under the white law that gave the Mirrar the right to control their land in 1982.

For over a decade, Margarula has fought Energy Resources Australia (ERA) which already controls the Ranger uranium mine and mill on Mirrar land and now wants to prolong its operations in Kakadu until the year 2027 by starting a new operation at nearby Jabiluka.

In July, Margarula faced court on trespass charges stemming from her arrest when she entered a section of that land now controlled

by ERA. Sitting in the witness box and whispering mostly one-word answers, she pleaded not guilty to the charge. 'It's Mirrar land,' she told the court. 'I have a right to go because I'm the traditional owner.'

She is not the only one to have fronted up to the small brick jail in Jabiru, the company town established by ERA in the early '70s to service the Ranger mine. Over 400 people have been arrested in demonstrations against the proposed mine since the Mirrar established a blockade against it in May.

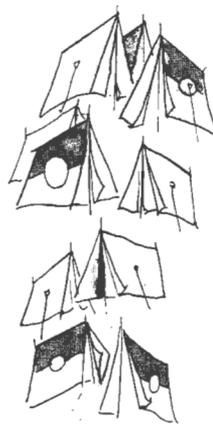
The protest has seen an unprecedented coalition between Aboriginal and environmental groups. The Jabiluka mine is the first to take advantage of the Coalition Government's easing of Labor's three-mine policy. Environmental and anti-nuclear groups claim that, if successful, Jabiluka could provide the go-ahead for up to 20 additional uranium mines across the country. 'There's a whole lot of other uranium mines on stream in Australia,' maintains Peter Garrett, president of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF). 'We are really at the crucial point in deciding whether or not we want a nuclear and radioactive future in the hinterland of Australia.'

'Jabiluka is definitely a test case,' agrees Eric Miller, who has been involved in the anti-uranium movement since 1978. 'Kakadu is one of our most beautiful places. It's a World Heritage area. If a company can mine there, there's no place in Australia they can't mine.'

ERA's chief executive, Phillip Shirvington, is cautious about Jabiluka's wider significance, but admits that other companies are watching closely to see how much community opposition develops and which way the government will act. 'They will be using it as an information base to assess their own chances,' he says.

The company spent over \$125 million securing rights to the Jabiluka lease, and is under intense commercial pressure to get the mine operating by the end of the year for the product to be on the international market ahead of overseas rivals. More fundamentally, with the Ranger deposit due to run out early next century, ERA's survival depends on Jabiluka.

Whatever the arguments for and against Jabiluka, one fact is indisputable: the Mirrar are totally opposed to the mine going ahead.



According to Jacqui Katona, executive officer of Gundjehmi Aboriginal Corporation, established in 1995 to look after the interests of the Mirrar, the current controversy over Jabiluka is part of a long history of attempts by big corporations to mine uranium on Mirrar land.

Explorations for the first mine, Ranger, started in the '70s, without any reference to the Mirrar or other indigenous people in the area. A subsequent Commonwealth government inquiry into the mine, the Fox Inquiry, ruled that the land containing both the Ranger and Jabiluka uranium leases belonged indisputably to the Mirrar.

But due to the Ranger mine's perceived economic benefits, the inquiry also argued it should be allowed to proceed, and the mine was exempted from legislation requiring Aboriginal consent for exploration and mining on Aboriginal land.

After years of negotiation, ERA and Aboriginal elders signed an agreement for Ranger in November 1978. A second agreement, for Jabiluka, was concluded between Aborigines and US mining company Pancontinental in 1982, but put on hold as a result of the Labor Government's three-mine policy.

ERA, which purchased the Jabiluka lease from Pancontinental in 1991, began construction in June this year after receiving state and national government approval to push ahead with the mine.

The Mirrar insist that both the Ranger and Jabiluka deals were reached under duress and deceit on the part of mining company representatives. Among the elders to ink the deals was Margarula's father, Toby Gangale. He died alcoholic and dispirited several years later, a victim, according to the Mirrar, of nearly a decade of constant pressure by mining concerns to negotiate access agreements.

Shirvington maintains that while ERA is still keen to come up with 'a win-win arrangement' for all parties concerned, the company will push ahead regardless of Mirrar opposition. 'The Mirrar just don't want the project to go ahead at all, so unfortunately there is nothing to negotiate.'

ERA also claims that Jabiluka will provide substantial benefits to local Aboriginal communities in the form of millions in royalties for health, education and housing.

'We have had 20 years of these extraordinary claims about how Aboriginal people are going to benefit [from uranium mining], but Blind Freddy can see that Aboriginal people are still living in Third World conditions,' says Katona.

‘There were no benefits from Ranger. The pressure was on Aboriginal people to spend their royalty money on providing water, power, roads and road maintenance. In Australia there is no other community that is required to make that choice that you have a uranium mine to get your basic citizenship entitlements. Only the Mirrar people.’

‘Until Aboriginal people have the ability to control their affairs on their land then nothing is going to change,’ Katona adds. ‘That is at the heart of this issue.’

In 1995, the Mirrar approached environment groups such as ACF to establish a blockade of the mine site. From around 40 people when it was first set up, the camp peaked at 500 in July. Most of the protestors at Jabiluka are young and have travelled thousands of miles to live in tents in a hot, remote part of Kakadu. While many are self-styled ‘crusties’ and nomads—the shock troops of the campaign who stay the longest and are often the frontline of arrestable actions against the mine—the camp cuts across social lines.

Rocky Marshal is 77 and under no circumstances could be mistaken for a ‘professional protestor’. An ex-serviceman, ex-real estate salesman and bush poet, Rocky says he is a regular visitor to Kakadu. ‘I’m a keen barramundi fisherman. I’ve been to the Ranger site and seen the ponds where they store the tailings from the mine. You don’t have to be a genius to see that when it rains the whole lot will go into the wetlands.’

While for many the issue of uranium and the environmental impacts of mining it in a national park are key issues, the glue that holds the campaign together is the Mirrar and their demand for control over their land.

‘This camp is the action part of the debate about reconciliation presently going on between black and white Australians,’ says one camp resident. ‘This is a lot of people from around Australia, particularly a lot of young people, who want to say sorry, but just don’t want to do it verbally. We want to get out there and support the traditional owners of this country and say, yep, we’ve done wrong and we want to make things right.’

—Andrew Nette

This month’s contributors: **Jon Greenaway** is *Eureka Street’s* South East Asia correspondent; **Peter Pierce** is Professor of Australian Literature at James Cook University; **Andrew Nette** is a freelance journalist.

Don’t commit postmodernism

CALL IT LATE- OR HYPER-MODERNITY, call it modernity in crisis, call it post-colonialism or post-liberalism, call it post-structuralism if you must, but, whatever you do, don’t call it postmodernism! At the latest round of theological conferences, held at Melbourne University and its Colleges, the words had changed slightly but not the basic question: ‘How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?’

Each of these terms carries specific connotations, but they were not so much being traded in the pursuit of precision as in an apologetic search for ‘p-m’ euphemisms. The result was a discourse with, *dare I say it?* undertones, uncertain of the status of such language in the Christian academy; a discourse that suggested to me a profound theological anxiety about the relationship between the churches and the world.

Although by no means all of the papers given referred or even alluded to our situation as post-something, the challenges that any truth-claiming discipline faces in a culture which has been thus described emerged as the key set of issues from three consecutive conferences.

A one-day seminar on the Bible and Critical Theory demonstrated the inroads that contemporary literary criticism has made into biblical studies, generating new and invigorating approaches to scriptural texts in the process. Yet a parallel discussion at the gathering of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS) revealed an attendant dis-ease as to where the boundaries of interpretation lie when a plurality of reading methods are in play.

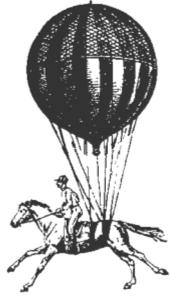
For example, does the current practice of reading against the biblical text (to subvert or at least uncover its culturally conditioned ideologies) mean that we no longer stand in some sense beneath it? And if so, as one delegate wondered aloud, ‘what *is* the canopy over us?’ What saves us from having to choose between a homogenising fundamentalism on the one hand and disintegrated relativity on the other? Can we speak of authority (be it that of text or tradition) without appearing naive to a culture beset by a sense of belatedness—of having, as it were, arrived just after that which guarantees meaning has left?

Sandwiched between these two ecumenical meetings, the Anglican Theologians’ Conference began with a paper on the Apostle Paul’s understanding of difference. The tendency of modern scholarship has been to interpret Paul as the champion of Christian identity, creating a picture of Christianity which subsumes diversity (Jew/Greek, male/female) under oneness in Christ. Recent readings, however, (reflecting a more postmodern celebration of particularity) have highlighted the significant role that difference plays in the thinking of Paul, whose life and writings constitute a holding together of Judaism and Christianity.

The theme of this conference was reconciliation. Time and again, when applied to a variety of contexts—factional, gender-related, racial—understandings of what reconciliation might look like were qualified by sensitivity to postmodern concerns that it may become simply a synonym for the politics of assimilation. Even so, one contributor drew upon a trade-off identified by Jürgen Moltmann between identity and relevance (whereby a community’s concentration upon either one inevitably leads to a crisis of the other) in order to show that no alternative politics, if made absolute, is without its theological loss. This same tension was evident in the ANZATS papers and the discussions they stimulated amongst theological educators. When does the shaping of Christian identity become a self-protecting uniformity? Conversely, when does appreciation for postmodernism’s useful critique of the forces of sameness turn theological schools and faculties (especially ecumenical ones) into smorgasbords of tolerance, where ecclesiological and theological traditions may no longer challenge one another?

If one thing became abundantly clear from the proliferation of these intractable questions, it was that we have yet to reconcile what appear to be dual imperatives. We must preserve that strong sense of the collective self which befriends tradition without making it a fortress from which to annihilate or colonise otherness. And we must also heed the demand for theological humility issued by a wider intellectual climate that is rightly suspicious of any way of knowing which seeks immunity from the constraints of context. ■

Richard Treloar is associate chaplain at Trinity College, Parkville, Melbourne.



SPORTING LIFE
PETER PIERCE



Clipped at Cluden



LIKE MELBOURNE, if on a smaller scale, Townsville prides itself on being a sports-loving place. Not only are two of its four state MPs from One Nation, but it supports both a basketball and a Rugby League team. At the latter's home ground, cannon fire, whip cracking and a troupe of buckskin-clad teenage tumblers greet every try by the North Queensland Cowboys. This season they would wish to have been busier. More exotic entertainment also graces the city. My local pub staged a bull-riding contest on a Sunday afternoon when it was too cold for the usual parade of women in bikinis. It was Townsville where Kostya Tsyu had his comeback fight and Australia's Davis Cup tie against Uzbekistan was staged. Unfortunately, public outrage and doubtful sponsorship led to the cancellation of a projected Caged Combat Contest at the Convention Centre.

In search of more sedate and traditional sporting fare, I took the Hermit Park shuttle bus to the racetrack at Cluden, for the 115th renewal of the Townsville Cup, 'The North's Premier Race Day'. There was plenty of company. A genial crowd of 13,000 turned up, the biggest for 20 years. They had come from all over North Queensland, as indeed had the horses for the Cup, who were trained from places as far flung as Mt Isa and the Gold Coast, the Atherton Tableland and Eagle Farm. Cup Day—in the tropical mid-winter—was unseasonably grey, although there was no rain. Clouds came down to the tops of the low hills that ring the course. The journey out along Charters Towers and Bowen Roads offered a grisly snapshot of Australian suburbia. A few elegant, high-set Queenslanders struggled for room amid KFCs and car yards and such places of resort as the Hi Roller and Casino City motels. Then it was across the broad Ross River, past the abandoned abattoirs and in to the track.

The first horse that I saw was galloping boldly for the post. Unfortunately it had dumped its jockey, leading local hoop Ray Warren, and bolted. My Moonee Valley badge got me through the gate, but not into the Members'. That select band can occupy the top deck of one of the two fine old grandstands at Cluden. Roaming around them were men in costumes and women dressed as if for Oaks Day at Flemington. Cheap champagne was the beverage of choice, presumably connected loosely to the notion of

festivity. In the second race I backed the Zephyr Zip filly Supermarket, trained out of Mackay by Laurie Manzelman, who is also a dab hand with pacers. Supermarket saluted, beating colts sired respectively by Blazing Saddles and Bureaucracy. Top performers all, the three sires of the placegetters might be bemused at where their progeny end up. But they would admire the times they ran. Townsville must be one of the fastest tracks in Australia. If the timing can be credited, the course records for 1000m, 1200m and 1400m are a slick 55, 68 and 81 seconds.

The entertainment, apart from the racing, was varied. While risking a dagwood dog, I watched three slim girls in boots and black body suits popping behind stage to don a succession of funny hats which they modelled. Later the same stage groaned as 40 women clambered aboard in the hope of being judged the most fashionable on the field. There was an army band (Lavarack barracks is just down the road) that offered—among other tunes—a rendition of 'Advance Australia Fair'. The racebook helpfully printed the words. In Melbourne, the John Wheeler-trained Maybe Rough staged a form reversal to win the last big jumps race of the season, the Hiskens Steeple. And then it was time for the Cup.

LAST LISTED EVENT of the Australian racing year, the Townsville Cup was first run in 1884, when R.F. Kelly's Ellington got the money. This time a full field of 16 presented for the 2100m-journey which began at the top of the straight. Coming off a second in the Rockhampton Cup and a win in the Mackay Cup, the favourite, Chappel Dancer, won easily, but connections had to wait half an hour to get their hands on the trophy. There had been a rash of protests all over Australia and the Townsville Cup was no exception, with third against second and fourth against third and second because of a scramble near the winning post. All were upheld. When that adjudication was done, I had time to back the mare Lieutenant Austen which took the Jim Gibbard Memorial Cup, then to head back for town, just as the course broadcaster made the immemorial call for the parents of a lost boy to collect him and the dagwood dog settled uneasily within me. ■

Peter Pierce is *Eureka Street's* turf correspondent.

Heaps of documents

IN JULY, John Heaps, recently retired as auxiliary bishop of Sydney, published a popular book, *A Love that Dares to Question* (Aurora Books/David Lovell). Simultaneously, a series of documents came from the Vatican: one commending Sunday Mass, another giving force to definitive teaching on faith, and a third limiting the competence of bishops' conferences.

These publications are of interest because they represent contrasting approaches to the church and to the construction of authority within it.

While the context of each document and the questions which each addresses are varied, the media set them all into stories of authority and power.

Bishop Heaps' book was of interest because it criticised practices officially commended in the Catholic Church. The Vatican documents were seen as exercises of authority to deal with dissent or indiscipline: Sunday Mass was an obligation reimposed; the endorsement of definitive teaching prepared legal sanctions against dissenters; the independence of Bishops' Conferences was curtailed.

Although the reduction of all church questions to the use of power by central authority is tedious and unilluminating, in this case the media were right to frame the issues as having to do with authority. But the question needs to be examined at a deeper level than as a conflict between coercive power and dissent. Heaps' book and the Vatican documents present different images of the Catholic Church, each presupposing different sociological configurations and implying a distinctive understanding of authority. Each construction of church makes its claims; each is open to question.

From his many years of serving the church, particularly through ministry with marginalised people, Heaps commends a church life in which relationships are simple and direct. Catholics are to hear the Gospel as Good News which blesses and frees human lives. Where the church lives authentically, Catholics display boldness of speech, forgiveness and hospitality. The ministry and sacramental life of the church encourage mutual trust and responsibility.

In describing this ideal church, Heaps appeals constantly to the stories of Jesus in the Gospels.

To this image of a functioning church, Heaps contrasts another image which he has found often among Catholics. Here, freedom, change and open discussion are suspect; obedience to law and fear of God's judgment are encouraged. The differences between clergy and laity, men and women, teachers and taught are emphasised, and the boundaries between faith and heresy, between insiders and outsiders are exaggerated. This is a church without ambiguities.

Heaps believes that some practices and institutions in the church reflect this image of church. He cites as examples compulsory clerical celibacy, the reservation of decision-making in the church to ordained males, and the barriers that prevent the divorced and remarried from receiving communion.

He concludes that if the life of the Catholic Church is to express, powerfully, the compassion and freedom of Jesus Christ, we will need the confidence to search for and find new structures.

Heaps writes attractively. I found the sociological construction of the church which he describes particularly interesting. In terms of the theory popularised by Mary Douglas, this Christian community is relatively loose in its construction. The tendency is to blur boundaries, with some diversity allowed in belief and in practice. The differences between those within the community and those outside it are correspondingly softened, as are the

hierarchies which separate teachers from taught, men from women, and ordained from non-ordained. Catholic identity is maintained by the fervour with which Catholics follow Jesus and the strong fraternal bonds of commitment which unite them in the community.

While Heaps' image of church is attractive, it poses questions. The difficulty endemic to loosely constructed societies is to allow the young to find a firm sense of identity and to maintain commitment. Communities need to be able to educate towards commitment, but the solidity through time and space that is assured where there is a strong tradition and defined hierarchies is difficult to maintain in less tightly organised societies. A detached observer might suspect that the community which Heaps commends is dependent upon the strongly integrated society to which it reacts.

HEAPS, OF COURSE, is a Catholic bishop who accepts the structures of the Catholic Church, including the special responsibility of the Church of Rome for encouraging and ensuring unity of faith and life in the church. The Roman documents assume that unity in faith and life demand a tightly structured society.

This form of church was most fully realised during the 19th century in clearly articulated beliefs and distinctive practices, strong and clearly explained symbols which order experience, and strong hierarchies which allow for diversity of function. In such a community, actions which separate the believer from God are clearly defined, with a consequent need for reconciliation to be mediated sacramentally. This is a church with a clearly marked identity and clearly delineated boundaries.

The concern for boundaries and common symbols can be seen in all three Vatican documents. Sunday Mass is a defining Catholic practice. While positively described in the document, its obligatory character in defining full membership is also stressed. The delineation of definitive teaching is directed against dissent which dissolves the boundaries of belief and blurs identity. It also establishes the hierarchies



of teaching which places Rome, bishops and theologians in their correct relations. Similarly, the limiting of Bishops' Conferences defines boundaries and hierarchies in responsibility for the church.

The attempt to create a tightly integrated church is clearly directed to the weaknesses potential in Heaps' vision of church. But it is also open to questions. They arise out of the difficulty and consequences of attempting to create, by decree, a tightly constructed church. In the 19th century there were

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many social reasons why the centralisation of the church in the Vatican should have been widely welcomed. It met the need felt by many local churches for a firm sense of identity in the midst of hostile societies and intellectual cultures.

In the contemporary Western world, societies, including churches, are relatively loosely organised. The basis of allegiance to voluntary organisations is strong personal commitment. In such a context, the attempt to recreate legislatively a tightly structured society based on strong hierarchies is unlikely to be effective.

The experience of societies and communities which have made this attempt suggests that eventually the capacity of central authority to strengthen the belief system, symbols and patterns of life of the members is weakened by the very effort to do so. Popular apathy or resistance is usually met by further centralisation and by more direct intervention to control the beliefs and symbols of the community. As a result the local officials whose intelligent co-operation is needed to implement the program become ineffectual.

From this perspective, the measures announced by Rome bear reflection, for at first glance they appear to favour a further centralisation of power. Where a single bishop can prevent the issuing of a

statement, and all bishops are appointed by Rome, the control by Rome of local churches is strong. Where relations are not harmonious, such control could be paralysing. Nor does the legislation giving effect to definitive beliefs provide clear checks against Roman authorities treating as definitive any belief which they believe—without general support—to be so. In citing as a possible example of such beliefs the controversial rejection by Leo XIII of Anglican Orders, Cardinal Ratzinger's commentary illustrates that this fear is not ungrounded. While the results of the measures may well be constructive, the potential dangers in them should not be overlooked.

The experience of societies in which authorities protect the basis of identity by forbidding dissent by officials also counsels hesitation. For the result has often been the spread of disbelief, not the acceptance of beliefs and symbols. The issue is simply taken temporarily off the agenda. Cynicism reigns, as those who defend the

prevailing ideology are assumed to do so for promotion or out of blind loyalty. The result is that an often defensible case is lost by default. The recent Victorian practice of devising contracts that muzzle teachers and health workers illustrates the paradox.

Some would argue that one of the unforeseen results of *Humanae Vitae* was to prevent effective parish teaching about sexuality and its uses. It has become impossible to speak persuasively because it is so difficult to create the trust necessary for learning. It is assumed that priests will simply endorse a party line, and that nothing illuminating can be expected from church spokespersons, anyway. This judgment may be mistaken. But it illustrates the danger of the Roman church's defending its theoretical right to strengthen the unity of the church in faith and in its life at the cost of losing its practical ability to do so.

The greatest danger in attempting to legislate a tightly structured community, however, has been that the most committed members of the community are often excluded. The fate of true believers in Stalinist Russia is only the most familiar example. It illustrates the tendency of authoritarian ideologies to turn, not on the liberal enemies of their ideology, but on the idealistic and committed who take most seriously their professed values.

This difference between the images of church represented by Heaps and the Roman documents suggest that this risk cannot be discounted in the Catholic Church. The committed Christians whom Heaps represents are usually inspired by the stories of Jesus in the Gospels. These stories, particularly in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, depict Jesus as critical of a society based on tight boundaries and hierarchies. He causes offence by breaking down boundaries. The risk, therefore, of a church which is seen to impose such structures, is that it will also be seen to fight against Jesus. Its moral authority will be compromised.

I DO NOT WISH to suggest that these dangers represent the reality of either construction. Only an unduly harsh critic would draw this conclusion. Nor do I want to imply that the church can ever be adequately described in the sociological categories used here, or in any other such categories.

But the questions which I have raised are critical both for church and for Australian society. In both cases, we ask how to remedy the flaws evident in loosely structured societies with a weak sense of identity, so that we can appeal to a richer and more effective shared identity. In civil society, shonky stratagems and proposals abound. Contracts that exclude informed criticism by insiders, the hardening of boundaries by scapegoating the unemployed, Aborigines and immigrants, draconian sentencing of petty offenders, detaining asylum seekers, defining Australia effectively in terms of its white population, are all attempts to legislate for identity. Similar proposals for strengthening identity by exclusion will be found among Catholic groups.

A better strategy may be to identify and encourage the relationships within society that carry the seeds of a richer identity and sustain the symbols of a community. In Australian society, families, local groups, small voluntary agencies, grass root co-operatives have all been weakened by government initiatives.

In the church, the strategy followed in its best moments has been to co-opt the local groups concerned to live the Gospel radically. The case of Francis of Assisi is only the most notable. The energy of the church espoused by Bishop Heaps will then lead easily to the stronger church identity sought by the Roman documents. ■

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The corner of Russell Street and mayhem

WE WERE SPOONFED gloom as Baptist boys at the always-on-a-lean, white-ant-riddled church up the road to Salvation where my mum and dad never ventured. In a way they were right to stay away because it was perennially sad and also they had to be the most godless people I have met in my entire life. They lived so far from Him.

Jesus Christ was a stiffened, stern Messiah for All Sorrows.

There was an old Billy Graham propaganda poster pinned up at the rear of the particle-board room where we got carbashed. Our teachers at the church called that 'Sunday school'. The poster I speak of depicted Christ smiling at multicoloured children gathered around his legs; those colours, those hues ranged from giddy mauve to a kind of evangelical jade-green.

'Jesus Loves The Children Of The World!' was typeset in a large font under the artwork; Jesus looked like my deranged geography teacher at Carrum.

It was quite clear to me at the age of four that God wasn't in the room there. My own personal dreamt-up God, or his son, was more like a contented booth announcer at 3AW. He loved his mum and dad and cheerily fetched home his pay on pay-day. He only looked disillusioned when he had to fork out his board, which was fixed at ten quid a week. Christ thought that was excessive.

Sing though we might, the hymns pounded into my stubborn head were drearier than the artwork silkscreened upon bags of lawn food. There was never an opportunity to enquire as to the lyrics' meaning. 'I Will Make You Fishers Of Men' meant tuna casserole to me. Their hymns gave me tinnitus.

After the mournful death-threats-got-up-as-songs it was so happy for the kids to 'boing-boing-boing' like rubber balls into the always entertaining truth of sunshine. We got bashed by ignorant parents who took it upon themselves to carry Christ's words into Reservoir, whose foundry hands were on us too much. We went zingingly into the innocent lanes to reacquaint ourselves with the geraniums and singing goldfinches of people's yards.

When I was 16 I went to work, but still read the Old Testament on the train to

'Town' (as Princes Bridge was titled in the popular mind). I worked rinsing down guillotines for a North Melbourne printer, and read New and Old Testament literature aboard the old red rattler to soothe my mangled soul. It was the reading of The Bible that actually lifted, buoyed me, above the tedium of the everyday.

Long years of philosophical inquiry fluttered by and I turned into a hippie. A Christian one who detected magical goodness in perfect strangers as though it was somehow transmitted like a Chopin prelude. I was a Magic Christian, as lost and found as a man in his cups can be. The only faith I found was the tragedy in people's eyes. I knew how to read that.

I met a man, not Peter but John, whose bizarre street courage was an inspiration and relief to me. This was in 1970, when I was 21, and insane and sane. He earnestly believed he was a messenger for Christ Jesus, and to that end he preached from his tattered bible on the corner of Russell Street and mayhem. We held hands together as we wandered Australia. Everyone was after Freedom, man.

Why he so believed he could help save Australia from Satan was not so much mysterious as addled. He had been made, he claimed, to do 'homo things' in Bendigo while studying his scriptures. His eyes had a burnt-out appearance, as though he'd been through a great deal. He was a damaged boy.

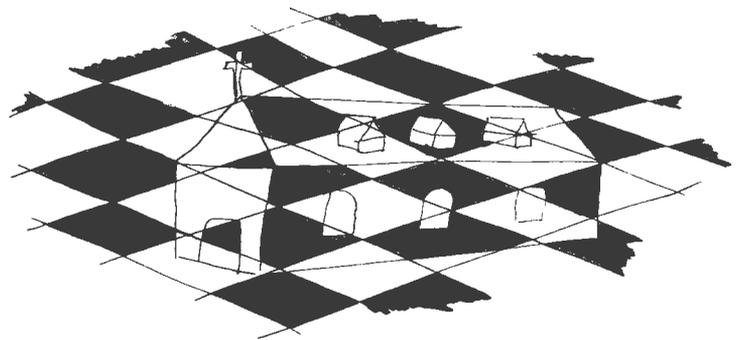
We travelled around Victoria, Adelaide and NSW 'saving' Australians. He used to hand out little cards with 'Endure' lettered upon them in green pencil. Perhaps it worked, and people found they really could endure Satan a lot more than they really should have to. What I loved about Johnny Pappas was that he had dropped out of his fear.

Life continually betrayed him. But he had good stuff in him. He was kind and thoughtful, even when we jumped off bridges together into trains far beneath that carted blinding lime under the coughing stars, from Whyalla to Broken Hill and back again.

We argued too much to stay together, and ended up having an almighty blue in Adelaide after a particularly gruelling highway stint where I honestly wearied of having shit cast at me from comfortable and bored holiday-makers. I couldn't bear being filmed *in extremis*. Bum out of pants and parched tongue hangin' out. I had a modicum of dignity.

He had a vision of his own murder and was right to have it, for he was slain by bored boys 17 years later in the Fawkner Gardens. They got him pissed and then, foolishly, he told them he had \$400 in the bank. They used soldering irons on his body. I see Johnny now only in my waking dreams of his insane form of evangelical guts and folly—wanting to save everyone he saw with his own eyes from an evil world.

My way to Christ has always been through the contemplative and never the physical. I have been looking long for the



perfect church to house my sorrows and fears. But the trouble is most churches I go to are either too gothic or too horrible. There's always been a baffling gloom in the churches I have knelt in. Why can't they be joyous? The priests invariably underwhelm me and the lessons are about guilt.

I don't need a charismatic church. They are much too deafening and upsetting. I want to go to a church where the spirit is uplifted in such a way you'd swear a happy boy was reading the lesson he wrote himself, in a fit of joy. Where's the church of brightness and hope? ■

Barry Dickins is a playwright, poet and commentator. His play 'Remember Ronald Ryan' won the 1995 Victorian Premier's Literary Award.

Molecular wait

We say that the past is another country, but what about the nanotechnological future? Get into it, says **Damien Broderick**, with passion.

HUMANITY'S CLOCK is the turning of the earth, and the earth's swing around the sun, and usually we don't feel it in our bones until our bones start to ache with old age. We don't feel the world spin on its axis. Metaphorically, however, its speed has been increasing lately. The world, history itself, is spinning up. You can almost hear the whine of the engines.

Yet usually we don't notice time's rush, either. You need to stand on a high hill and survey the landscape of years and decades, watch time's swooping shadow. Do that, and its pace, the force of the alterations it presses upon us, might tear the breath out of your chest.

Let's consider briefly just one of tomorrow's mind-boggling possibilities. Molecular nanotechnology, or MNT, which I call 'minting', has been on the news lately, after some surprising breakthroughs in miniaturisation. You might recall the announcement of a chemical sensor developed in Australia by Dr Bruce Cornell and his team. It's a kind of sniffer with working parts at molecular scale, able to detect a sugar cube dissolved in Sydney Harbour. And chemistry professor Michael Wilson, at Sydney's University of Technology, heads several labs working on a nano-scale motor, with working parts in the billionths of a metre.

But the real secret promise of minting is not that it involves gadgets the size of viruses. Tiny little machines at the scale of atoms are part of the plan, but the correct way to think about the still-unborn MNT field is this, according to Dr Ralph Merkle, who works with Dr K. Eric Drexler, pioneer in the minting field: it would be a manufacturing technology able to fabricate, with molecular precision, almost any structure consistent with physical law, and to do so inexpensively.

If you have the plans for something—the computer design describing its structure—and the laws of physics don't forbid it, you'll be able to build whatever you wish ... using molecular assemblers. In principle, minting can build you a

skyscraper, or a skijet, or a tube of lipstick in Blushing Pink, or a diamond tunnel to China. Every atom will be in the right place, as specified by the computer program driving its assembly, tugged and herded into place by machines smaller than a virus and many times smarter.

True, you can also expect to manufacture—to *nanofabricate*!—tiny dedicated computers the size of bacteria to control the hues of your smart-paint wall, or photovoltaic cells that pave the street and provide your juice at very little extra cost, or surgical gadgets that swim into your chromosomes and repair the telomeres. These protective caps tend to fray each time a cell replaces itself, damage that degrades the cell's ability to keep track of its DNA blueprint. It helps *bring about* death in all complex organisms. So minting will certainly have effects at that minute scale. But really, minting is a way to remake the world at our *own* meso-scale, midway between the atom and the cosmos.

Using diamond-like materials cobbled together cheaply, carbon atom by carbon atom, we'll sit in chairs with a strength-to-weight ratio 50 times better than steel. If those chairs include smart nano-components, little computers rather like insanely fast abacuses, then sitting in diamondoid chairs will be a truly sensuous experience, as they mould themselves to your best posture.

Diamond? Build a chair out of *diamond*? But you'll be able to mint a diamond, that legendary icon of ineffable beauty, immemorial permanence, and extravagant costliness, exactly because a diamond is a stable arrangement of one of the commonest elements in the world. Gold and silver might retain their price, because they can't be constructed from more plentiful atoms. Even so, nano-scavengers will float

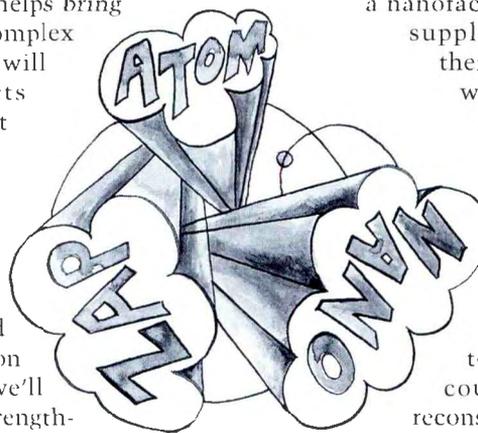
eventually in the oceans and locate such atoms one by one, popping them into a bag for later collection at the shore.

Such are the prospects of material profusion, of inexpensive wealth, in a world suffused by smart machines. But for the immediate future, nano-scale assemblers remain on the drawing boards, awaiting a lot of detailed engineering, but arguably ready for the major development push that'll yield the new minting technology. 'As good as a licence to mint money,' clear-eyed cynics say today of media permits issued by governments to radio and television proprietors. Nanotech promises to make good that metaphor.

Guided by their programs, nano-assemblers are the mint itself. If you had a nanofabricating system and a supply of raw materials, there's no obvious reason why you *couldn't* mint anything not forbidden by the laws of physics. Clothing, food, creature comforts, smart underground pipes to fetch you water in the desert where land prices are dirt-cheap. Once the technology matures, you could disassemble and reconstitute garbage and old refrigerators into steak and maglev rapid transit vehicles, all with a minimum of greenhouse emission, powered by cheaply minted solar cells.

Are we smart enough to design and build nano-assemblers, and keep them under control? Maybe not. People have been known to fear the grey goo catastrophe, when assemblers run amok and gobble down everything in sight, turning radio transmitters and cute babies into amorphous sludge.

Luckily, that kind of death by mutated assembler is fairly easily foiled, or at least made vanishingly improbable. (It's harder to ward off the silly teen hacker, or the demented terrorist.) But all these novelties add together. Early nanotech helps improve



supercomputers, and those help design and debug more advanced mints, and so the bootstrapping of utopia continues, until one day the world looks around itself and notices that everything, pretty nearly everything, has altered. Except, naturally, the poetic mysteries of the human heart. And even the heart is infested by diligent cholesterol-scrubbing nanites ...

Nonsense? Too far off to be psychologically relevant to us standard-model humans, still stuck here at the end of the 20th century?

Not necessarily.

For American mathematics professor and novelist Vernor Vinge, it comes down crucially to the accelerating trends in computer science, trends converging somewhere between 2030 and 2100 to form a barrier of technological novelties blocking the future from us. Vinge calls this barrier a technological Singularity. (I prefer the more graphic name of the Spike.) We can only guess at what lies ahead of us, up the Spike's slope.

NANO-MINTING, for example, might arrive sooner than any of us would dare to hope. A science-trained Brisbane trans-humanist named Mitchell Porter recently offered this bold prediction on the internet, although I should point out that others found it wildly optimistic: 'I expect the first assemblers within five years. I would now add to that, that I think most of the foreseeable uses of nanotech (that don't require astronomical quantities of matter) will be possible within two years of the fabrication of assemblers.'

He amplified this: 'Once we have assemblers, we can build new designs very quickly—thus accelerating the construction stage in the design-and-test cycle. Furthermore, those who are trying to design, say, a new type of nanosystem will be able to use the internet of five years' time as a collaborative medium. I doubt that we can imagine very clearly just what possibilities will exist, but we have every reason to believe they will be awesome.'

The Spike! Why didn't anyone warn us?

Well, they did, of course, but nobody was listening. Consider this wonderfully resonant phrase from H. G. Wells, from his 1899 novel *When the Sleeper Wakes*: 'We were making the future, and hardly any of

us troubled to think what future we were making. And here it is!'

It's true. We're already *in* the future, this other country where they do things differently, this long escalator that's hauling us upward toward the Spike. For centuries, landing on the Moon, along with the year 2000, was one of the two great symbols of tomorrowland, pie in the sky, that Buck Rogers stuff. Well, the impossibly remote year 2000, as everyone keeps telling us, is now an event pencilled into ordinary history. And here in the future, roughly three decades have already passed, rather more than half my lifetime, since humans first set foot on the Moon.

In the late '60s, since there were no jobs for people who tried to map the shape of the future (and nothing's changed since then, in this respect), I thought I might become a librarian. I'd been looking for one of those 9-to-5 jobs you're not supposed to give up if you're a writer, so I was summoned one day to an interview committee of the Public Service Board. I'd recently been writing about rock 'n' roll for *Go-Set*, the world's first pop music newspaper, and this interview was not in any way like listening, with a small square of blotting paper under the tongue, to Jim Morrison and the Doors sing 'Break on Through' or 'Light My Fire'. This was not the future, or even the present. Surely this was the past, and I was trapped in it.

I was seated before an authoritative committee of grey-suited old fogies and one woman, the archetypal Lady Librarian. I hadn't known they existed outside of bad American movies, but there she was, mouth pursed, hair in the traditional bun. She didn't say anything during the inquisition, and appeared to be asleep.

The men asked me plenty, starting with the standard inquiries—did I have a record of petty pilfering ... One of them noticed that I'd expressed an avocational interest in science. Why would someone like that want to be a librarian, rather than a nuclear

physicist or a car mechanic? I burst into a desperate aria about how computing was the future of the world, libraries the information nexus, clearly we were soon going to have a world-girdling global village with satellite links casting bytes back and forth, *and I wanted to be there*, plugged in to the console of this cybernetic library network.

ONE OF THE GENTLEMEN nodded his head amiably, and said, 'This is very interesting, can you tell us more about these "satellites", how would they work?' Telstar had been up since 1962, and Intelsat 1 since 1965, but the news was slow in getting through to the bureaucracy. I said with immense confidence, 'Well, they'd be in geostationary orbit—22,500 miles above the equator' (I was out by a couple of hundred miles, I'd read it in an Arthur C. Clarke novel when I was a child). He found this interesting, but said, 'Don't you think it's a bit ... futuristic? Computers? Information technology? Look, how would you feel about sitting at a counter stamping out the books every day?'

Of course, I cried eagerly, 'I'll do it, I'll do it!'

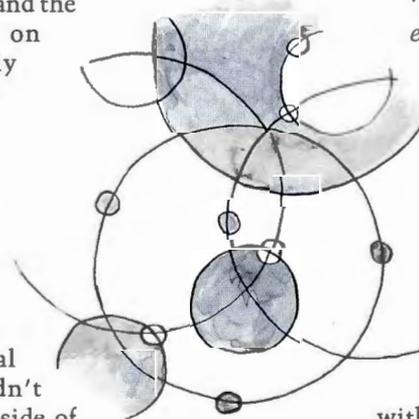
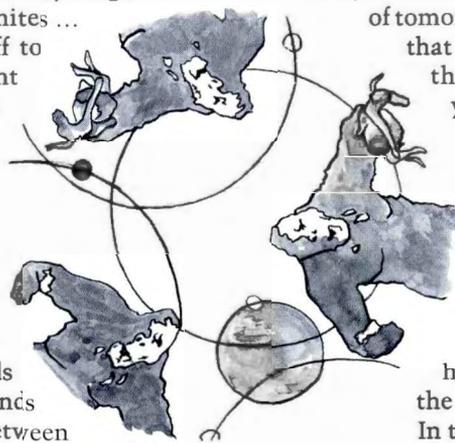
I added, 'Is everyone satisfied with what I've said?' and at this point the dinosaur crept into alertness. She consulted a document in front of her, and she said, 'Ah, Mr Broderick, ah.' She sniffed. 'As far as I can see here, you're not married. Are you married?'

I said, 'No, no, I'm not married.' 'Arh, hmmm. Are you engaged?'

I thought, This is very strange. Isn't 'engaged' what *girls* do? Then I realised that since it involved a male and a female, if the female was engaged then probably the male was also engaged. So I said, 'No, I'm sorry, I'm not engaged.'

But she wasn't finished with me. She saw *deeper* than that. She said, 'Have you got any plans to *become* engaged?'

I looked back at her with eyes like poached eggs and said, 'I see what you're doing here! You're applying a rule applicable to young women, who might secretly be pregnant, and would therefore zip off shortly after they've entered the tenure and total security of employment in the Public Service, and thus receive all manner of





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ill-gotten ancillary benefits.' She looked back stonily. 'But the fact is,' I said in my most reassuring tones, 'I am *not* planning to be engaged, and I am not pregnant, and I'm not going to *become* pregnant.'

Even so, I didn't get the job. I was forced to write about the future instead, even as the future became the present and then started slipping into the past, as men's and women's roles changed drastically and for the better, as every library in the land set up its computer system, and the internet spread its vast electronic tendrils through the global village that really *was* happening after all.

Although I've always lived in the future, I am always surprised when it actually happens. Nevertheless, it's difficult for me to grasp how truly strange the future seems to most other people. It's almost impossible for me to understand the usual response to the technology-shaped future, which is typically a blend of dread, denial, scorn and boredom.

Twenty-five years before the Apollo Moon landing was 1944, the height of the war against Hitler, the year I was born, and everyone (so I'm told) brayed like jackasses when people like Isaac Asimov and Arthur Clarke told them humans would shortly be flying into space. I got the same reaction from a teacher when I was in fourth grade, and that was a mere three years before Sputnik and seven before Yuri Gagarin rocketed into orbit.

Twenty-five years prior to the year 2000, by comparison, was 1975. The personal computer revolution had not yet booted up. In 1975 the mirthful equivalent of landing on the Moon would have been cyberspace and virtual reality, if the scoffers had even thought of such far-fetched novelties. If you'd believe *that* nonsense, sir, you'd believe anything! That was the year I mailed off to the United States a novel called *The Judas Mandala*, eventually published in 1982. Here's a fragment, set in the remote world of 6039, when most of the world's remaining humans drift in dreams written for them by advanced cybernetic organisms or cyborgs. My 20th century lesbian narrator, who's been bushwhacked into the future, is trapped in just such a simulation:

For the first time, I understood the overwhelming lure of addiction, the honeys of transcendental art. I understood how it could be that the Dreamvats of the cyborgs contained the majority of the world's living human beings, their brains afire on a junkie's junket of total fantasies.

For being on line to Dream circuits was the ultimate art. There was nothing paltry

or imposed about cyborg fantasy. Verisimilitude was unsurpassed. Each character I encountered in the endless cast of my sleeping universe was rich with density, beyond the resource of a Murasaki, a Shakespeare, a Dostoevski. It was solipsism tuned bracingly to my supine needs.

I understood its addiction and its horror: The hunt is done and bellies are full. In the flickering firelight the tribe lean forward to hear and tell their boasts. The old ones sing, at last, the sagas of their once and future heroes. In the Dreamtanks, at the apotheosis of art, the old ones live and sing forever ...

Incidentally, the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* credits me with coining the term 'virtual reality' in that novel, written more than 20 years ago.

When Rory Barnes and I wrote *Valencies* in the late '70s, a novel eventually published by the University of Queensland Press, I proposed a method of predictive sociology, an ironic variation on Isaac Asimov's 'psychohistory' (in his celebrated *Foundation* series). My invention, I now see, quite spookily resembles a current hot tool of Complexity Theory: a mathematical methodology called a 'genetic algorithm'. I called it 'data farming'. It's not clear from the book whether it happens in the simulated Darwinian space of a computer memory or inside actual vats swarming with engineered DNA. Both kinds are now being used in labs to solve otherwise intractable calculations.

Genetic algorithms. We published that novel in 1983. The Spike lay up ahead, perhaps 60 years distant. I would be a century old by then, if I lived so long. I suppose somewhere deep in my knowledge of the future I felt it rushing at me like a wall of shadow, or maybe a wall of brilliant light.

I don't mention these fairly minor escapades to dazzle you with my ingenuity and powerful access to the future. On the contrary—all I did was filch elements from the public domain and weave them together in ways that seemed vaguely plausible. It's proof that we *can* discern the shape of things further up the curve of the Spike.

The Spike, you see, isn't really some incredible Apocalypse hovering dimly in the remote future. It is the curving gradient which we already climb, day after day, into an ever-more exotic future. Start getting ready for it. ■

Damien Broderick is a novelist and writer about science.

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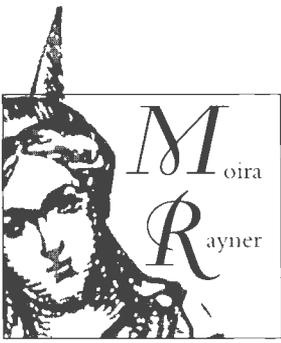
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The state we're in

OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS, governments have proclaimed a raft of measures designed to make them more 'democratic' and accountable.

We have become familiar with laws promising 'freedom of information'; codes of conduct for ministers and public servants; statutory 'ombudsmen' or commissioners, standing apart from the administrative institutions; regimes for reviewing administrative decisions. We have come to expect (and be disappointed in) legal aid. Our governments have signed and enshrined international treaties agreeing to protect civil, political, industrial and human rights in our laws and practices. We show every sign of being a progressive nation.

The old ways were for an age when 'freedom' was 'freedom from' governmental interference and all that was required was a bit of distance. The 'old' bulwarks against authoritarianism—Parliamentary scrutiny, and the courts, and fear of the mob—were enough. They were not enough for the intrusions of modern government.

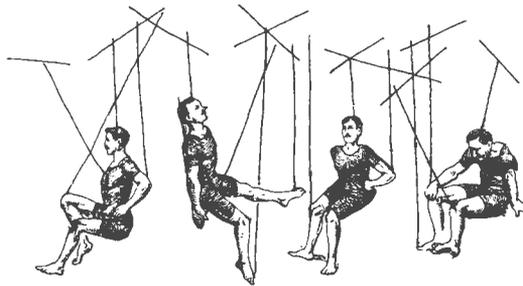
The state has been quietly reinventing itself. Government is no longer public administration, but a market-place for goods and services, a network of contracts and elite competition. This is the result of a number of factors.

First is the introduction of a management culture into our public service—payment and performance by 'results'—and the loss of an independent public sector. In this new culture senior public servants do not have tenure: lucrative short-term contracts are meant to compensate for their political susceptibility. We even expect new governments to 'dismiss' their predecessors' Heads of Department. The practice was introduced by Labor. It is now a norm: when Queensland's new Labor Premier offered its choice of Department Heads five-year contracts, Opposition leader Borbidge announced that when he next had the power he would introduce retrospective 'term of government' appointments laws.

Second is the deliberate separation of government policy-making from service-delivery structures; and changes in the way services are delivered. There is a distinct, bi-lateral preference for privatising,

corporatising and contracting 'out' even fundamental government services such as water, power and public transport to the commercial sector. The not-for-profit 'third' sector competes for government funding to provide community services, in exchange for contracts requiring confidence and threats to their funds if they criticise government policy.

Third is the proliferation of government corporations, and partnerships between government and private profit-making interests, whose activities are protected from public scrutiny by 'commercial-in-



confidence' contracts and exemptions from ombudsman, FOI and other public review. This is generally accompanied by deregulation, or self-regulation by benchmarks or standards.

What we have then is a change in government's dominant paradigm, from the 'public interest' to something very like doing business. The shift also challenges the basic assumptions of our 'accountability' mechanisms: assuring public information, explanations, and access to independent review. On a business model, government service standards are set by market mechanisms, the Corporations Law and market forces, not individual rights and freedoms and the public interest. The result is a passive, consumer-oriented 'citizen', whose 'rights' are his purchasing power.

There are seven well-tryed ways for governments to murder the new accountability mechanisms.

1. Cripple it at birth.

When an idealistic new government gesticates a bright idea, such as FOI, their bureaucrats slip quietly into the maternity ward.

Most bureaucracies resisted FOI from the inception, arguing that 'efficiency' required confidentiality. Similar arguments

were applied when, in the 1970s, Australian Social Security Appeals Tribunals required adverse medical reports to be disclosed to unsuccessful applicants for invalid pensions. Both the Department and the medical profession argued that disclosure would make for guarded, and less useful, record-keeping. Natural justice won out: so did unguarded record-keeping.

If it manages to slip through, you ensure that it is linked administratively, and in funding cycles, to the agency to be reviewed; under-funded, or funded for two years (when the 'baby' full of promise has become a demanding toddler) then require it to rationalise and cut-back; through public sector 'reform', force it to restructure every 18 months (this keeps the new infant on its toes.)

2. Keep it a secret

If you don't tell people that there are systems, or how to use them, they will wither away and you can restructure or abolish them. This ruse can take months to be discovered, and by then it's too late!

3. Create complexity.

This is very popular. You can leave it to every state or territory to create their own administrative remedies, specialist tribunals, equal opportunity and industrial commissions, and costs regimes. This means Australian citizens' rights depend on where they happen to live.

As government becomes managerial and commercially oriented it seems 'sensible' to create 'no go' zones for commercial enterprise, or 'cabinet documents'—increasingly broadly defined—and 'internal working papers.' It is a good technique to instruct the parliamentary drafter to set up categories or exceptions into which an assiduous official might be able to fit what she or he does not wish to release or explain.

4. Give it back to the lawyers

If you have had a specialist tribunal, put it back into the Department completely (but promise to be 'fair') or collapse it into a super tribunal run by a judge or two, or put it back into the mainstream courts. This is what has happened to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

Allow legal challenges. Gradually introduce pleadings, affidavits, and jurisdictional arguments. Require investigation and

conciliation to be according to 'natural justice' principles. Real courts understand the injustice to corporations of having to answer complaints from equal opportunity commissioners. Everyone can afford a lawyer, according to the prevailing wisdom. In case they can, cut back viciously on legal aid for administrative review.

5. *Introduce user-pays, or up the costs of using the system.*

This turns the citizen into a consumer, and a good thing too. The power to buy and sell is the power to choose. Make them pay for access to information. The expense of providing documents or seeking review of a decision to withhold it is a very effective barrier to public access. So is the introduction of costs-follow-the-event rules in 'tribunals'.

Cut out legal aid for the 'luxury' of administrative review or asserting equal opportunity claims. If this deters an individual (who cannot write off her legal expenses as a business expense) from pursuing a grievance, then she could not have had faith in her own case. Market forces working at their best.

6. *Weaken independent decision-makers.*

This, too, is increasingly popular. It can be done quite simply, by limiting their resources, or by making them report to the institutions or interests they 'watchdog', or by sacking selected commissioners, judges, tribunal members or statutory officers, thus sending a message to any successors. Or you can take away their control over their own officers (as the Victorian government recently did to its fiercely independent Auditor-General.)

Or limit their discretions, so that they can't consider 'fairness', if the decision was in accordance with 'government policy'—one of the limits proposed on the restructured Federal Administrative Review Tribunal (the about-to-disappear AAT).

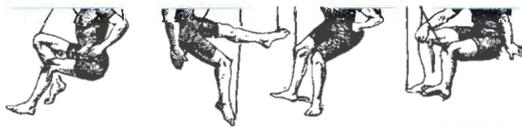
Another useful technique is to challenge each inconvenient decision legally. During 1997 the Commonwealth sought judicial review of all the adverse decisions of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Newly corporatised government businesses treat regulatory watchdogs as the enemy. One of Victoria's new private power companies has taken its own Electricity Ombudsman to the Supreme Court, to challenge her right to find it accountable for repeated 'outages'.

Better yet, after a court finds you have acted unlawfully or improperly, change the law retrospectively.

7. *Narrow the laws and limit the way the courts may interpret them.*

Judges are inherently inclined to interpret legislation carefully. If they are encouraged to do so narrowly and lose sight of its objectives, it will lose its intended purpose.

One counter-mechanism is their use of international human rights treaties to interpret ambiguous laws, fill gaps, and determine 'fair' decision-making processes. This is part of a respectable Common Law tradition. It is logical: governments are presumed to intend to be bound by their agreements. It is ethical: Justice Brennan, in *Mabo*, referring to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, remarked that international law was a 'legitimate and important' influence on the common law's



development, 'especially when international law declares the existence of universal human rights.'

In *Dietrich*, the High Court said it would be 'incongruous' that Australia should adhere to that Covenant's requirement of fair trials, unless Australian courts recognised it, 'and Australian governments provide the resources required to carry that entitlement into effect.'

In *Teoh*, Justice Gaudron emphasised the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child's* emphasis on the child's best interests since it 'gave effect to a fundamental value accepted by the Australian community—indeed [she said] 'Article 3 of CRoC reflects an existing principle of common law.'

After *Teoh*, another immigration decision, the Commonwealth legislated this avenue away.

The Commonwealth changed our industrial laws more subtly. The *Workplace Relations Act 1996* simply deleted references to many of the human rights obligations that appeared in its predecessor; and altered the emphasis where they did. For example, the former *Industrial Relations Act* stated that it was 'the means' of achieving the prevention and elimination of discrimination, where the new Act states these non-discriminatory principles are just meant for 'respecting and valuing the diversity of the workforce.' The old Act's principal object was, 'ensuring that labour

standards meet Australia's international obligations': the new Act's is, 'assisting in giving effect to Australia's obligations in relation to labour standards.'

The result is to narrow the focus of 'human rights' in industrial law, taking into account local values, not universal principles, and driving it by the needs of the business.

In a globalised economy, this shift matters. The courts have shown us how to do it, by a narrow interpretation. In 1997 the High Court decided that former Qantas pilot, Mr Christie, who was dismissed because he turned 60 (apparently unlawful age discrimination) nonetheless lawfully lost his job, because an international aviation Convention allowed other countries to exclude 'old' pilots from their airspace. Mr Christie could not fulfil the 'inherent requirements' of being an international pilot. Qantas had established operational requirements based on the discriminatory assumptions of other nations. As Justice Michael Kirby pointed out, in dissent, this has serious implications for Australian civil values. If your company trades in Saudi Arabia, and they don't fancy dealing with female, or Jewish, or disabled executives, 'business' considerations may let you sack them. The government will allow you.

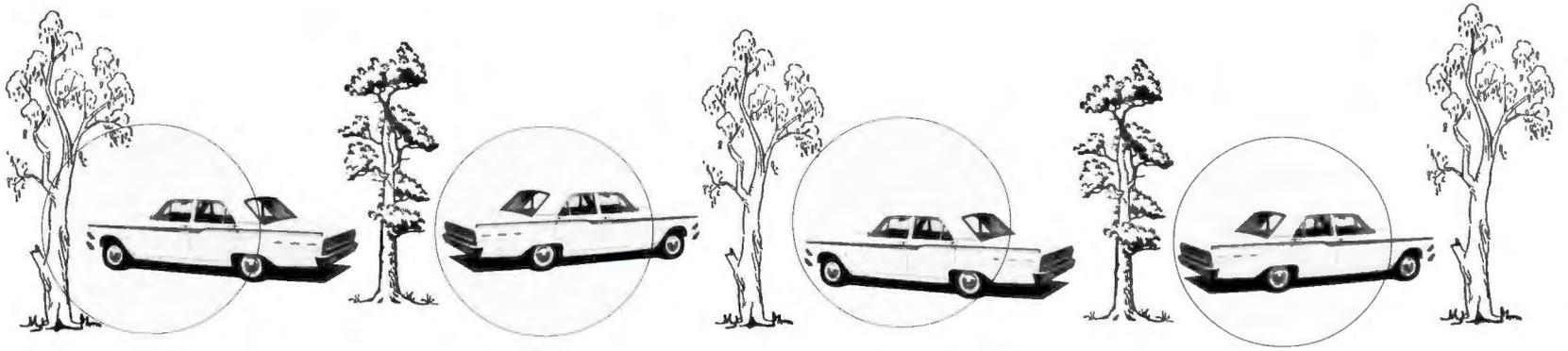
The culture of our society has changed, especially over the last five years, and more than most realise. 'Rights' and accountability mechanisms and 'legitimate expectations' and due process have given way to contracts, purchasing power, market mechanisms and market share.

We were, in retrospect, naive to assume that, by writing laws we could change the culture of public administration. Instead of a new world of openness and public interest, we established a culture of resistance, a niche legal market for professional tribunal members and avoidance, and an executive politically committed to the form, but not the substance, of accountability.

What, then, do we do? It is important to talk about this, now that rage against government has erupted in the polls, and not leave it to the tiny group of 'rogue' academics, slightly unbalanced agitators, or One Nation supporters who express their frustration in resentment against their neighbours.

Accountability is a civic virtue: the market will not suffice. ■

Maira Rayner is a lawyer and freelance journalist (MairaRayner@compuserve.com).



ENVIRONMENT

Needed: a new way of thinking

Frank Fisher unpacks the contradictions at the heart of much of our current economic and environmental planning.

CONSIDER THE imaginary headline from last year's Kyoto climate conference: *Greenhouse Conference Meltdown—available decision-making frameworks discarded as inadequate.*

UNESCO assumes renew role.

Not very likely.

It is easy to show that we are not dealing with many of the big problems facing humanity at present, but, to make matters worse, the intellectual structures available to make sense of issues such as Greenhouse are not adequate to the task. They simply do not allow us to look at them broadly enough.

Let me illustrate with a selection of related problems, drawn from press contributions at the time of the Kyoto conference, to highlight contradictions at their cores. The contradictions indicate an inadequacy in thinking which in turn gives rise to the problems. Once the inadequacy is demonstrated, we are in a better position to overcome it and offer a general direction for the reshaping of institutions.

1. *Time* magazine supported by Toyota, produced a special issue entitled 'Our Precious Planet: Why saving the environment will be the next century's biggest challenge' (November 1997).

2. The Uranium Information Centre tells us that 'Nuclear energy still has a role ... every thousand kilowatt hours [of electricity] generated by nuclear energy saves about a tonne of carbon dioxide emission compared with coal' (letter in *The Age*, 3 November 1997).

3. Engineers Australia maintains that 'cheap, grid-competitive photovoltaic power is within reach' (October 1997).

4. Melbourne University (Gilbert Chandler College) is offering an orientation

program for graduate engineers entering the dairy industry in 1998 (advertisement, November 1997).

5. A doctor representing the AMA rails righteously against cigarettes then climbs into his comfortably polluting 'Beamer' to commute the few kilometres home (*The Age*, 9 November 1997).

6. Social researcher Hugh Mackay suggests that the well-heeled 'do the world a favour: avoid the housework'. The supposed favour is job creation through 'outsourcing' of housework (25 October 1997).

Explanations

1. To publish its excellent special issue, 'Our Precious Planet', *Time* had to find sponsorship. Its sponsor is Toyota and the ads draw attention to the company's considerable efforts to produce 'greener' cars. Hidden behind these ads however, are a number of massive contradictions that inevitably undermine the good work of both Toyota and *Time*. For example:

It takes huge amounts of energy: a) to research, design, make, maintain and disassemble cars for recycling; b) to provide for the road and other infrastructures for cars (including a share of environmental and health infrastructures); c) to research, design, etcetera all this supporting infrastructure.

Indeed, this energy constitutes far more energy per average car than will ever be generated from the fuel it uses in its road life. Further, saying that 'Water [is] the only emission from the power source of the future' namely fuel cells, is correct, at best, only if we ignore all the contextual expenditures of the other polluting energies and materials needed to bring the fuel cells and their fuels to us. Which is not to deny the bright future for fuel cells.

It is not strictly necessary to expend all this energy just to get people around fast. It is expended to fulfil a swag of *social demands* which manufacturers rightly perceive we want *as we drive*. These range from rapid acceleration through air-conditioning to armouring. Further, while used primarily for driver-only urban commuting, most vehicles are also designed to be multi-purpose: for example, to transport the family to the beach with a boat behind.

Make no mistake, even this and safety itself are social, not engineering, demands. If, for instance, we did not believe we had to own a car to access it, we could hire the vehicle appropriate to our needs *when we needed it*. And safety? Perhaps the safest car in the world is the 60-year-old, 4 litre/100km Citroen 2CV, so flimsy it was outlawed in Sweden (home of Volvo) because inside it has no framework solid enough to attach seatbelts. It occupies insurance categories with premiums below those of other cars because it is driven carefully. Its drivers know their vulnerability and drive accordingly, in spite of the engineering. The engineering is, incidentally, quite good and its East German equivalent, the Trabant, easily outran Mercedes on a recent animal avoidance test.

Massive investment in machinery and infrastructure produces a certain flexibility and inertia in society. This happens with all large, hard (mechanical) or soft (e.g. administrative) systems. Investments in machinery, training, administration and in non-quantifiables such as employment satisfaction and status generate extensive social inflexibility. Investors must cover their outlays by making their investments

pay for themselves in their own terms. That is, by doing what they were designed for.

Diversification hardly helps: a \$500 million engine production line cannot be made to pay for itself by making solar panels. Extensive diversification would be needed to cope with the capital annihilation involved. Even a world famous bicycle-parts maker such as Shimano could hardly afford 20 pages of advertising in *Time* on its own, simply because the much smaller value of its products would not generate or need such a budget. Small, as Schumacher pointed out 25 years ago, indeed has its virtues.

When we do develop more fuel-efficient cars, they will simply maintain or depress further the already low price of fuel and so encourage continued wasteful use.

Cigarettes are vilified while still being smoked actively or passively in a society that not only accepts but idolises a much grosser polluter: the commuter car.

In the end, a transport equipment manufacturer such as Toyota cannot stay in business if required suddenly to start producing wind turbines or even non-material products such as environmental and social care. There is of course no market demand (i.e. political will and social infrastructure) to enable such transformations at present, and even if there were, there is too much inertia in our political economy to enable rapid social change of this scale.

2. Nuclear power is probably an oxymoron. If one were able to add up the energy costs associated with the research, development, construction, maintenance, decommissioning, and safe storage and monitoring of (for thousands of years) wastes associated with nuclear power stations and their fuels (enriched uranium or similar), we would probably find that more energy is required by the nuclear power system itself than it yields in electricity. Even excluding such vast energy costs as those associated with the Chernobyl disaster and its aftermath, the energy cost of the military defences associated with the world's existing fission power infrastructure would doubtless be equivalent to the output from a sizeable nuclear power station.

3. Photovoltaic electricity also comes to us with an initial energy expenditure large by comparison with that generated by the existing world output from these cells.

Unlike nuclear power however, photovoltaic cells do have the potential to deliver nett energy ... eventually—that is they have the potential to work off the energy debt their development and production incur. Nevertheless, the energy debt is considerable. Initial estimates indicate that it will be years still before we move into the black of a nett contribution to overall available electricity. Nor do solar electricities (hydro, photovoltaics and wind) come to us pollution free. Hydro has notorious natural environmental consequences, and to reach industrial society output levels, photovoltaics and wind will have numerous production

and use consequences, including noise, aesthetic impact and even meteorological disturbances as we plant broad acres to 1 MW+ wind turbines.

4. Dairy products might be fun but they are also 'metafoods'—that is they are produced essentially from other foods. They are certainly

nutrition-added foods, but when mass-produced as staple foods for humans, they also cause a raft of nutritional, social (animal exploitation and cultural conflict factors for example) and environmental problems. The environmental problems are associated with the water, land and additives used to produce them in comparison with say, the equivalent soy products. Afficionados of milk products may object to the proposal of soy products as alternatives, but that is a separate issue and an argument for another day. It is, however, interesting to note a contradiction in academic values: university course providers are routinely blocked from dealing with the environmental consequences of mass milk production.

5. Cigarettes are vilified while still being smoked actively or passively in a society that not only accepts but idolises a much grosser polluter: the commuter car. While two wrongs don't make a right, the contradiction (normally never even recognised, let alone acted upon) helps undermine the concern over cigarettes.

6. Buying in home help as a form of employment creation is a holding action for, sooner rather than later, such employ-

ment will be swallowed by automation. Moreover it involves a raft of environmental consequences, not least increased 'busy-ness' on the roads. Monash University geographer Kevin O'Connor's point that outsourcing of 'many formerly in-house tasks to private operators, whose workers travel from company to company increasing congestion on roads' can easily be extended to the outsourcing of domestic chores. They might increase business opportunities but they also increase traffic. The outsourcing habit also invades yet another part of home (our 'Haven in a Heartless World' as Christopher Lasch put it) converting it into just another area of production in the overall patterns of consumer society.

THESE ARE contradictions that need to be teased out. There are others that are more blatant. Here is one clutch, all reported in the press within the space of that same Kyoto conference week:

- rich Americans are now installing 'secure' bunkers to hide from each other; meanwhile
- mobile phones sold to help keep their/our loved ones 'safe' are now suspected of causing their own health effects and our National Health & Medical Research Council is now calling for \$4 million worth of research to clarify these concerns; meanwhile
- the marketing of 'off-the-rack clothes that protect office workers from electromagnetic radiation emitted by computer screens, televisions, microwaves and mobile phones' is being canvassed in Japan—except that keeping a mobile in a pocket in such a suit would render it (er...) *immobile*; meanwhile
- a new very fast-growing industry is developing to counter hacker-generated viruses that 'compromise the immunity' of microprocessors; meanwhile, your daily paper will keep you posted with more.

The contradictions in this latter group are straightforward. Not so straightforward is the contradiction inherent in the *persistence* of these and a myriad similar contradictions. This invisible mother of contradictions, or contradiction underlying other contradictions, has the same basis as the first six. All are currently unavoidable because they are outcomes of the way society organises thinking about itself and therefore of how it manages itself.

Explicitly, the contradictions are unavoidable and obscured because virtually no-one has the training to spot them, that is, the intellectual tools are unavailable. Consequently, there are no social (political,



legal, economic) mechanisms to enable the activities mentioned to be analysed or scrutinised in the way outlined here, and therefore no mechanisms that would enable corrective action to be taken to the social structures that make these activities the necessary outcomes of other actions. So we move in circles, trying to correct the activities and not the structures responsible for them.

More worrying still is the fact that publicly raising the existence of these general, pathology-inducing structures has hitherto been seen as subversive, or worse, seditious. Therefore, attempts to do so have been suppressed. The activities outlined are in the main contradictory in their own terms. They depend for their viability on partial understandings. Moreover, there is no socially legitimate institution that would consistently enable them to be brought under an accepted intellectual (let alone regulatory) infrastructure that would expose the problems that are generated by acting on such partial insights. The Australian Science & Technology Council is, to my knowledge, all but dead, and parliamentary committees only rarely rise to this level of complex consideration.

Finally, we cannot claim that we have not been warned. In this century articulate voices such as Alfred North Whitehead in *Science & the Modern World* (1926) and C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* (1943) have tried to put the concerns I raise. More recently E.F. Schumacher (of 'Small is Beautiful' fame), in his last book *A Guide for the Perplexed* (1976), sought to draw attention to the notion of adequacy—in our approach to life—itsself. His concern arose from the endless repetition of the agonies associated with innovations such as the so-called Green Revolution through which specialised, high-yield cereals are imposed upon poor societies in ignorance of the social contexts in which their traditional cereals were grown.

For long-term survival, a way of organising societies and their wealth has to be found that re-establishes the parallel value of that which cannot be counted or regulated and gives it parallel political ascendancy. For that to happen, a more profound understanding must be cultivated and its cultivation in turn, rendered socially desirable.

Herein lies the new job for UNESCO. ■

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Good news is no news

THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT NOAH knew how to work the publicity machine. The story of the man who rode out the devastating flood in his ark crops up in a host of ancient civilisations—albeit with some of the names changed.

And the image of Noah ticking off a list of animals two-by-two is so pervasive, that Archimedes suspects most people believe such a list exists—that somewhere on Earth there is a Golden Book in which the names of all species are inscribed. Not so. Despite the fact that hundreds of species are becoming extinct each year, there is no definitive list of the estimated 1.5 million named species, and even this number represents less than a quarter of all species.

Things are about to change, however, with the advent of the Global Biological Information Facility (GBIF), a US\$300 million project to make the biological information stored in the world's museums and research institutions available to all via the World Wide Web. GBIF was the central recommendation of a summary report recently endorsed by the Megascience Forum of the OECD (an influential body responsible for handling scientific projects too big for any one nation to tackle). Details of GBIF proposal were revealed at the first world conference on Biological Informatics held in Canberra in July.

The plan is to compile a definitive electronic list of species—a 'Catalogue of Life'. The name of each species would lead directly to a description, information on where the type specimen is stored, key references in the scientific literature, and directions as to where the organism is found. The catalogue would also act as a gateway to further information on genetics, biochemistry, physiology, ecology, habitat, medical and agricultural significance—in fact, to any other scientific data relevant to the species.

But GBIF is not just some egghead plan to back up esoteric research. Its promoters regard it as essential to conservation of the Earth's diversity of species, a practical way that rich nations—which hold most of the world's museum specimens and biological information but are home to relatively few of the Earth's species—can provide practical resources to assist the poorer nations, who are responsible for managing a much greater variety of organisms.

'Most countries do not even know what biodiversity they have,' says Dr Jim Edwards of the US National Science Foundation, who chaired the working group which prepared the report recommending GBIF. 'And without that information they can't mobilise their scientific resources effectively to conserve biodiversity.'

Such repatriation of information is already happening. Most of the type specimens of the birds of Mexico, and the accompanying basic descriptive and ecological data, for instance, are sitting in museums in the US, Canada and Europe. The World Bank is funding a project to transfer that data to Mexico. The relevant Mexican authorities are using the information to plan conservation areas to secure the future of their birds.

Closer to home, Australian biologists are using data from the natural habitat of the Cane Toad in Latin America to seek out natural enemies and other constraints on its population growth and spread.

In fact, it turns out that Australia is at the forefront of biological informatics, the new field at the heart of GBIF which employs computers to link, manage, analyse and present biological information. According to Dr Ebbe Nielsen, the director of the Australian National Insect Collection and organiser of the Canberra conference, if Australia handle things right, it could well end up selling informatics software and technology worldwide.

While some might argue that it's a desperate response occasioned by dramatic cuts in spending on conservation, most governments in Australia are heavily involved in biological informatics. They are developing electronic inventories of their biological resources, as well as descriptions and keys for identifying species, and software tools for pulling together, analysing and displaying information to assist conservation planning and management. The programs to do all these things will constitute an important part of GBIF.

Though the cost of GBIF will be considerable, in general, GBIF is a good news story. Perhaps that is why the huge enterprise of bringing together all the world's biological knowledge has had little or no publicity—unlike Noah, who had the good fortune to preside over a disaster. ■

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That Henry Handel Richardson fella

TRACKING Henry Handel Richardson around Victoria brought both rewards and worries. Long drives, correspondence, phone calls, interviews, helpful librarians and local historians and lots of books, gave pleasure and excitement. Yet there came, too, a stark realisation that large sales of books about cooking, sport, gardening, celebrities, travel and how to do things, cannot hide the overwhelming public ignorance of our vital literary heritage. It wasn't nice to learn that lots of university graduates, booksellers, readers and other thoughtful folk, know little or nothing of literary figures like Henry Handel Richardson, a writer largely neglected and unread despite the plaques adorning buildings in East Melbourne, Koroit, Chiltern, Hawthorn and Maldon. In Maldon, where the author's name is prominent, men sometimes ask at the Tourist Information Centre: 'Who was that Henry Handel Richardson fella?'

Then, some who knew of Richardson startled me by their hostility and vehemence towards her, so long after publication of her books and her death. She had a king-size capacity to infuriate. Her portrayals of characters and places often irritated and outraged those who believed she slandered their forebears or unfavourably described their town or school.

First published 50 years ago, her autobiographical *Myself When Young* produced much of the indignation



but so did the earlier fiction, *The Getting of Wisdom* and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. From childhood she had an extraordinary capacity to 'make up', and like so many successful writers she used the people and places she knew as a basis for characterisation.

The tears flowed freely, long ago, as I finished *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* for the first time, immediately believing it to be one of the greatest Australian novels. So it was a labour of love to pursue Ethel Florence Richardson and her family around the Victorian countryside.

The search began in Buninyong a few miles from Ballarat where the Richardson Australian story begins. Buninyong is a pretty little place with fine old buildings, lovely oaks and conifers, a restful Botanical Gardens for which the ubiquitous Ferdinand von Mueller supplied seeds. There is an atmosphere of gentle quietness unusual in these times. The Uniting Church has attractive interconnected gables and a huge front precinct filled with majestic oaks and wide lawns. European trees dominate, the eucalypts having been cut out long ago. To see eucalypts one has to look up to the Mount Buninyong summit or onto the surrounding hills and ridges which attractively encircle the town.

When Dr Walter Lindesay Richardson, on whose life *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* was based,

Above: the Maldon Post Office to which the Richardson family was transferred in 1880. Below: the Post Office's memorial plaque to H.H.R. Photographs by Bill Thomas.

arrived in Australia in 1852 he hurried to Buninyong bearing a letter of introduction to Thomas Sheppard who had settled there in the 1840s. Sheppard owned a brewery situated on the town's small reservoir known as the Gong. Chairman of the Buninyong Council, a JP and President of the Horticultural Society, he was a big figure in the town.

Richardson stayed with the Sheppards for many months. The Sheppard home still stands solidly adjacent to the bluestone brewery, a large single storied brick home with ample verandahs adorned by wrought ironwork.

Apparently Richardson earned the Sheppards' displeasure by not immediately setting up a medical practice. He opted instead to open a general store on the Ballarat goldfields. They asserted afterwards that he was a drunkard suffering from dipsomania and described him as being shiftless and a bounder. However, Dorothy Green and others have rather convincingly disputed these allegations.

Walter Richardson's tent-store was established at Mount Pleasant in 1854 just along from the present popular tourist complex at Sovereign Hill.

He maintained his Mount Pleasant store after his marriage to Mary Bailey, as the fictional Mahony did with his wife, Mary Turnham. As business declined he undertook more duties as a medical practitioner and by 1856 operated as a full-time doctor.

Towards the end of 1859 he bought a property at 4 Webster Street, Ballarat, built a home and conducted his medical practice there until 1867. This home provided the location for much of the first part of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Now it is known as Peplow House, a Shelter for Homeless Men run by the Ballarat Council of Churches.

Webster Street, nowadays, is lined with comfortable homes hidden behind giant trees and abundant shrubbery. Magnificent rows of elms and oaks provide deep shade in summer, lovely autumn colours and a sea of fallen leaves in early winter. The old Richardson home is at the city end just round the corner from the commercialism and roaring traffic of Doveton Street. A short walk away is the large district hospital where Richardson played an important role in the 1860s.

On a delightful autumn morning I stepped onto the verandah of Peplow House just after 11am. To my surprise, six or eight men stood in complete silence at one end of the verandah, each one alone, dead pan, patiently waiting. None of them actually looked at me. It seemed eerie. What would Richard Mahony have thought?

I tried to open the wire door but found it latched. The nearest man said softly almost in a whisper, without looking at me, 'There's a bell.' I rang and stood there, the only man on the verandah sporting a hat, my squatter's hat to protect a balding pate—a Tim Fischer hat, an ALP heavy had called it accusingly not long before. Did I look like a homeless man? The

waiting men, waiting as it turned out for a three-course 11.30 meal, ranged through all age groups; one or two resembled derelicts, most were clean and tidy and a couple appeared quite natty.

The Welfare Officer, Kath Simpkin, courteous and helpful, was aware of the house's literary connections. A framed print of Fred McCubbin's 'Down on His Luck' appropriately hung above her desk. Her phone rang several times within a few minutes. Kath Simpkin showed me the room she believed Richardson used as his surgery. The house is of brick with a bluestone base. From the front gate, Warrenheip looks stark and exciting even though six miles away. Lake Wendouree (Yuille's Swamp as it was in Richardson's time) is a ten-minute walk down the street.

AS A GIRL, Ethel Richardson saw the house while on a holiday in Ballarat. In 1912, when she was 42 years old, she saw it again on a research visit to Australia. Apart from those visits she studied documents relating to Ballarat history, read much correspondence and talked to people who had experienced life there. So well did she absorb early Ballarat history that Weston Bate, who wrote *Lucky City: The First Generation at Ballarat 1851–1901*, believed her proem to the first volume of the novel to be 'the most satisfying description I know of the essence of the early Ballarat experience'.

Nowadays, Ballarat means Webster Street for me. While walking down it Richard Mahony is likely to loom beside me protruding his pomposity, conservatism, intelligence and humanity, and never far away, a homeless man hovers too.

But this does not lessen the delights of Lydiard Street with the Art Gallery and Masons at the Gallery, the precious tiny restaurant nestled there; Craig's Hotel, as well as the statues, trees and gardens of Sturt Street and the Botanical Gardens beside Lake Wendouree. Lucky city, indeed. Richard Mahony would have acknowledged all this had he stayed and lived on and on. He would have been pleased, with reservations, about the crop of writers and artists that the city produced or hosted: Adam Lindsay Gordon, Bernard O'Dowd, Edward and Will Dyson, Nathan Spielvogel, Norman Lindsay and his siblings from nearby Creswick.

The Richardsons left Ballarat in 1867 and travelled overseas. Ethel Florence was born on January 3, 1879, after their return to Australia, 15 years after



Above: the Queenscliff house to which H.H.R. and her family moved in 1887.

their marriage. Her first years were lived in Balaclava where her sister, Lil, was born.

Walter Richardson had prospered by investments. On a second overseas family trip in the early 1870s disastrous news came about his business affairs, requiring an immediate return to Australia to salvage what he could of his finances and face the necessity of returning to medical practice in order to support his family.

In 1874 he bought land and built a two-storey house and surgery in Burwood Road, Hawthorn. In the 1960s and 1970s my home was just round the corner from this site occupied then by the Glenferrie Hotel where I used to go for the occasional bottle or jar, quite unaware of its historical significance. Walter Richardson walked the streets of Hawthorn attending his patients, but deteriorating health and financial concerns sapped his strength and confidence which in turn unsettled the five-year-old Ettie.

The Hawthorn house was rented out in 1876 when Richardson took over a country practice at Chiltern. There, Ettie first experienced the Australian bush. A lifetime later, in *Myself When Young*, she wrote

about Chiltern: '... for the first time, I saw and smelt wattles in bloom. It was an unforgettable experience. To this day, I have only to catch a whiff of mimosa in a dingy London street, and I am once more a small girl, sitting on a fallen tree under the bluest of skies, with all around me these golden, almost stupefyingly sweet masses of blossom.'

BUT THE HEALTH and economic difficulties of her father grew apace and the family moved to Queenscliff in 1877. The house they lived in still stands at 26 Mercer Street. The piano and the beach occupied much of the children's time and books and reading began to loom large for Ettie, whose father took advantage of the daily return trips available on the paddlesteamer and the steamship to visit Melbourne bookshops in order to satisfy his own voracious reading habits and to supply his precocious daughter with suitable fare.

However, Richardson's mental health declined so badly that he had to abandon medical duties and the children were often publicly embarrassed by his antics in the streets of the town. Mary Richardson had no choice but to send her husband to Melbourne for treatment and institutionalisation. She then had only a very tiny income. Through an old family friend, Henry Cuthbert, the Victorian Postmaster-General, she was appointed as postmistress at Koroit.

She assumed her duties in the bluestone Koroit Post Office in September 1878 and lived with her daughters in the little house attached. Ettie's impressions of Koroit were not flattering. The eight year old thought it 'mean and ugly', like the house, while she saw the surrounding countryside as flat and treeless. Her mother's prejudice against State schools necessitated her each day going to the Rectory of the Anglican Church where the Vicar's wife tutored her and two stepchildren. This was the family of the Rev. C.L.H. Rupp. The Rectory still stands in Queen Street directly behind the Anglican Church, a homely-looking old weatherboard place with eye-catching chimneys and bow windows.

Ethel wrote of the Rupp family in quite unflattering terms in *Myself When Young*, alleging the daughter was beaten savagely by her father on one occasion and intimating that the children and their stepmother hated each other. These allegations were strongly and convincingly refuted by the Rupp 'children' nearly 70 years after the Richardsons left Koroit, following publication of *Myself When Young*. The daughter, Florence Monypenny, while denying the accusations in a letter to Nettie Palmer, praised Ettie as 'rather a wonder child', emphasising her abilities to write stores and poems and referring to the piano prowess displayed by her and Lil at concerts. Florence Monypenny and her brother also refer to Ethel Richardson's failure to mention the beauty and special features of the district, in particular Tower Hill.

Yet who could blame Ethel for having adverse memories of Koroit? She was only eight or nine. Her father came to live there in February 1879, a complete physical and mental wreck; he died in August. Her formative years brimmed with anxiety, fear and embarrassment.

Rev. Rupp officiated at Richardson's funeral on the lower slopes of Tower Hill on the Warrnambool side. Driving from Koroit today, and following the route of the funeral procession, one sees the ocean waves still tumbling on our southern shore. Without trees or shrubs the cemetery remains starkly grim, bleak and windswept. On each of my several visits there I have been struck with the accuracy and power of the depiction of the scene in the penultimate paragraph of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*:

A quarter of a mile off, behind a sandy ridge, the surf, driving in from the Bight, breaks and booms eternally on the barren shore. Thence, too, come the fierce winds which, in stormy weather, hurl themselves over the land, where not a tree, not a bush, nor even a fence stands to break their force. Or to limit the outlook. On all sides the eye can range, unhindered, to where the vast earth meets the infinitely vaster sky. And under blazing summer suns, or when a full moon floods the night, no shadow falls on the sun-baked or moon-blanching plains, but those cast by the few little stones set up in human remembrance.



Above:
Henry Handel
Richardson,
circa 1921.

Mary Richardson was transferred to Maldon early in 1880, from a bluestone Post Office to a red brick one, but with more responsibility and a higher salary. Maldon became home for the Richardsons from 1880 until January 1887. During this time Ethel's five years as a boarder at the Presbyterian Ladies College in Melbourne, though academically successful, were not always happy. However, she always looked back on Maldon with fondness, as her comments in *Myself When Young* testify:

Compared with Koroit, Maldon seemed and indeed was a lovely spot. For one thing trees abounded. Even the main street was lined with great gums, and almost every house had a garden, in springtime a profusion of white and coloured blossoms. Blue ranges banked the horizon, and to the rear of the little town rose its own particular hill—old, boulder-strewn Mount Tarrengower—an hour's stiff climb up a trickling gully, and a landmark in the district for miles around.

Little is left of the Post Office garden which so attracted Ethel Richardson. However, an oak, two old almonds, a peppercorn and some creepers are probably remnants from her time.

Diagonally across from the Post Office is the old Calder home visited often by the Richardsons for parties, games and musical evenings. A little up High Street is the Holy Trinity Church which perhaps had more significance in Ethel's young life. Externally lovely but magnificent within, this Anglican Church has a superb wooden scissor-beam ceiling and fine pipe organ, the decorations on which are over 100 years old. Rev. Jack Stretch became the minister there in 1882. Ethel heard him preach there and became infatuated with the good-looking, personable and articulate young minister. She was 13. A lifetime later she wrote in *Myself When Young*: 'I fell in love, desperately, hopelessly in love, with a man fifteen years my senior ...' Much has been made of this childhood infatuation but Stretch left Maldon in 1885 and married shortly afterwards.

Stretch's successor at the Holy Trinity Church was the Rev. Arthur Green who came to Maldon with his wife and his sister, Florence. The Green family were known to the Richardsons. Arthur Green had been the incumbent at St Peter's in East Melbourne near the Presbyterian Ladies College. It seems most likely that Ethel, some 25 years later, based her



Above: the gadabout H.H.R. in her Armstrong-Siddeley, 1927.

caustic characterisation of the Shepherd family in *The Getting of Wisdom* upon the Greens—husband, wife and sister.

What a talented lot they were. Jack Stretch became Bishop of Newcastle, known for his human and liberal attitudes. Arthur Green was a considerable scholar, later Bishop of Grafton and Armidale in NSW and then Bishop of Ballarat. Florence Green founded a number of schools including the Girls' High School in Geelong, the forerunner of The Hermitage. Ethel's sister, Lil, an active suffragette in England, married the 'new' educationist A.S. Neill. She helped found Summerhill School, to which she devoted a large part of her life.



IN JANUARY 1887, Mary Richardson left Maldon to become postmistress of Richmond South Post Office in Swan Street. Ethel and Lil attended PLC as day girls. But the Swan Street job and residence did not appeal to her. She resigned from the service, sold the Hawthorn house and took her daughters to Europe. The girls returned to Australia only for the six-week trip in 1912.

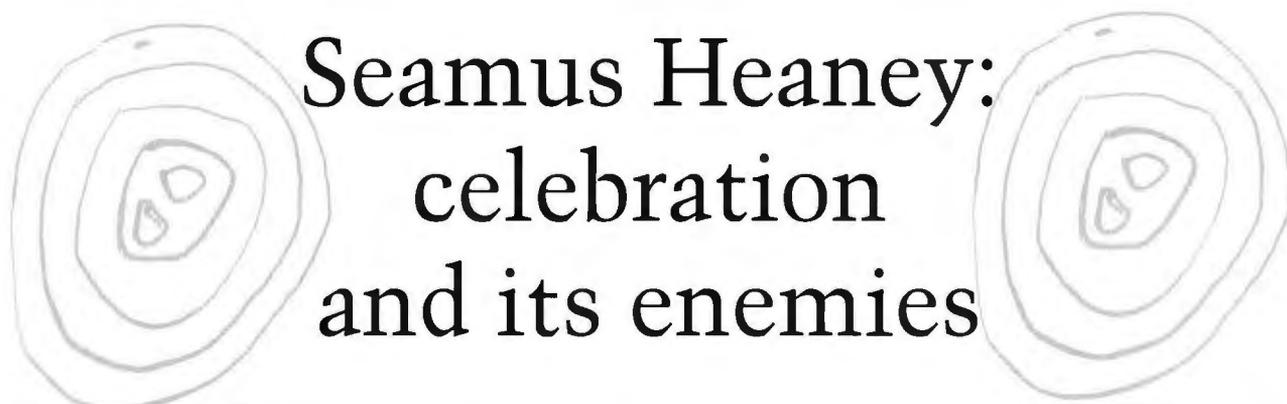
Ethel Richardson declared once that a writer had usually gathered sufficient material by the age of ten. Her 18 years in Australia gave her an abundance. Her horrifying childhood experience of seeing her father gradually lose his faculties and her difficult times at

PLC gave her a sense of the tragic and of alienation. She knew wealth yet she experienced frugality. This unusual background together with her intelligence and her ability to 'make up' enabled her to become one of our greatest writers. Dorothy Green put it so well:

... to know *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* ... is one of the most elementary and obvious duties of Australian culture ... But to read it is not only a duty, but an unforgettable experience of the profundities that sustain the simplicities of existence, an experience that shakes and then strengthens the reader who yields himself to it, and which endows the common dust with a tragic grandeur. ■

John Senty lives and writes in North Central Victoria.

Left: the Richmond South Post Office in Swan Street, where Mary Richardson became postmistress in 1887. Unhappy in the position, she resigned and took her daughters to Europe. Photograph by Bill Thomas.



Seamus Heaney: celebration and its enemies

THIS IS HOW CELEBRATION CAN GO, when things are well in hand:

The Rain Stick
for Beth and Rand

Upend the rain stick and what happens next
Is a music that you never would have known
To listen for. In a cactus stalk

Downpour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash
Come flowing through. You stand there like a pipe
Being played by water, you shake it again lightly

And diminuendo runs through all its scales
Like a gutter stopping trickling. And now here comes
A sprinkle of drops out of the freshened leaves,

Then subtle little wets off grass and daisies;
Then glitter-drizzle, almost-breaths of air.
Upend the stick again. What happens next

Is undiminished for having happened once,
Twice, ten, a thousand times before.
Who cares if all the music that transpires

Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?
You are like a rich man entering heaven
Through the ear of a raindrop. Listen now again.

—'The Rain Stick', *The Spirit Level*

A newcomer to Heaney's work might notice a handful of things about this poem, including the following. It traffics in the elements, as by instinct—rain, breaths of air, earth's grass and daisies, the sunned cactus—and goes the rounds of them, touching base with the given for its own sake; whatever is to be made of them will be in part of their own making. Then there is fluidity, whether in the music invoked from first to last, in the summoning narrative, or in the range of aspirations and vindications—things heightened by a poet who has always had the blood of Orpheus in him. And there is the bid for, the salute to, plenitude: 'a music you never would have known/To listen for'; the experience undiminished for all its earlier frequency; that rich man got, surprisingly, into the final opulence. In the Gospel story, at the prodigal's return, 'they began to celebrate', making a meal of it with the fatted calf. One of Heaney's prime inclinations is to offer a bread, at once world and word, as best taken with the wine of exhilaration—a wine which seems to come from water itself when water is well regarded.

Celebrations commonly make use of emblematic objects—wedding ring and veil, maturity's key—and Heaney is a great one for these. The rain stick here is of a piece with the harvest bow, the blackberries, or the palmed stone which are at the centre of various other poems. Any such thing might, in other contemporary hands, come to stand for dismay, as if every golden thread must at best lead us only into darkness and its minotaur: but although Heaney's whole poetical fortunes might be symbolised in terms of his assaying and scrutinising such objects, his basic disposition is to hope for good of them.

Joseph Joubert, in his splendidly independent *Notebooks*, writes at one point, 'Our arms are canes of flesh with which the soul reaches and touches', and, at another, 'A diamond lost in the lawn is only a stone for the caterpillar who crawls along it, but for us it is a source of radiant scintillations. It is a star. It is a meteor.' This might be called Heaney's lingua franca, though it is so only if we notice the elements of probing—what Shakespeare calls 'tenting'—and of revisionary attention in Joubert's phrases. The heart can be done good only if the mind comes good, it would seem.

Two of Heaney's favourite words are 'acoustic' and 'vigilant'. Either, in isolation, might be inadequate to celebration and its occasions. 'Acoustic' can look only to sound's modalities, to choices from the tongue's and the ear's repertoire, to manner—to the sheerly aesthetic: 'vigilant' can on occasion serve only the menaced self or community, can bear on peril and its averting. But in ensemble, they may stand for a more complex keying of the imagination, one in which account is taken of intimate, shifting, and only partly comprehended relationships between the fertile and the lethal. In the round, the celebrations at least of adults typically accommodate both good acoustics and appropriate vigilance. A sacral example of this is a priest's 'celebrating' the Eucharist or Mass, where the ceremony is impossible without allusion both to emblems of life and joy—bread, wine, light, water and so forth, and the 'secret harmonies' for which these stand—and to a tale of betrayal, desertion, and judicial murder at the hands of an army of occupation. The example is drastic: but more commonplace occasions—any day's countless weddings, ceremonies of initiation, markings of professional competency, solacing of the bereft—all make room both for intuited significance and for required endeavour. Celebration is a kind of agora of the heart, a locale of audition, insight and transaction.

GOOD THING THAT IT IS, indeed indispensable for any amply human life, celebration has various enemies. I think here not of the people Brendan Behan used to call 'the begrudgers' in every generation, and presumably every culture: but of dispositions to which anyone may be subject, and cultural demeanours to which anyone may consent. One of these is outright cynicism, in the face of which celebration simply withers. To Heaney's 'Upend the rain stick ... Listen now again', and to all comparable invitations, cynicism says every time, '*ohne mich*' (not me!).

Still, I believe that one thing which has made Heaney's work, prose as well as poetry, engaging in both senses of that word is his instinctive readiness to make provision for the voice of the cynic in his own work. Very few, if any, of his poems are purely lyrical: usually, to use another of his words, they are 'badged' with the insignia of grief, misgiving, subversion. So, in 'The Rain Stick', his 'Who cares?' is an invitation to continued enchantment, but 'the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus' is still vigilance's concession to sensed implausibility: and the bold gaiety of the last couple of lines still enjoins a new exertion. Even in the modest circumstances of this poem, there is something of a call to arms to be heard.

We are on somewhat different ground in another of Heaney's shorter poems, 'A Daylight Art', which is dedicated to Norman MacCaig.

On the day he was to take the poison
Socrates told his friends he had been writing:
putting Aesop's fables into verse.

And this was not because Socrates loved wisdom
and advocated the examined life.
The reason was that he had had a dream.

Caesar, now, or Herod or Constantine
or any number of Shakespearean kings
bursting at the end like dams

where original panoramas lie submerged
which have to rise again before the death scenes—
you can believe in their believing dreams.

But hardly Socrates. Until, that is,
he tells his friends the dream had kept recurring
all his life, repeating one instruction:

Practise the art, which art until that moment
he always took to mean philosophy.
Happy the man, therefore, with a natural gift

for practising the right one from the start—
poetry, say, or fishing; whose nights are dreamless;
whose deep-sunk panoramas rise and pass

like daylight through the rod's eye or the nib's eye.

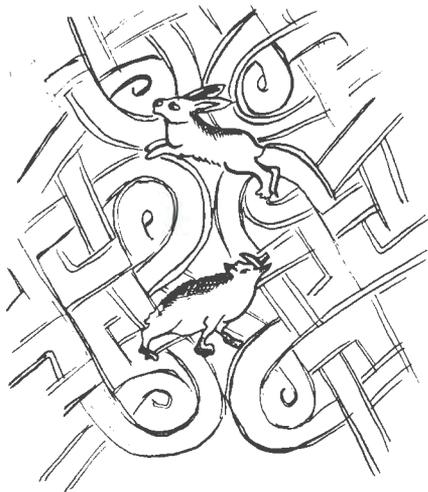
—'A Daylight Art', *The Haw Lantern*

'Through the ear of a raindrop', 'through the rod's eye or the nib's eye'—the confirming, concluding gesture is one thing which links the poems, and there are other occasions on which Heaney rehearses the trope, taken of course from Christ's characterisation of improbable, beneficent accomplishment. I take it here as a reminder of something critical to all of this poet's aspirations to celebration, namely the coming to cases, or to put it a little differently, the declining of the abstract. It is not that Heaney, especially in his prose, eschews generalisation, or the handsome rhetoric which wears aphoristic formulation as a sort of tabard. In fact, he does that kind of thing exceptionally well: the mewed voice may loft at any moment, and does so often. But he commonly writes as though the particular and its constraints are insight's best warrant.

Joubert called Plato 'the Rabelais of abstractions', which may be an important part of justice to the philosophers' philosopher. It implies, surely, singularity of mind, immense command of individual occasions, relish, and non-stop drama. The fact that the whole original Platonic affair comes to us couched as drama is far from incidental, signalling as it does the truth that we really have insight on no other terms. Heaney, who clearly finds thinking relishable, contemplates the great philosopher's mentor and messianic figure as someone who, approaching that most particular of all points, the death-moment,

In cultural milieux in which those ancient transcendentals, unity, truth and goodness, are automatically discounted, beauty has a harder time still in urging its cause: but poets cannot always be attending to intellectual pathology, and must sometimes get right on with making the things which at least insinuate excellences decried by the dogmatic.

*At the beginning of
A Midsummer
Night's Dream,
Duke Theseus,
planning wedding
celebrations, says
that 'The pale
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our pomps', that
pale companion
being sadness—
death's shadow,
perhaps. But
celebration may
have to be
attempted in the
face of intimidation,
which is another of
its enemies, another
of death's agents.*



takes his stand on a new-found art, which requires verse's precision in the framing of Aeschylus's fables.

Heaney has the account of Socrates' last hours from Plato's *Phaedo*. Good translations of the original offer, variously, that his dream enjoined on him that he should 'work at music, and compose it', or that he 'make art and practise it'. There is nothing enigmatic in the contrast, given Plato's view of the musical as ubiquitous; and the convergence of the two formulations would be altogether congenial to Heaney, who often writes in counterpoint to existing staves, and who bids for a 'music of what happens' even in the face of melody's violation. But he is not cajoled, not seduced, by life's orchestral insinuations so that he neglects to put these to the test of the particular. It was, after all, the then-Britannic agents, Edmund Spenser and John Davies, who wrote with sumptuous fluidity of cosmic harmonies, unalarmed the while by the shedding of Irish blood. Perhaps Heaney also remembers Elizabeth's terse injunction, 'Hang the harpers wherever found', but he is not someone easily beguiled by music native or foreign. Entertaining gratefully the example of shapers, pipers and hauntings, he is also a Platonic scrutiniser, a holder of things, item by item, up to the light.

'A Daylight Art' is dedicated to one of Scotland's veteran poets, a man whose work has undergone a number of significant transformations. The poem may be more than casually complimentary, implying both that MacCaig kept faith with early intuitions and that he had something of a Socratic readiness to go wherever, appropriately, he was drawn. At all events, the bent of 'A Daylight Art' is to celebrate a quality which Heaney elsewhere identifies in Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence'—a being 'philosophic in its retrieval of the stance of wisdom out of the experience of wonder'. (Heaney, in Introduction to *The Essential Wordsworth*, Hopewell, NJ, Ecco Press, 1988). This, no doubt, is 'a natural gift', but it has—like fishing—to be exercised case by case: the 'deep-sunk panoramas' have to be played-up, played-through, 'artlessly' as it may seem, but only after long 'practising'. 'Happy the man', Heaney says, conscious in so doing that he is echoing a long tradition of celebrating ease of spirit, a tradition with its own complex practices. Airy celebration is all to the good, but gusty celebration goes nowhere. 'Beauty is something animal, the beautiful is something celestial': if Heaney (after Socrates) were to agree with the second half of Joubert's claim, it would be on condition that the first half is never out of sight.

AT THE BEGINNING OF *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Duke Theseus, planning wedding celebrations, says that 'The pale companion is not for our pomps', that pale companion being sadness—death's shadow, perhaps. But celebration may have to be attempted in the face of intimidation, which is another of its enemies, another of death's agents. Heaney has been badgered from left and from right concerning his polity, and it is improbable that he has yet said all his say, in verse or otherwise, on the matter. What is clear is that the presence of intimidation, of terror in fact, is no small part of his matter. One of his own 'original panoramas' is the green and grey corpus of Ireland, but another is that same zone coloured red and black. Going to singing school requires vigilance as to the heart's territory.

Whence a poem like 'Two Lorries'.

It's raining on black coal and warm wet ashes.
There are tyre-marks in the yard, Agnew's old lorry
Has all its cribs down and Agnew the coalman
With his Belfast accent's sweet-talking my mother.
Would she ever go to a film in Magherafelt?
But it's raining and he still has half the load

To deliver farther on. This time the lode
Our coal came from was silk-black, so the ashes
Will be the silkiest white. The Magherafelt
(Via Toomebridge) bus goes by. The half-stripped lorry
With its emptied, folded coal-bags moves my mother:
The tasty ways of a leather-aproned coalman!

And films no less! The conceit of a coalman ...
She goes back in and gets out the black lead
And emery paper, this nineteen-forties mother,
All business round her stove, half-wiping ashes
With a backhand from her cheek as the bolted lorry
Gets revved and turned and heads for Magherafelt

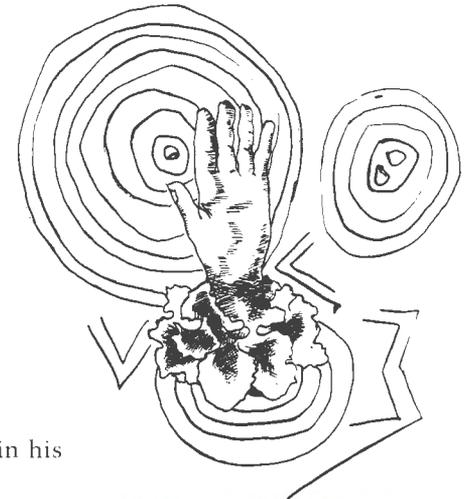
And the last delivery. Oh, Magherafelt!
Oh, dream of red plush and a city coalman
As time fastforwards and a different lorry
Groans into shot, up Broad Street, with a payload
That will blow the bus station to dust and ashes ...
After that happened, I'd a vision of my mother,

A revenant on the bench where I would meet her
 In that cold-floored waiting-room in Magherafelt,
 Her shopping bags full up with shovelled ashes.
 Death walked out past her like a dust-faced coalman
 Refolding body-bags, plying his load
 Empty upon empty, in a flurry

Of motes and engine-revs, but which lorry
 Was it now? Young Agnew's or that other,
 Heavier, deadlier one, set to explode
 In a time beyond her time in Magherafelt ...
 So tally bags and sweet-talk darkness, coalman.
 Listen to the rain spit in new ashes

As you heft a load of dust that was Magherafelt,
 Then reappear from your lorry as my mother's
 Dreamboat coalman filmed in silk-white ashes.

—'Two Lorries', *The Spirit Level*



Heaney has been badgered from left and from right concerning his polity, and it is improbable that he has yet said all his say, in verse or otherwise, on the matter. What is clear is that the presence of intimidation, of terror in fact, is no small part of his matter.

IN HIS NOBEL LECTURE, Heaney remarks on what he, and others, have seen as a decisive shift in his priorities as a poet. He remarks that, when thinking of

the actualities of Ulster and Israel and Bosnia and Rwanda and a host of other wounded spots on the face of the earth, the inclination is not only not to credit human nature with much constructive potential but not to credit anything too positive in the work of art.

Which is why for years I was bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effort, but constrained by his obedience to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture. Blowing up sparks for a meagre heat. Forgetting faith, straining towards good works. Attending insufficiently to the diamond absolutes, among which must be counted the sufficiency of that which is absolutely imagined. Then finally and happily, and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in despite of them, I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous ... (*Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture*, London, Faber, 1996)

'Two Lorries', surely, is a poem which is driven by this newer intent. The break between earlier and later endeavours is not absolute—few things in poetry are of that kind—but the ground has shifted somewhat. 'Two Lorries' is scarved in formality to a degree not often welcomed in the earlier poetry, even given Heaney's liking for the sonnet. Still, the sestina is loosened somewhat, is servant and not master of the questing imagination. It is part of the poem's affair to celebrate lee-way in human choosing as in human remembering, and some relaxedness is relevant to both of these.

Thinking of the business of celebration, I want to say that it does aspire to conjunctions, to harmonies, and to the prizing of beauty. In cultural milieux in which those ancient transcendentals, unity, truth and goodness, are automatically discounted, beauty has a harder time still in urging its cause: but poets cannot always be attending to intellectual pathology, and must sometimes get right on with making the things which at least insinuate excellences decried by the dogmatic. And there is a more important point, so far as this poem is concerned. Intimidation, demoralisation, and above all terror, 'blow things apart'. All those many years ago, in Yeats' nightmare vision of wars to come—a vision founded in part by memories of what had already been—it was said that 'the centre cannot hold ... mere anarchy is loosed upon the world'. Political terrorism aims to dissever, to atomise and disband; and in varying degrees, so do various other forces—intimately personal ones, domestic ones, societal ones—to which anyone may be exposed, even in the most tranquil-seeming of circumstances. One strikingly significant thing about 'Two Lorries' is that, in the harmonies of its development, it re-concerts a world which terroristic explosion tries to dis-concert.

I should, perhaps, point out that Heaney is quite without illusion as to the power of art—does not expect too much of it, and does not ask too little of it. Some of his readers have shied at the line which he has used more than once, and which he had from Yeats, who had it from Coventry Patmore—'The end of art is peace.' Heaney, interviewed, has made it plain that he knows all too well that art's coherings are always lodged in history's incoherences. (I sometimes wonder whether those who salute the majestic serenity of Dante's 'In His will is our peace' always notice that the pilgrim poet who hears the blessed say this is to be re-consigned to the bloody parishes of Italy: but it is not a point to escape Heaney.) The last lines of the Nobel Lecture put his position clearly:

Poetic form is both the ship and the anchor. It is at once a buoyancy and a holding, allowing for the simultaneous gratification of whatever is centrifugal and centripetal in mind and body. And it is by such means that Yeats' work does what the necessary poetry always does, which is to touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic reality of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed. The form of the poem, in other words, is crucial to poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit: the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that

T we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being.

THE FORM OF THE POEM' can accommodate a number of things. In 'Two Lorries', for instance, there is the following of the young, sweet-talking Agnew with that taciturn immortal, Death: there is the stanzaic form, designed both to still and to round a fugitive attention, which itself eyes fleeting enough events: there is the quadrilateral relationship between mother, son, the bearer of fire's fuel and the custodian of residues: and there are the counterpointings of red plush and silk-white ashes, of dream and film, of revenant and survivor. Hovering over it all are the implications of the 'lorries', things of a piece with the other vehicles—fisherman's boat, scout-car, bicycle, domestic vehicle—which Heaney has used in other poems, each of them at once something solid and an agent of 'transportation'—which every metaphor is. Heaney wants to 'transport' his reader, but on terms like those suggested, again, by Joubert: 'A thought is a thing as real as a cannon ball'; and, 'Uproot? No, but transplant.'

'Hunters and gatherers of values': the expression may remind us of a double agenda—a cherishing of as much of the past as possible, and a girding of the moral imagination for future tasks. It is on some such terms that one may read a final poem, 'Damson'.

Gules and cement dust. A matte tacky blood
On the bricklayer's knuckles, like the damson stain
That seeped through his packed lunch.

A full hod stood
Against the mortared wall, his big bright trowel
In his left hand (for once) was pointed down
As he marvelled at his right, held high and raw:
King of the castle, scaffold-stepper, shown
Bleeding to the world.

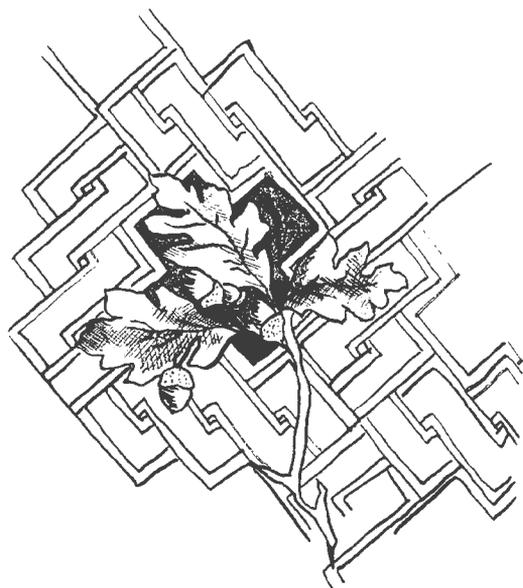
Wound that I saw
In glutinous colour fifty years ago—
Damson as omen, weird, a dream to read—
Is weeping with the held-at-arm's length dead
From everywhere and nowhere, here and now.

*

Over and over, the slur, the scrape and mix
As he trowelled and retrowelled and laid down
Courses of glum mortar. Then the bricks
Jiggled and settled, tocked and tapped in line.
I loved especially the trowel's shine,
Its edge and apex always coming clean
And brightening itself by mucking in.
It looked light but felt heavy as a weapon,
Yet when he lifted it there was no strain.
It was all point and skim and float and glisten
Until he washed and lapped it tight in sacking
Like a cult blade that had to be kept hidden.

*

Ghosts with their tongues out for a lick of blood
Are crowding up the ladder, all unhealed,
And some of them still rigged in bloody gear.
Drive them back to the doorstep or the road
Where they lay in their own blood once, in the hot
Nausea and last gasp of dear life.
Trowel-wielder, woundie, drive them off
Like Odysseus in Hades lashing out
With his sword that dug the trench and cut the throat
Of the sacrificial lamb.



But not like him—
 Builder, not sacker, your shield the mortar board—
 Drive them back to the wine-dark taste of home,
 The smell of damsons simmering in a pot,
 Jam ladled thick and steaming down the sunlight. —'Damson', *The Spirit Level*

If anyone can be said to have title to the word 'damson', it must be the Hopkins of 'dappled-with-damson west'. Heaney writes of some of Hopkins' lines that 'despite the gleam and deliquescence and intense sufficiency of the verbal art, they are still intent on telling a truth independent of themselves'. Such words could be applied with justice to much of Heaney's own writing, earlier and later: and they have a special appropriateness when one thinks about celebration and things inimical to it. For if celebration can be subverted by cynicism, by abstraction, and by intimidation, it is also helpless in the face of narcissism. Celebration, I take it, is an act of solidarity: the dancers in its ring face outwards. Auden, in his elegy for Yeats, speaks with regret of individuals' being jailed within themselves, and invokes poetry's ability to 'teach the free man how to praise'; Brodsky, at the end of his 40th birthday poem, 'May 24, 1980', proclaims that '... until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx, / only gratitude will be gushing from it.' Neither of these two was unalert to the jungle element in public reality, and neither without temptation to live in a mirrored room: but the governing disposition in their verse is to go on making common cause with 'the others'.

Those others are primarily other persons, but the reach can be more ample, as is suggested in the title of Paul Shepard's book, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*. And since our understanding of anything is permeable to our understanding of anything else, the salute to one can become a salute to all—as happens, for instance, in Smart's 'A Song for David', where the stars in their courses move in concert with 'quick peculiar quince'. This is one of Heaney's veins, alert though he constantly is to violence and violation, on both of which he has written intently. 'Damson' is a poem which, in a thoroughly open-eyed way, tries to do justice to that world of the palpable which preceded each of us, and will perhaps succeed all of us, but which we make our own, and most our own when we are open-handed about it all.

Celebration, in practice, is almost inconceivable without the evocation and deployment of memories. These may be assayed, sometimes to test them for spuriousness, but also to determine their yield, their plenitude. In Heaney's poem, the small, purple, tart plum is 'Damson as omen, weird, a dream to read', retrieved from fifty years back, and scrutinised for significance. And so is the bricklayer—'King of the castle', as in a children's game, 'scaffold-stepper', as in an heroic poem, 'shown/Bleeding to the world', as in countless representations of Christ's and Pilate's 'Ecce homo!' He, like the damson, is at one with 'the held-at-arm's-length dead', with all that may be questionable about such a fending-off. It can, after all, be excess of significance in things remembered that prompts their being put behind us, but our being so brisk with them can leave us attenuated—preserved, yes, but deprived too.

As the poem unfolds, it becomes clear that Heaney is glad to see the bricklayer not as larger than life, but as more full of life than a glancing attention might suppose. And if the trowel is 'brightening itself by mucking in', so is the bricklayer—once again, a state of affairs remarkably like the one celebrated, repeatedly, by Hopkins. Yet for all his proficiency, the workman has wounded himself—one of the insignia of all our tribe. In that, he cannot be held at arm's length, is still our omen. Damson's purple can stand for all the ways in which we are imperial, from walking erect to being master builders to commanding the language in which such things can be said, but it can also stand for the blood which, whenever inspected, shows both vitality and vulnerability. Heaney's own language, then, is 'brightening itself by mucking in', and this is a large part of its warrant for the reader.

AND THEN THERE ARE THOSE OTHER GHOSTS—disconcerting presences, these. In his poem 'Ghosts, Places, Stories, Questions' (whose title might encompass all of Heaney's work), Vincent Buckley writes, 'Heatless and demanding presences, / I will endure you; but you shall not be my gods. / Arcadia cannot give you flesh; heaven cannot make you more than spies of hell'. They might have been words for Heaney's poem, but only provisionally, since the Odyssean bricklayer is called upon to differ from any Homeric 'sacker of cities' and to give them what is wished for the dead in another tradition—'refreshment, light and peace'.

It is a sanguine conclusion, but if one asks how that particular band of ghosts came to be there at all, the answer must surely be that, here as elsewhere, Heaney wants to come to terms with an unbidden world. A psyche engaged only by the familiar and the congenial can easily stay, as it were, fifty years younger than its chronological age—can practice the infant strut of ideology or the preening of self-absorption. But to be met by such archons of otherness as the ghosts crowding up the ladder is to be tested for ability, and readiness, to grow. And to persist, come what may, in a demeanour of hospitality, itself sends a man, not a boy, home. ■

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Speaking in tons

Fredy Neptune, Les Murray, Duffy & Snellgrove, 1998. ISBN 1 875989 30 7, RRP \$24.95

LES MURRAY'S new long poem plunges you into a strange world, large and plentiful, where nothing stays the same for long: events tumble out in a kind of eternal present. Initially this might seem almost mad, certainly eccentric: comforting generic rules seem abandoned for sheer originality. But *Fredy Neptune* quickly beguiles, its eponymous narrator acquiring that 'strange power of speech' of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner: give this book a little time and it will transfix you.

This itself is an achievement, and so is the size (write 200 lines of verse yourself to glimpse the Herculean task of writing the 10,000 lines of *Fredy Neptune*). The work's characteristics are so pronounced that the critical commonplaces that have been used to praise Murray's earlier poetry (his capacious imagination; his poetic and linguistic facility; his prodigal use of ideas) seem premature.

Murray has long bemoaned poetry's status in the republic of letters (something like an anachronistic earldom with academics for courtiers). Part of this minority status comes from the loss of the narrative mode. For a hundred years, 'poetry' has signified lyric poetry, despite the modernists' guilty desire for the epic mode. Murray's previous efforts to return poetry to the common reader have proved less than critically successful, whether through using narrative (*The Boys who Stole the Funeral*) or reviving the 'middle style' found in 19th-century newspapers (*Dog Fox Field*). With *Fredy Neptune*, Murray illustrates how to write a long narrative poem that is eminently readable and full of ideas and intelligence. One poem cannot return poetry to the readerly mainstream, but this one

could go a long way towards that goal. It really does deserve to be a popular success.

This readable quality partly comes from Murray's style, but also from the work's cracking pace. There is so much that happens, in so many exotic locations, and with so much action. It's as if Murray has rewritten the Boys' Own adventure as 'larrikin culture' (to pinch a phrase from Chris Wallace-Crabbe). Murray's ripping yarn turns out to be a Trojan horse of the mind: you'll find numinous soldiers messing around in your head long after you've put the book down.

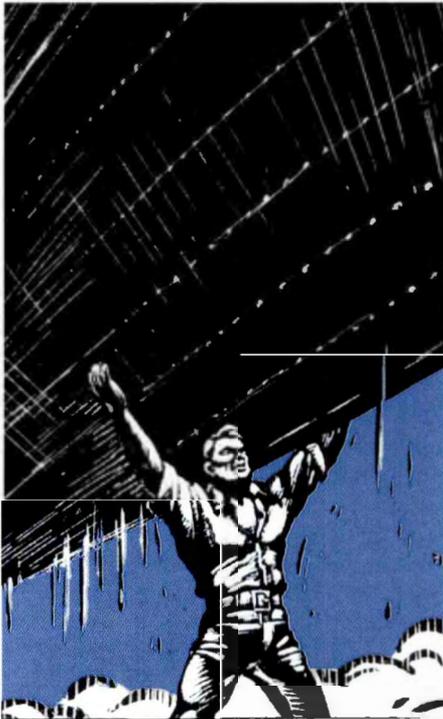
The work centres on Friedrich Boettcher, a German-speaking Australian (b. 1895), and his experiences in the first, very dark, half of our century. His background disallows him to take sides in the Great War, but his troubles really begin when he witnesses the burning of a group of Turkish women by soldiers. This event, and a brush with leprosy, brings about a numbness, leaving the barest outline of his bodily self. Freddy then leads a peripatetic life, sometimes a sailor, sometimes a worker, sometimes neither. We find him in the Middle East; Prohibition and Depression-America; Nazi Germany (with a brief sojourn to the USSR); and South East Asia during the next War. Added to these are interludes, not all bucolic, in Australia.

Through his lack of sensation (just one irony in a sensationalist work) Freddy develops superhuman strength, since he cannot feel pain. As well as being a worker-philosopher, he becomes a strong man, joins a circus (where he's called Fredy Neptune!), is an extra in Hollywood, crews for a

Zeppelin, punches a lot of thugs and saves a few people in need of saving. He has an amusing ability to bump into historical figures: yarning with Banjo Paterson in Egypt, not-quite interviewing T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia), and amusingly (if not believably) being chatted up by Marlene Dietrich.

This tendency to intersect with 'big' history makes *Fredy Neptune* an interesting comparison with *Forrest Gump*. Like *Harvey* and *Rain Man*, *Forrest Gump* is a most-American work in its use of the myth of innocence. If Gump represents an American everyman, then his lack of moral culpability is both his unlikely strength and weakness. History becomes destiny, success becomes accidental and not tainted by the bloody hands of real-life capitalism. Murray's working Forrest Gump is intriguingly different in that, while similarly 'disabled', Freddy is certainly not stupid, and he never succeeds materially (he doesn't buy the Australian equivalent, if there ever were one, of shares in Apple). Indeed, he is most Australian in his desire to remain at the sidelines, even when he has a front seat to the 20th century. He survives, but he does not enter the fray on any authority's say-so (unlike Vietnam-vet Gump). In addition, while he tries not to cause suffering, he is never innocent enough to believe that he succeeds, even (as we shall see) when trying to ameliorate suffering. Where *Forrest Gump* is a character who pretends to be devoid of ideology, Friedrich Boettcher actively opposes ideology.

Freddy's strength obviously casts him as the hero-figure, but his literary function is notably manifold. He is the picaresque (the roguish figure, not averse to slightly dodgy dealings when required) in this picaresque, with its episodic structure. He is also a trickster figure: he has a tendency to change his form, can speak more than one language, and holds arcane knowledge. When he descends into the underworld to find his father (in dream) he becomes a classical hero, an Aeneas or Odysseus. This latter figure is an obvious antecedent when Freddy is the sailor cunningly, but slowly, trying to get home to his wife, who is one of the



work's few rounded characters, and son ('I'd go home and get old, beached in responsibility'). Dietrich sees his physical condition as standing for the unconscious in the split subject. He is sometimes phantasmal, sometimes a classic Australian pioneer. His condition is even, enigmatically, seen as 'a story of law that you're carrying / for all places'.

The plot is intensely episodic, but a shape does become observable, particularly as the aspects after the war that initially seem almost comic (like Sir Peter, the Queensland crook who forces Freddy to go to America) become grimmer, until we are back into war again, and Freddy finally makes it home. The vast array of episodes seen through Freddy's eyes sometimes produce that strange sense of the platform moving rather than the train; that is, as if history moves through Freddy, rather than the other way around. This is not realism, but neither, thank goodness, is it magic realism (despite one or two incidents). Things happen, but they do so through a fund of humour, memorable imagery ('Laura's mother held me out on the end of her questions / as if after I left she'd have to fumigate her voice'), and strangely gnomic moments ('I've forgiven the old girl since, without noticing, as you do').

PROBABLY THE MOST notable feature of all the action is its violence. This is a very violent poem (on both a 'macro-' and 'micro-historical' level). But no matter how indebted to the masculinist fantasies of the adventure story, this work is not in thrall to them. Certainly, we cheer when Freddy crushes a Nazi's hand over his gun, or when he keeps fights 'fair', but Murray doesn't simply peddle stylised violence for cheap emotionalism. Freddy isn't always successful and some people die awful deaths. And, more significantly, despite Freddy's heroic actions, the world is simply too big a place for his deeds to really change anything. Sometimes they make things worse. The Jew whom he protects from Nazi thugs points this out: 'You have killed me young man ... Run now or you will die too'. When Freddy suggests that the man flee, he points out the ever-growing circles of effect that Freddy's actions could cause: 'he looked an old man's look / like up through deep water. That would expose my family / and students to my punishment, he said'.

Freddy's exploits, while undoubtedly heroic, occur in a context sufficiently like the world for them to have little real effect: the poem illustrates again and again how

In Your Story

after Edward Albee

This obliquity is almost shining,
those eyes of a different colour.
In your story we are all triptychs,
dynasties of pearly selves,
needing so many acts to intermit
a flawed heart, the loping silence.
Cloudage, suspended or real,
ushers rancour, vindication.
Across orchestras, promenades,
immortals step onto a terrace,
admire the infinite, humanized greenery.
What curious lives they must lead
in their tumid, adulterous valleys;
spontaneity the gods, endamaged, lack.
New perspectives, severely raked,

take our lines away, dispossessed.
In a park, day perpetrates its farce,
merchants, selling palmery,
glide backwards in their noble tans.
The children are gathering autumn.
They do not understand yet—
the falconer ignores their plight.
Your character would identify
with this sorrow, this realized joy.
The soliloquy at the end baffles
old perplexities; we ease them
with our random gait. Like Spartans
of some consummate struggle, martyrs
brandish china and speakers, veer
northward, skyward, rearward, anyways.

Peter Rose

ideology is the antithesis of heroism (and not, certainly, its source). Wars go on, men continue to fight one other, police remain free to harass the unemployed and the different, regardless of heroism or bravery. If Australia is relatively free of these abhorrences it is not through any essential difference: 'If Russians could do it, my own folk could. There or here. / If Turks could, so could both my own. I'd always known that / since the burning women.'

In a sense, however, this lack of large-scale effect emphasises the importance of acting on a human scale, which is an individual scale. As Murray writes in 'A Working Forest', communities preserve their history not through pattern or ideology, 'but with the living quiddity of each person, each being, each thing'.

The violence of the poem is also concerned with its representation. Any thoughtful writer must at some point wonder how much stylised violence is complicit with actual violence. Australian history (Twain's 'beautiful lies') has long been drawn to violence: in war, the convict past, bushrangers, sport, and the landscape as a form of stylised violence paradoxically beyond the aesthetic domain. These historical features occur repeatedly in Australian literature: think of Robert Drewe's dandified Ned Kelly, with his tweeds and magenta cravat, in *Our Sunshine*; or Patrick White's picking away at the scab of artistic creativity as a sublimation of violence; or Thomas Keneally's use of stylised violence as part of a grand drama of self. And lest we think this is altogether a male thing, there

is Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* with its great sweep of time book-ended by images of the Australian land 'consuming' men.

Indeed, Freddy is probably unique in Australian literature in his lightness; he almost floats off the ground like the Zeppelin he worked on. He is not burdened by a heaviness that forces the male character to either submit, die, or leave. Instead, his lack of sensation seems to be a rather more daring metaphor. It is hard not to see something biographical in the condition, keeping in mind Murray's comments in 1996 about his depression. But more generally, the metaphor of Freddy's body, divided against itself, is an interesting metaphor for 'the Australian experience' (if we can speak so grandly).

This sense of division as a national trait is most obvious in the potentially scandalous character, Sam, who is both a Jew and an Aborigine. Freddy asks: 'How do you know so much, Sam?—We are studious people.— / We Jews or we blackfellows?—Both.—First you're one, then the other.— / And I always will be. Surely you would know about division!' To which Freddy answers, 'No. The world's divided'. This sense of division is most strikingly healed in what could only be seen as the Australian (male) as everyman:

There's a common-human level you can
strike with any people
if you don't impose on them, or scare
them, or sound strange.
On their own ground works best, and

with legs bent if they're men.
It's near impossible not to play up to the
other sex
but if you can not, they sometimes forget
yours, for minutes:
you can be just human, sharing. Even
mad folk and toffs
and others who have trouble getting off
stage can be soothed
into it. Outside this, things all slope
towards war.

This is comic, for sure, but the last sentence tells us to take it seriously.

There are certain Murrayisms throughout the work with regard to ideology, and Australian history, especially. He even has one of his characters quote from that (sometimes-horrible) study in division, *Subhuman Redneck Poems*: 'Sex is a Nazi,' says Artur Gunst (first met in Hollywood, then seen doing well in the Third Reich) to justify not 'paddling / against the natural flow of blood and shit'. The stanza about the common-human level, and having a Nazi quote an earlier Murray poem, are no doubt part of Murray's own strange baiting of the world (especially academia, where cultural relativists would refute a view of universal humanity defined by a white male).

Murray's right-wingery is that kind of anti-ideological ideology that is radically suspicious of the institutional. It was Murray after all who wrote that 'all academies are police academies', the full nastiness of which appears in the present context, with the poem's description of the rise of Nazi Germany as the Police Revolution. Murray is habitually garrulous (only last year he referred to Universities as 'humiliation mills'), but what is significant about *this* work is that the poetry seems to dispel Murray's need to work in such a vein. *Fredy Neptune* is a notably sympathetic work (unlike *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, or *The Boys* with its anti-feminism).

This humanity comes through Freddy's care for others. The work is immensely Christian. For this reason the poem's violence acts as a kind of conscience for the artistic act: 'How good's your poem? / Can it make them alive again after dancing in the kerosene? // Can it help Sam swim into Heaven?'

This calls to mind a comment in Murray's essay 'Embodiment and Incarnation': 'The conscience resembles a permanent poem of ourselves that we carry within ourselves'. Like the Ancient Mariner, Freddy is afflicted until he can pray with a

whole heart. The work's climax is intensely moving: specifically Christian but also generally, and immensely, humane. This poem is Murray's most humane vision of the world despite its intense pessimism regarding human behaviour.

If, as Helen Vendler puts it, a poem is a problem secreting its own resolutions, then the problem about stylised violence may be solved by the poem's own being. If Freddy's condition suggests the condition of the artist, shocked by the imagery of violence, then the solution is a theological one: a condition of prayer. And with the representation of choice that prayer involves ('beggars must be choosers' is an enigmatic phrase that Freddy must come to understand) we may also see through one of the greatest myths of our violent century: that violence is stylish.

Fredy Neptune is that strange non-form, the anatomy, with its encyclopedic interests, seeking to capture the world's variety, immensity, while aware of that project's impossibility. It is also, according

to Northrop Frye (who revived the term) 'extroverted and intellectual'. These features are present here. Indeed, the internal and sexual worlds are somewhat lacking in the work, but this lack is part of the poem's concerns. *Fredy Neptune* is immensely rich: no pun is too painful, no knowledge too arcane, no unlikelihood too unlikely. It presents many of Murray's concerns in a form far more palatable than elsewhere. We cannot, surely, ignore the poem's immensely difficult purpose: to be a heroic poem for an unheroic age; a comedy for a tragic world; a search for 'benign' nationalism in the shadow of nationalism's worst phase. Previously, despite Murray's desire to speak to the common reader he has (at least to my eye) often been disconcertingly difficult. Here he synthesises his desire for accessibility with his difficult, fecund intelligence. Murray has written a kind of masterpiece. ■

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BOOKS: 2

JON GREENAWAY

High flyers and criers

Harry: The Words and Wisdom of Justin Madden, Justin Madden, Pan MacMillan, 1998, ISBN 0 330 35852 9, RRP \$19.95; **Real Footballers Don't Cry**, Justin Madden, Pan Macmillan, 1998, ISBN 0330 36091 4, RRP \$22.95; **A Football Life**, Clinton Walker, Pan Macmillan, 1998, ISBN 0 330 36081 7, RRP \$19.95

IN EARLY JULY bottom-feeders Carlton sprang the surprise of the round by defeating Adelaide in Adelaide by four points. More remarkable than the reversal of the form that had seen them vying for the wooden spoon was the reaction of many Melbournians who found themselves enjoying a Carlton win. For football's legion of fans who love to hate, a successful Adelaide turned out to be a bigger troll than a downtrodden Carlton.

The lovely thing about the hate one reserves for another football team is that it is more constant than the love for the favoured team. Your side will always break your heart



by blowing a five-goal lead in the final term but the others down the road are always ugly and distasteful no matter how they fare.

People relish hating Carlton. Maybe it is the patrician air about the club—the image they seem to portray that success is their birthright. This has been personified in recent times by the chain-smoking arrogance of club president John Elliott, yet even the hardest hearts opened up to them following their desperate win against last year's premiers. Previously, in more profitable times, the only redeeming feature of the Carlton football club for other teams' fans was one

Justin 'Harry' Madden. Even maniacal Collingwood supporters who regard Carlton with the same affection a mongoose saves for a cobra would soften at the mention of his name.

In his two books, *Harry: The Words and Wisdom of Justin Madden* and *Real Footballers Don't Cry* he credits this phenomenon to the fact that he was more human than other footballers. He never possessed the ethereal skills of Gary Ablett or the intuition of Paul Kelly; he was merely a 208-cm dinosaur lumbering around the ground managing to put in his fair share every week. The beer-gutted fan in the stands could more easily dream about making it in league footy with him as a reference. When asked in 1995 how he felt about notching up 300 league matches, he replied that he regarded it as an indictment of the game.

I remember a few years ago I was driving with a mate up Elgin Street in Carlton on my way to cricket training in Parkville. As we topped the rise near the Clyde Hotel, Justin Madden was waiting for a break in the traffic. He was on his way to pre-season training at Princes Park, loading his huge frame on to one of those small collapsible bikes suitable for circus clowns. He was wearing a shirt and tie and suit pants neatly tucked into long black socks, squinting back at the peak-hour traffic with an over-sized bowl-helmet atop his crown. 'Who's that goose?' my friend asked before we both erupted in hysterics, not quite believing the answer.

Two things distinguish Justin Madden's writing from that of other former football greats. One is a wit that does not rely entirely on player shenanigans during end-of-season footy trips, but instead satirises the whims and insanities of modern football.

Delphi, 1976

Of all the intersections
and what is possible,
blue-grey centuries
cliff-hanging like perfidy,
hawks in a nerved haughtiness,
this is neatest, glamorous,
hovers, timeless deliberant,
resisting every nuance of
breeze, cool now, buffeting
those aliens on the stage,
wingless at opposing ends.

Peter Rose

(He does, however, give a highly amusing account in the latter of the two books of the time he and a couple of team-mates appeared before a magistrate in Hawaii for writing their initials in wet cement.) The other is his pragmatism—a pragmatism that saw him bargain with the AFL for a better deal for players during his time as president of the Players' Association and also made him look on football as a job. His starry-eyed days ended when he realised that the dream of playing for the side he harracked for as a kid, Essendon, was over after 45 games.

WHERE MADDEN is quite ruthless in demystifying the religion of Australian Rules Football, Clinton Walker in *A Football Life* gives it all back as any good footy fan should. What he offers is essentially an autobiography as written through football—the story of the many teams his father played for in Melbourne and country Victoria and the story of his own years as a junior footballer. It's an ambitious effort which falls down a little where he tries to document a history separate from his own experience. These passages lack the liveliness he displays when talking about the difficult relationship with his father as filtered through football and how growing up is measured by achievements on the field.

He hints that the arrogance he displayed as a callow youth could be traced back to the young boy who in the terraces fell in love with St Kilda, the glamour team of the '60s. For Walker the team seemed to have a message, told best by the brash baby boomer and 'New Australian', Carl Ditterich:

My mother adored him for his animal sexuality as much as anything. Even my father, who clearly disavowed his apparent lack of discipline, couldn't deny his excitement, or effectiveness. To me, he was just a big blond god. He was a true Aryan superman. And that was the thing about St Kilda in the early '60s: they were very exciting at a time when most everyone else seemed content to mark time, or else didn't know how to move forward.

The Melancholy God

No protection in a chic space,
reality stark for a blue proscenium,
music formidable in its royal box,
angled view and tanglement of wire.
Behind the players, behind memory
and its exiguous props, Botticelli's
beauty stares in her scallop,
survives calamities of rhetoric,
the hollow in the audience
equally ineloquent. The blood
is false, the mind a very opal.
Comedy is blither for its blackness,
ritual humiliations in a cage,
the clown's careering spite.

Peter Rose

When he gets the wind up in such passages he seems to enjoy the thrill of writing about sport outside the narrow parameters of back-page reporting. Then he approaches the suppleness of Gideon Haigh on cricket and the sense of romance Martin Flanagan always seems to conjure from the ordinary with his observations of football on and off the ground.

Walker is also brave. He freely admits that he completely forsook his beloved St Kilda for the Sodom and Gomorrah boys, the Sydney Swans, during the 1980s. Not only is he open about his complete lack of taste but also admits that he passed over a much more sustainable option of supporting Brisbane, where he played his footy and spent most of his teenage years. He also dismisses Rugby League as a pestilence (and Rugby Union as well I would guess, given the parochialism of the pure Aussie Rules fan who cannot differentiate between two games that are as far apart as the poles).

Perhaps the problem Rugby League has is that it is not well-served by poets. Thomas Keneally tried with his biography of Manly great, Des Hasler, but failed. Maybe if someone had stood up in the late '80s and early '90s and had written about it in a way that took it to other places then the glue might have been there to stop greed and selfishness from tearing the game apart.

If only the Australian Rugby League plugged for Mr Curly instead of Tina Turner as their great promoter. I wonder if Michael Leunig is a League fan? ■

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Cross-Tasman reflections

Geoffrey Milne goes to the theatre in New Zealand

I TRAVELLED in early July to the New Zealand city of Hamilton for what proved to be an excellent Australasian Drama Studies Association Conference at the University of Waikato, but there was an added bonus. As luck would have it, Bill Peterson (the herculean conference convenor) had also laid on a very impressive Festival of New Zealand Theatre to satisfy the cravings of conferees who needed a theatre fix by night.

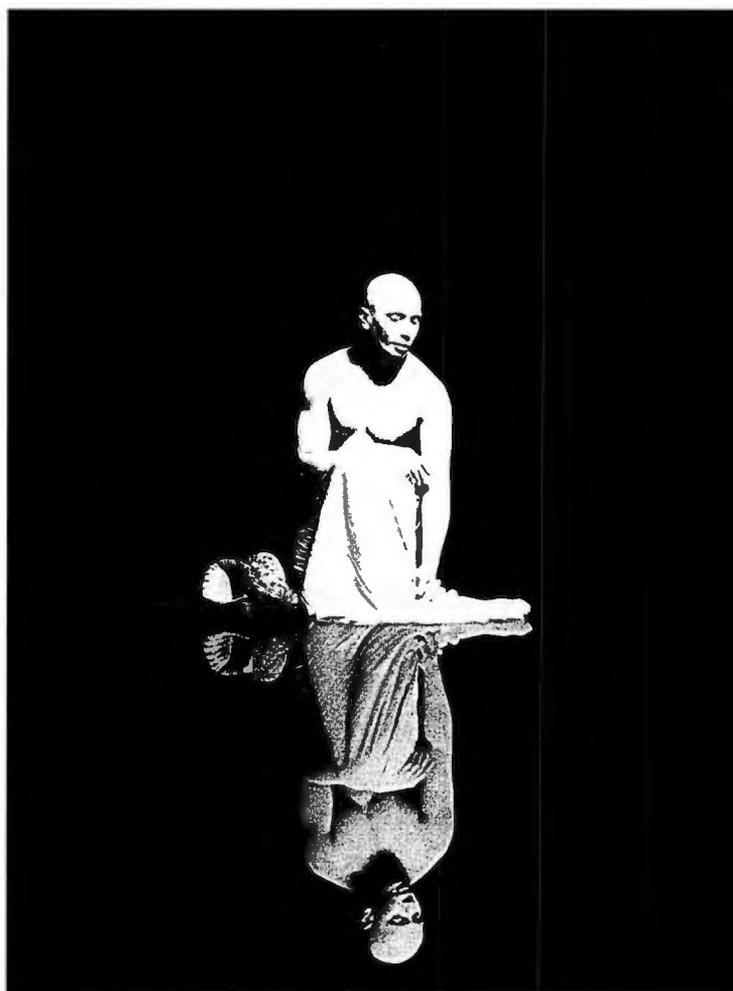
New Zealand, with a population of barely 3.5 million people and with no city bigger than Adelaide, can only sustain a very small theatre 'industry' as such, but the wider theatre culture is interesting. There are no 'flag-ship' state theatre companies as we know them in Australia, for example, although there are national opera and ballet companies and a couple of broadly mainstream, professional theatre companies supported by Creative New Zealand (NZ's version of the Australia Council) plus some commercial entrepreneurs. The national capital, Wellington, is the principal site of professional theatre, but New Zealand is an even more 'regionally' organised nation than Australia and there is a wide range of theatrical activity in cities like Christchurch, Dunedin, Palmerston North and the country's largest city, Auckland.

Co-operative, semi-professional theatre (most of it 'alternative' or 'oppositional') is quite strong, although not many such companies have lasted very long. University theatre is as prominent—and taken as seriously—as it was in Australia in the 1960s, and pro-am 'town-and-gown'

companies often tackle the less commercial but more serious national and international repertoire in productions that receive as much critical attention as Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral* did in Adelaide back in 1961. The best amateur companies in most major cities, likewise, command the same attention as, say, Brisbane Arts Theatre. Indigenous people make up a vastly greater proportion of the population of Ao Te Aroa than they do here. Consequently 'Maori' theatre (by indigenous and Pakeha writers) also has a very strong presence.

The inaugural FUEL Festival of New Zealand Theatre assembled most of these strands. The NZ Ballet and the NZ Opera were not there and neither were Circa Theatre, Downstage Theatre or BATS (NZ's more prominent 'mainstream' theatre groups), but the best of the local amateurs were on show, as were productions from most of the rest of NZ's alternative theatre spectrum. Taki Rua in Wellington (arguably the leading indigenous company) couldn't bring a production but its leading playwright Hone Kouka gave an inspiring keynote address at the Conference.

MY FESTIVAL highlight was *Songs to the Judges*, a 1980 'song-play' by the prolific alternative playwright Mervyn Thompson, with music by William Dart. This is a documentary chronicle of New Zealand history from the Treaty of Waitangi to the present day, told from the margins as a



cross between a song-cycle and an agitational propaganda street theatre piece with a mixed cast of Maori and Pakeha actors. The material covers the various Land Acts from 1841–1967, the introduction of Christianity to the Maori, the Matakite Land March of 1975 to Wellington and the sometimes violent clashes which followed. Seemingly minor events (like a dispute over the 15th hole of a Hamilton golf course, constructed on the site of an 'urupa' or sacred burial ground) are placed in the wider context of land rights generally. As one of the Pakeha judges to whom the songs are sung remarks: under the land act of 1953, land not actually occupied or properly used could be taken by the public trustee. In the event, the Court granted the Maori litigants ownership of their traditional site ... but forebade them the use of it.

William Dart's music bristles with the kind of irony (and humour) inherent in the historical facts. There are Gilbert & Sullivan-style patter-songs, songs reminiscent of those of Brecht and Eisler and others using traditional Maori melodies. The simple, imaginative production was by the co-operative Free Theatre from Christchurch. Director Cherie Hart has staged the play in traverse form, with the audience on opposite sides of a street-like acting space, suggestive of the road (or

journey) traversed by both parties in the pursuit of the reconciliation hinted at in the play's final song. The staging enhanced the notion of judgment inherent in the play. On one level, the songs of the title are sung ostensibly to Pakeha judges grouped at one end of the space; but the judges' songs (and those of the military supporting them) are judged by the indigenous characters opposite them and ultimately by the audience ranged on *both* sides of the action.

But the traverse staging also adopts the style of Marae theatre (increasingly practised since the late 1970s) which in turn follows the traditional practice of public debate in a clear space between two blocks of listeners. *Songs to the Judges* is a reminder of the continuing struggle between opposing cultures and of the extent to which reconciliation can be advanced by intercultural theatre productions such as these.

Intercultural performance of a very different kind was also prevalent in the Festival, especially in the influence of the Japanese Butoh dance form on local culture. A case in point is *Lo'Omatua (The Ancient Mother)*, by Lemi Ponifasio & MAU, a performance troupe from Auckland. Ponifasio is a Western Samoan who has studied Butoh in Japan and his piece was very skilled in its execution, gorgeously lit and extremely beautiful to watch; his exploration of Polynesian folk legends in Butoh-style dream-form is about as cross-cultural as you can get.

Lo'Omatua opens with a white-powdered, semi-naked authority-figure (Ponifasio himself) sounding a wake-up call for his people (or the spirits of his past) on a conch shell. Slowly, three similarly attired male figures—artfully reflected in the mirror-surface of a shiny dance-floor—appear as if from nowhere to enact a ritual from the past. They are followed by a solo piece on a high platform to the left in which the ancient mother of the title invokes the enactment of further ritual action below. Meanwhile, a huge pearl shell glistens overhead, alternating from phosphorescent green to red or gold, depending upon the mood of the separate sections which follow each other in an almost hypnotic succession.

Lo'Omatua is one of the most effective Butoh-inspired performance pieces I have seen since Chapel of Change's *The Descent* in Melbourne in 1996.

Not to be outdone, Richard Huber from the University of Dunedin in Otago presented a solo Butoh piece entitled *The Bookshop*. If *Lo'Omatua* is Butoh at a slow

tempo (let's say *moderato*), Huber's piece is Butoh *molto lento*. Here, a young woman, naked from the waist up and powdered white all over, is revealed squatting at the base of a cruciform layout of books, burdened by the weight of a huge book on her shoulders. She gradually rises, plucks the offending tome (the complete works of Shakespeare) from her back and triumphantly holds it aloft. She then moves up the trunk of the cross and takes an opened book to its proper place at the right; she then shakes a couple of times and finally raises two half-opened slim volumes from knee-height to another triumphant overhead position. And that's it. The whole piece took an excruciating 45 minutes to execute, but Helen Colston's disciplined mastery of the style made it very engrossing and strangely beautiful to watch.

AT THE OPPOSITE end of the spectrum was *Social Climbers*, by the prolific Roger Hall in a production by Hamilton's leading amateur Creative Theatre Company. Hall is something of a cross between David Williamson and Alan Ayckbourn and he is best-known in Australia for plays of social comment couched in formulaically entertaining structures like *Flexitime* (about office workers) and *Middle Age Spread* (about marital conflict).

Social Climbers takes five well-differentiated female high school teachers (and, reluctantly, the art-school daughter of one of them) on a vacation mountain climb. On their first night out, they are marooned in their log-cabin by torrential rains and a washed-away bridge and their enforced incarceration dislodges many skeletons (and clever one-line gags) from the collective closet of an embattled contemporary school staff-room. It is easy to see why this highly engaging and entertaining play has enjoyed long sell-out seasons all over NZ since its première at Dunedin's Fortune Theatre in 1995—and why the City of Hamilton (as a major sponsor) insisted on its inclusion in the inaugural national Theatre Festival.

All festivals have their disappointments, but it was all the more disappointing that this one's should come from the legendary Red Mole, NZ's oldest alternative theatre collective. Based in Wellington, Red Mole has been continuously active at home and abroad since 1974, including a long stint in the US and a briefer one in the Netherlands during the 1980s. The current show, entitled *The Navigators—Historia von Dr Ray Humbabhy*, is a slow-moving, over-wrought

but under-developed remake of the Faust legend couched in a contemporary context. The ageing-hippy Faust figure (played by Red Mole co-founder Alan Brunton) is a 'wannabe' rock star lured into his contract with the devil by a talk-radio hostess (played by the other, still impressive, co-founder, Sally Rodwell) but the piece gains nothing from the modernisation or from the liberal inclusion of excerpts from some of the company's other recent shows, shorn as they are of their original and informing contexts. The young Russian-speaking members of the collective don't do much for the piece either.

I might have caught Red Mole on an off night, or in a new 'team-building' phase, but—on the evidence of *The Navigators*—there certainly is rebuilding to be done.

Nonetheless (and bearing in mind that I didn't have time to catch several other shows, like a deconstruction of the Robinson Crusoe legend in the form of a 'Lapsarian Mass' and an intriguing drama entitled *New Zealand Lamb*) I thought FUEL a pronounced success. Let's hope it can be repeated. ■

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Heads I lose

Head On, dir. Ana Kokkinos. Based on Christos Tsiolkas' novel *Loaded*, *Head On* is a confronting version of what it's like to be young, gay, male and Greek in suburban Melbourne. The film opens at a wedding, a Greek community ritual, at which Ari (Alex Dimitriadis, above) is a groomsman. He is clearly out of place. From the beginning, Ari is pushed to the edge. But because the story is told through his eyes, the community is also pushed to the edge. In other words, this is a film in which every character is marginal in some sense. This does not mean the film is somehow incomplete: it is a superbly crafted portrayal of a fractured world.

Ari is 19. Everything in his life is brittle. His disorientation is evident in painful scenes of drug use and desperate sex. It is most poignant in his inability to negotiate relationships with people who could be close to him but whom he encounters only through the miasma of his own insecurities.

Head On incorporates black and white footage of Ari's parents as young Australian Greeks. His father, Dimitri (Tony Nikolakopoulos) used to attend demonstrations about Cyprus and marched under the banner of the Communist Party. He believed in things. Ari has inherited some of his father's worst attributes: he can be as authoritarian as the old man in controlling his sister, Alex (Andrea Mandalis). But Ari has no broader view of the world than the back fence of an alley.

—Michael McGirr SJ

Art house

Artemisia, dir. Agnes Merlet. The self-portrait of 17th-century Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi hangs in Hampton Court Palace as part of the Royal Collection. The painting, showing a handsome woman with strong features, is superb, consistent with her reputation as the first great female painter. On reflection,

seeing that painting told me more about Artemisia than French director Agnes Merlet's film about two years in the artist's late teens.

Artemisia (Valentina Cervi) is a student in a convent school and the daughter of Orazio (Michel Serrault), a famous Italian painter. The discovery of several drawings of nudes results in religious outrage but paternal admiration. Taken from the convent, Artemisia begins to paint and draw as her father's assistant, sometimes completing impressive works to which he puts his signature.

Artemisia's talent and her father's support gain her admission as a private pupil of noted painter Agostino Tassi (Miki Manojlovic) and in the ensuing months she becomes her teacher's lover. Her father discovers the affair and in outrage demands that the perceived offence against him be redressed. The final portion of the film is devoted to what is loosely described as a rape trial although the lines between crime and civil rights are blurred by contemporary custom.

Here, the film begins to stall. A snapshot of a life in progress, with six lines of text covering 35 years, leaves a feeling of unfulfilment. The fate of her lover is dismissed in four lines. I felt that I had witnessed part one of a mini-series, with the hoped-for development of Artemisia's character never achieved.

Rather than letting history speak for itself, fleshing out known events, Merlet has chosen to embellish history, distracting and detracting from a story of personal triumph which surely needed no help.

The cast is first class and Cervi captures Artemisia's innocent enthusiasm

and determination. However, beautiful costumes and memorable photography, in the deep contrasts and flesh tones of the Baroque tradition, are not enough to prevent the film foundering on its own structure.

—Gordon Lewis

Light laughs

The Opposite of Sex, dir. Don Roos. It's a funny old thing, the hit movie. While watching the first 15 minutes of *The Opposite of Sex*, I kept thinking, why is this is not a mainstream movie event? This should be the next big thing. It is funny, sexy, dark, blah, blah, blah: all the things that by and large make hit films. And then, all of a sudden, you know why. The film loses its way.

The Opposite of Sex has great, even brilliant, moments and hilarious one-liners. The acting is wonderful: Christina Ricci, playing out one of the many configurations of the disaffected teenager, is spot on, and Lisa Kudrow (*Friends*) is a revelation as a dour and deeply cranky school teacher. There is a feast of action, events and stereotypes; there's birth and death, love and hate, kindness and cruelty, generosity and blackmail—something, indeed, for everyone. But as in that old parable about the father, the son and the donkey, you can't please everyone all the time, and somehow, in an attempt to do so, the film lurches off into a strange indifference halfway through—although, rather symmetrically, the last bit of the film is as good as the first. And the last line is worth practically the whole film.

I had a good laugh in *The Opposite of Sex*, despite its occasional clunkiness. Watch for the graveside scene—it's especially good.

—Annelise Balsamo

X misses the spot

The X-Files: Fight the Future, dir. Rob Bowman. There are many who say that this movie is aimed at *X-Files* fans, the ones who are up with the series and its teasing self-awareness as America the Great Secret Society, riddled with powerful cabals and their conspiracies that may or may not involve extra-terrestrial civilisations. The trouble is that the series has gone on for too long, and this has deeply affected the film. At its best, in the first three seasons, the series was an important reflection on America itself, delivered with a wry self-conscious sophistication that recalled

the best English efforts such as *Edge of Darkness*.

The film recycles the alien/black ops conspiracy that the series is playing around with as it limps into its sixth season, hampered by a conspiracy that is no longer mysterious and a determination not to allow the URST (unresolved sexual tension) between the two stars, Mulder (David Duchovny) and Scully (Gillian Anderson) to take its natural course. The series' creator, Chris Carter, is said to be resolved that the show will not go the way of *Moonlighting*. The result, in the later episodes as in the film, is a constant hovering around genuine dramatic concerns—constant teasing, never fulfilment, dénouement or resolution. The film is said to be a lead into the sixth series, but seems to have suffered a damaging falling-off of imagination: borrowings from *Alien*, in particular, abound quite shamelessly. Such a pity.

—Juliette Hughes

Return to sender

Dead Letter Office, dir. John Ruane. Alice Walsh (Miranda Otto) spent her childhood attending ballet classes and sending letters to her absent father. The letters were always returned 'not known at this address'. As an adult, she gets a job at the dead letter office, the place where homeless mail ends up, in an attempt to find all the mail from her father which never reached her. Instead she finds Frank Lopez (George DelHoyo), her uptight boss, as well as three eccentric co-workers. Frank is from Chile. The home in which he has settled on the fringe of suburbia is vacant and colourless. But as Frank's story gradually unfolds, we discover that his children were killed before he left his country. Like Alice, he used to dance. He begins to reattach himself to the expatriate community which shares his heartache. Slowly, surely, Deb Cox's delightful screenplay brings together the man who has lost his children and the woman who has lost her father.

Anybody familiar with *Death in Brunswick* will enjoy seeing John Ruane once again working at the height of his powers. He makes a world of small detail: a pigeon hole, a pillar box, the way an obsessive unpacks his lunch. The locations on which the film is shot open up acres of nuance without so much as a word being spoken. This is not only true of Frank's house on the edge of nowhere, but also of the rambling beachside weatherboard Alice

shares with a group of feckless friends. *Dead Letter Office* is a gentle, hopeful, quiet pleasure.

—Michael McGirr SJ

Deco city

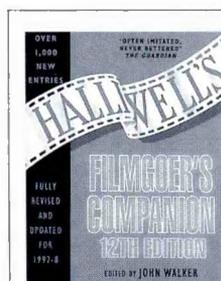
Dark City, dir. Alex Proyas. In a crumbling deco city full of potholes and puddles, jazz clubs and beaded curtains, style and fear are combined to create a compelling sci-fi thriller, full of genuine gloom and menacing imagination.

John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) wakes to discover a woman's body, covered in bloody spirals, beside a hotel bed he doesn't remember sleeping in. Wanted for a series of gruesome murders, John finds himself on the run from the law but in pursuit of his true identity. Besides the law, close on John's heels are The Strangers—tall bald scary guys in high-collared coats, with the power to alter reality by will alone. Do they hold the key to John's identity or the keys to this darkest of dark cities?

With constantly shifting realities and fairy-tale plot twisting, *Dark City* confidently negotiates its own highly developed style. The cast bring both clarity and direction, performing in perfect sync with the film's mad and rainy atmosphere. William Hurt is exacting as the meticulous Inspector Frank Bumstead and Rufus Sewell has devastating appeal as the meandering lost soul. Kiefer Sutherland lends an appropriate degree of humour to his limping Dr. Schreber, and Jennifer Connelly smoulders through her role in beautifully tailored suits.

Twisted riddles of identity and perfectly dressed sets make *Dark City* rich and constantly entertaining.

—Siobhan Jackson



EUREKA STREET FILM COMPETITION

Just name two actors from this month's crop of reviews, matching them with the name of the TV show in which they star together. The winner will receive a copy of the indispensable 1998 *Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion*, to help you cheat on the next quiz. Send entries to:

Eureka Street September Film
Competition
PO Box 553, Richmond VIC 3121.

Many questions

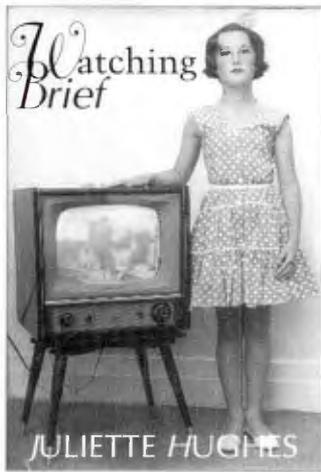
The Interview, dir. Craig Monahan. It begins with a billowing lace curtain—visual trope of Australian cinema. Only this curtain doesn't keep the bush sun and dust off Sybylla's Edwardian complexion (remember the opening scene of *My Brilliant Career*?) Instead it plays across a pile of old newspapers stacked up against the windows of an ominously grand, decaying city interior. Balanced on top of the newsprint plinth is a goldfish bowl—fish out of their depth as usual. The room is blue-black; so is the piano score (original music by David Hirschfelder). A man is slumped in a chair. He looks as though he's been done with an ink wash as well. It's a classic opening sequence, disorienting, lyrical and extraordinarily tense. Shades of *Rear Window*. Then the police break in. They kill the quiet but not the tension. The man is floored, humiliated, abused and dragged off to headquarters to be subjected to 'the interview'.

And that is about all that any film reviewer who is not an utter cad can tell you. Sorry. This one is too good to give away.

But I can say that the casting, cinematography, editing, acting and directing are deft and powerful. The double act of Hugo Weaving as the suspect (Eddie Rodney Fleming) and Tony Martin as the interrogator (Det Sgt John Steele) is a gift to cinema—both actors insinuate themselves into your nervous system. Martin has a lethal stillness far more frightening than any screen violence—no catharsis from his performance. And Weaving, whose face is so malleable it seems to have detachable parts, shifts from craven to maniacal with a muscular twitch. Both actors are given every break by Monahan and by Richard Bell's art direction—the film is an austere feast.

Much of the high polish derives from its crew's experience in the impressive sub genre of the Australian television crime show. The cast has covered the range—from *Homicide* to *Wildside*. But Monahan has pushed local realism by grafting on an element that will inevitably be called Kafkaesque. And there my reluctant reservations start. *The Interview* is a very good film indeed and will be variously interpreted (I walked out of the dark straight into passionate, mutually exclusive accounts). Ideally that would mean the script had mystery at its heart. I suspect it has something more like incoherence.

—Morag Fraser



T Watch what they say

THAT DANGEROUS subversive, my 16-year-old son, was not paying much attention to *Media Watch* on 3 August. But when Anne Fulwood was shown excoriating a pair of teenagers for their participation in the secondary students' day of protest against racism, he sat up and took a bit of notice. His comments were salty and unprintable and concerned the flexibility of truth

when put into the power of journalism that pushes a barrow rather than attempting to find out the reality. He had been a participant in the Melbourne rally, but hadn't made much of a song and dance about it, had simply gone there with many of his classmates because he felt it was the right thing to do.

Fulwood allowed a One Nation spokesperson uninterrupted airtime to warn us all about Communism manipulating the minds of our youth who 'should have been at school'. And the two teenagers (real menaces to society they were, a girl with long hair and a lad in a black beanie with a badge on it) were a lot meeker than my son as they sat there under the Fulwood fulminations. He kept arguing with the telly, a habit he has inherited from my late father through me, although we won't reach his granddad's rhetorical heights until we've learned to accompany ourselves with a walking stick banged on the floor. Arguing with the telly is very satisfying sometimes, particularly if those in the room object to what you're saying, because then you can always say that TV hasn't killed the art of conversation. I'm happy to report that Richard Ackland awarded Reptile of the Week to Fulwood for that piece of work, although I think that I ought to point out that to date no snake, lizard, turtle or dinosaur has yet been found to bend the truth in the way of the hairless ape, scourge of itself and all other species.

Our species does strange things to truth, or reality, whatever they may be. Because whatever they may be, they do exist. Eliot says that 'human kind cannot bear very much reality'. So much easier then, to cop out with Pilate, asking 'What is truth?', which is just another cool, proud way of saying that there's no such thing. And recently, after 1: watching *Against Nature* on the ABC and 2: reading the reviews of Jana Wendt's *Uncensored* series of interviews, I'm wondering at how some people can get things so wrong—notably the makers of *Against Nature* and the mainly unfavourable reviewers of Wendt's series.

To deal with *Against Nature* first, it seems strange that the ABC should have screened a program so bankrupt of any solid scientific knowledge over two weeks without creating a chance for refutation from the scientific community. Other 'controversial' programs have often in the past been followed by a forum. Was it too expensive to produce a decent line-up of scientists? The ABC has a responsibility to its audience to provide more than a cable-style buy-up of overseas dreck.

The dreck in question is produced by Martin Durkin of RDF, a London-based production house that has made (I gather from a glance at the titles in its documentary catalogue on the internet) numerous documentaries on everything from baldness to Gaddafi's female bodyguards. Whatever its other efforts may

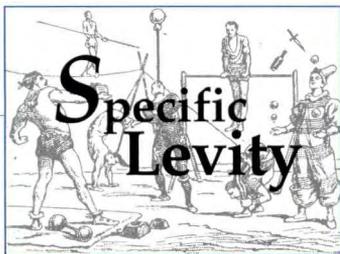
be worth, RDF's *Against Nature* achieves a level of untruth, ranging from mere distortion to outright lies, that is breathtaking. The porkies are so outrageous in fact that it would take half of this magazine to deal thoroughly with all of them. This is the power of audio-visual input—when this medium is used falsely, a stream of infected impressions, each one of which would take many words to unpack, gushes into the passive eye and ear. The only defence is to vaccinate the mind with truth, and that is available only to the informed. I take comfort from the fact that most young impressionable minds were watching *Beverly Hills 90210* at the time.

Against Nature's narration asserted, in passing as though it were a truism, that countries which value animal rights highly put a correspondingly low value on human rights. Ask your average 'roo or duck shooter what he thinks on the Wik issue and One Nation and I think you'll get an instant refutation of that argument. We were also informed that dirty air in pre-industrial times caused typhus and TB! Various spokespersons claimed that all environmental considerations were specious, that World-Bank-funded dam builders were motivated by altruistic desires to bring clean water and electricity to the Third World. Global warming is a myth thought up by green spoilsports to stop brave and kind fossil fuel companies from making life better for the peasants. (Tell that to Nigeria after Shell had its way there for a decade.) 'What is the use of all this biodiversity?' demanded one Wilfred Beckerman. (It permits some strange organisms to survive, Mr B, despite their being no use at all to humanity. Perhaps you should be grateful.)

WHILE WE'RE ON THE SUBJECT of credibility, I find it appalling that the commentary so far on Jana Wendt's *Uncensored* series has been so myopic, so pusillanimous. The ABC has, in *Uncensored*, something that it can sell all over the world. The interviews with Toni Morrison, Germaine Greer and Markus Wolf alone would be an achievement. How many interviewers would leave in an interchange that charges them with unconscious racist arrogance? Wendt was visibly crestfallen at Morrison's steely comment but left it uncensored. And how many interviewers of Greer resist the temptation to flirt with her, to contend their small personalities against her? Wendt was calm, restrained. She knew not to try to be the star of this particular show, and drew from Greer one of the most forthcoming and loveable interviews I have ever seen—most male reviewers seemed instead to want us to be voyeurs at a femocratic mudwrestle. With Wolf, she was predatory and relentless. *Did you ever stop to think about the regime you were supporting? Did you put Alois Estermann to spy in the Vatican?*

Wolf was gentle, even a little patronising at the start. By the end the air of patronage was gone. His eyes shifted around like Bob Hawke's as he sought from the walls and the ceiling the *mot juste* to throw Wendt off track, and never succeeded in doing so. I hope the ABC repeats *Uncensored* soon and at a more friendly timespot. To throw her against the shtick and pizzazz of *The Panel* was just plain bad programming. ■

Juliette Hughes is a freelance writer.



Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 66, September 1998

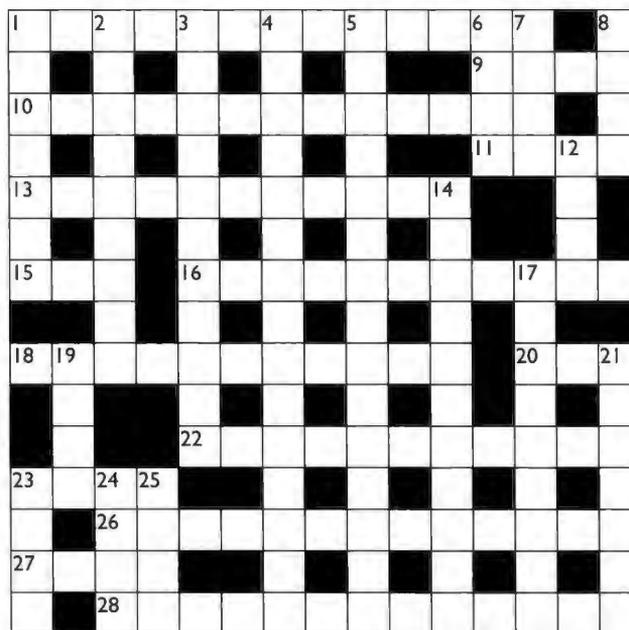
Devised by Joan Nowotny IBVM

ACROSS

1. One forever seeking new tunes? (5,3,5)
9. Top the fruit for everyone. (4)
10. Having somehow learnt tidy pen-craft, the girl's name appeared thus when the form was filled in. (6,7)
11. Almost twelve? Time to have a nap! (4)
13. Rose—taken from the garden? (3,3,2,3)
15. She always comes before night. (3)
16. 'A seat for every lad' said the president. (11)
18. Where does most of the rain fall in Spain? (2,3,6)
20. One change for new prefix. (3)
22. Possibly imperil Ryan in the initiatory session. (11)
23. East won cup back. West blushed a pinkish purple! (4)
26. What the weather did when the drought broke—terrible banker cut side levees. (6,7)
27. Hails the prayers in the rosary. (4)
28. When she saw a strange water python eat without a napkin, she took steps to seek a cure for her delusions. (4,2,7)

DOWN

1. What if Angel could get it by trickery? (7)
2. Measure deed intended, we hear, for promulgation of edict. (9)
3. Robber tells what he did, describing his victim contemptuously as some sort of crawler that he displayed. (4,2,5)
4. Is it a miracle, this unlikely occurrence? Prove I bent Mabel somehow to believe it! (10,5)
5. Though regarded as irresponsible, see Bert, reformed, fit big bible into his suitcase. (15)
6. Express distress in fine edition. (4)
7. Pop has love for the skirting-board? (4)
8. Change stockings when wearing footwear. (4)
12. There's nothing in this craze, Rob thought. (4)
14. Decorate group in the front gallery. (5,6)
17. Compo of red bananas bishop extracted when he went to the sports stadium with the greyish-yellow floor. (4,5)
19. Misuse of part of speech—not acceptable. (3-1)
21. A long wandering tale! (7)
23. Participate in drama with some latitude! (4)
24. The company displayed unseemly boastfulness! (4)
25. Some letters suggest relaxation to the audience. (4)



Solution to Crossword no. 65, July/August 1998



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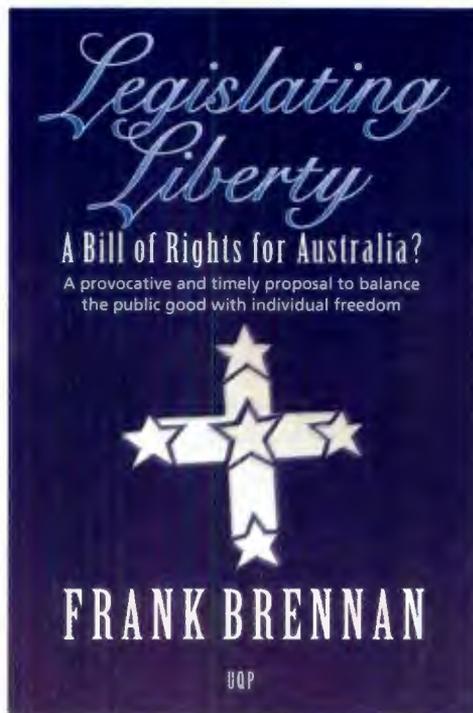
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