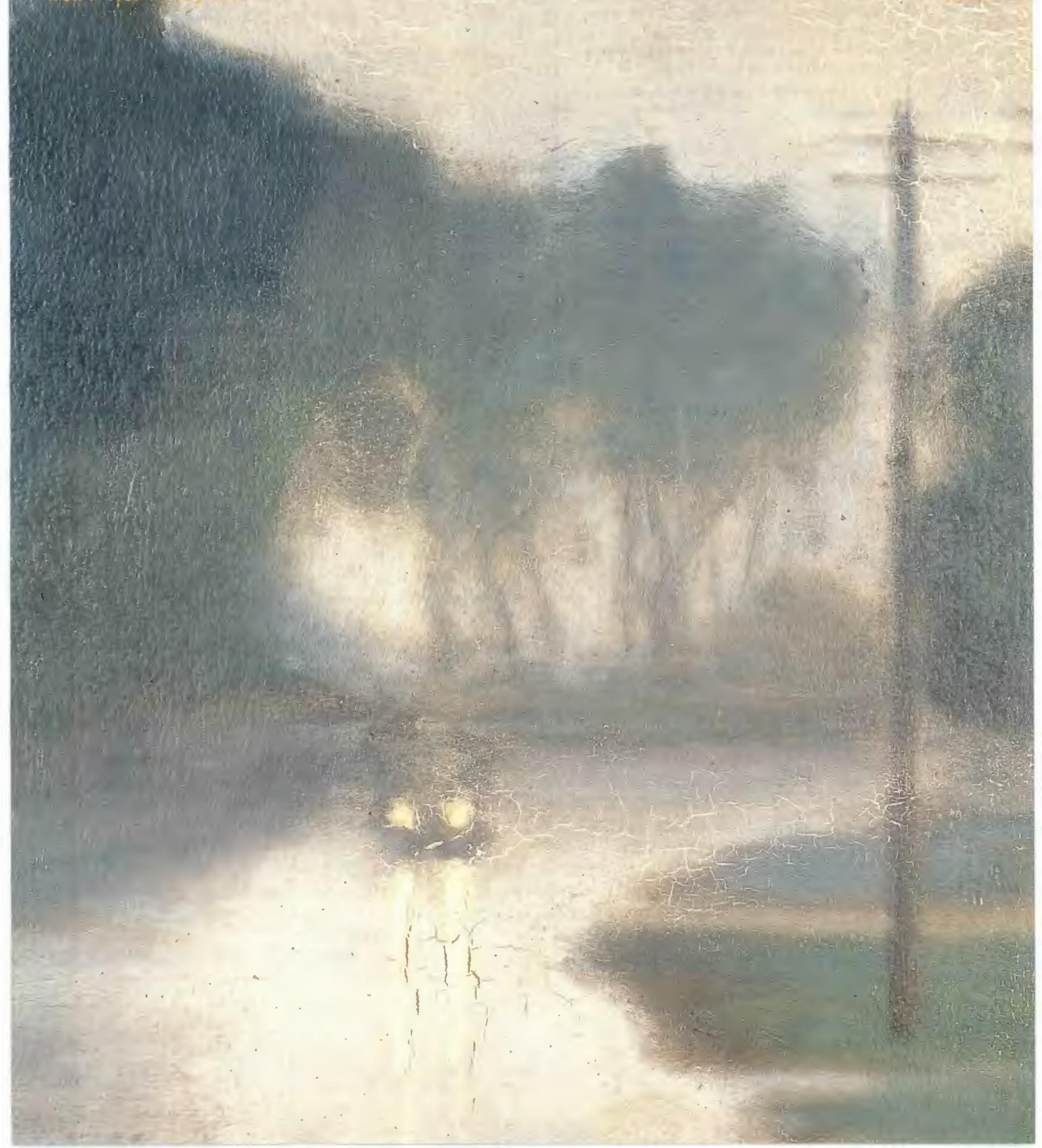


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Photograph of Peter Porter p3 by Greg Scullin.  
Photograph of Clarice Beckett p3 courtesy Ian Potter Museum.  
Graphics pp8-9, 17-18, 41 by Siobhan Jackson.

The exhibition of Clarice Beckett's work, 'Clarice Beckett: Politically Incorrect', is currently touring Australia, having completed its opening season at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne. **Sydney:** 24 April-13 June 1999, S.H. Ervin Gallery (National Trust of Australia NSW); **Orange, NSW:** 19 June-18 July 1999, Orange Regional Gallery; **Adelaide:** 6 August-19 September 1999, Art Gallery of South Australia; **Bendigo, VIC:** 30 September-31 October 1999, Bendigo Art Gallery; **Ballarat, VIC:** 5 November 1999-16 January 2000, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery; **Hobart:** 3 February-26 March 2000, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery; **Burnie, TAS:** 7 April-22 May 2000, Burnie Regional Art Gallery.

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# Cities in the mind

**O**LIVER SACKS, THE ENGLISH NEUROLOGIST who has made so many of us think afresh about the way our minds work, was talking recently about walking in the botanical gardens. I caught the conversation—it was with the ABC's Louise Adler—while I was stuck in city traffic.

Sacks goes to the gardens every lunchtime, after seeing his patients. During the walk he forgets completely the details



of his morning consultations. He just takes the time and lets the backroom of his mind do the work of salting down. Come the afternoon, he has the shape, the narrative he needs to make sense of the morning's experience.

To make his point even more dramatically, Sacks told the story of the playwright, Harold Pinter, who once read the neurologist's book, *Awakenings*, and promptly forgot about it completely for ten years. But then, out of the blue, he had a detailed dream about what he had read, and had to make something out of it, urgently.

It is probably lucky for Sacks' patients that his transformation process is speedier than Pinter's, but the point—about fallow time and the creative, transforming mind—is well made.

Art comes out of transformative processes like these. Art can also be the botanical garden for those of us who take the time to read or look or hear with our defences put behind us for a while.

So in this month of May, which will be a jangle of war, dispossession, political stridency and opportunism, our cover records one still moment. The car, moving toward you like the onset of winter, was painted by Clarice Beckett, who died when she was only 47. Her Melbourne contemporaries were concerned with more heroic subjects; Beckett recorded the fragile moment. On this page you can catch a different seasonal moment, a turn of a shoulder into the bleaching summer sun, in *The Red Sunshade* (1932). Many of Beckett's paintings were destroyed after her death—fashion and carelessness contributing to a loss that is ours now. But enough remain to show what power a focused imagination

can have and how it can transform mundane seconds of life into a pattern of light and tone and shapes to keep you marvelling for days.

We have paired Clarice Beckett's paintings of her Australian city and its streets and beaches and corners, with an essay, by Peter Steele, on the poetry of Peter Porter, one of Australia's great city explorers. Porter, who turned 70 earlier this year, returns to Australia for a time in May to celebrate the launching of his *Collected Poems, 1961–1999*. ■

—Morag Fraser

Peter Porter will read briefly from his poems at a public lecture in Melbourne on Tuesday 25 May. The lecture, 'A Letter to the World: Love and Peter Porter' will be given by Peter Steele sj, at 6.30pm, in the Sunderland Theatre in the Medical Centre, University of Melbourne. All are welcome. The lecture is being sponsored jointly by the University of Melbourne and the Europe–Asia Centre at the Victorian University of Technology.

An exhibition of Clarice Beckett's work, 'Clarice Beckett: Politically Incorrect', is currently touring Australia. For details of exhibition locations, see p3.

COMMENT: 2

ANDREW HAMILTON

## Reading the signs

**T**HE BRIEF FLURRY of government activity about Kosovo refugees has subsided. It looks unlikely that Australia will receive Albanian refugees, at least in the immediate future.

As with everything that has happened in Kosovo, it is easy to find fault with the response of governments, but hard to devise anything better. Past reluctance to get involved, the reliance on a long bombing campaign that privileges Allied lives over Serbian and Albanian ones, the faithlessness evident in similar humanitarian interventions in Somalia and elsewhere, all argue that the final result will be much human suffering for little gain. But would the Albanians have suffered less without intervention? If the Western governments have got it all wrong, it is hard to imagine oneself doing better.

The response of the Australian Government to Albanian refugees has been scratchy and disjointed. One day Mr Ruddock declined to offer shelter to Albanian refugees on the grounds that it would be better to support them closer to their homes. The next day, the Prime Minister was moved by popular outrage to accept a few thousand refugees for a few months. Initial reports suggested they would be housed in remote army installations.

After a few days, it appeared likely that they would be sheltered reasonably close to centres of population, with access to their communities and with some provisions for pastoral care. But then the United Nations decided that there was no immediate need to send refugees to Australia.

It would be easy to criticise the Government for a belated, unco-ordinated and grudging response. I would rather praise it for readiness to develop new policy with bipartisan support, and to put it into practice at short notice. The need for further change—for example, to offer permanent residence—is less a mark of incoherence than of flexibility in an unpredictable situation.

What was disappointing, however, about the government response was something more subtle and pervasive—a culture of government with a network of assumptions about priorities, about who is to be valued in a society and who is not deserving, about the proper scope of administration, and about the ways in which economic rationality fits human values.

The initial Australian response to the Serbian crisis was to support the Allied bombing, to encourage allies rather than to show solidarity with the Albanians of Kosovo. There was no attempt to prepare Australians for the length and difficulty of this campaign. Nor was there any pledge of humanitarian support for the refugees who would inevitably flow from the conflict. While Australian officials may have been involved in such discussions, there was no indication that the government leaders believed the tragedy salient to Australians.

This silence ensured that the Australian reluctance to accept Albanian refugees in Australia seemed merely self-serving. The Prime Minister strengthened the impression that the human face of the crisis was neglected, when he emphasised the temporary and remote nature of the refugees' stay. It appeared that the government was apologising for yielding to the generosity of spirit of its citizens.

Thus, good actions were betrayed by a persistent meanness of spirit which appears to believe that narrow self-interest is the only legitimate motivation of individuals and nations.

Narrow symbols, like removing legal access to asylum seekers and effectively excluding community groups from the resettlement of refugees, come easily to this government. When creating broader symbols that express and encourage national generosity of spirit, it suffers from spiritual illiteracy. ■

**Andrew Hamilton sj** teaches at the United Faculty of Theology, Melbourne.

# Third time lucky for GST?

**T**HE PRIME MINISTER must be feeling confident that the GST, third time around, will finally become a reality in Australia. And in spite of more than three months of public inquiry into the Coalition Government's tax reform package which failed to produce any convincing evidence to verify the claim that 'everyone is a winner'.

The Senate's final reports reflect the reality that it is divided over the merits and interpretation of testimony given by inquiry witnesses. A divided Senate makes the Government's pitch for a couple of key votes somewhat easier. The hopes of community welfare groups—that the third swipe at the GST will result in a strike out—are fading as the 16 tax Bills are debated in the Senate. It is a place where cautious, pragmatic politics dominate.

So what's all the fuss about?

The new tax system will introduce a regressive GST on food and other essentials of life, income tax cuts favouring high-income earners, and inadequate compensation measures to vulnerable Australians. These features, along with the unfulfilled promise that tax reform would be comprehensive (business tax reform will not be considered until after July) are fundamentally unfair for the following reasons.

First, the Government asserts that the introduction of a GST is the key means by which the present tax system's problems of efficiency, complexity and inequity can be solved. However, as has been true of the previous two GST tries, the inequitable, non-discriminating nature of this type of tax means that its ability to address current problems without making our vulnerable citizens worse off remains highly dubious.

The introduction of a flat-rate, broad-based consumption tax on essential household expenditure items such as food, clothing and utilities will fall most heavily on low-income groups. This tax, by design, fails to account for the various expenditure patterns of similar and different families on essential goods and services. Compared to the richest 20 per cent, the poorest 20 per cent will bear at least four times the burden of a GST on items such as food. Evidence has disproved many assumptions underpinning the Government's modelling and reveals that at least one million low-income households will be worse off. An increased number will remain worse off in subsequent years as compensation is dissipated through inflation.

Second, the reductions in personal income taxes heavily skewed in favour of high-income earners is grossly inequitable. The top 20 per cent of income earners will accrue over 50 per cent of the \$14 billion worth of tax cuts. Accordingly, a single person with no dependants earning \$75,000 will gain \$86 per week, whereas a single-income couple with two children earning only \$25,000 will gain only \$12 per week. Even after accounting for increases in Social Security payments, low-income families will still be at a comparative disadvantage: they will gain a

weekly increase in disposable income of just \$26. This is before the regressive impact of the GST is taken into account.

The income tax cuts are to be funded largely from the GST and a \$7.25 billion draw down on the Federal Budget surplus by the third year. These national savings have been primarily acquired through the harsh Costello Budgets, which severely cut assistance to unemployed and disadvantaged citizens. What kind of mateship prevails when savings taken from the battling poor are redirected to the relaxed and comfortable high-income earners?

Third, in recognition of the unfair and inflationary impact of the GST on some sections of the community, it is necessary to introduce a range of compensation measures. Research suggests that the present compensation package—which relies on increases to tax-free thresholds, family assistance and income support payments—will be inadequate. For vulnerable families who rely on income support payments and for middle-income families with children, the price effects of a GST will be greater than the Government's estimate of 1.9 per cent. Some estimate

the impact on vulnerable groups may be five times higher than Treasury projections.

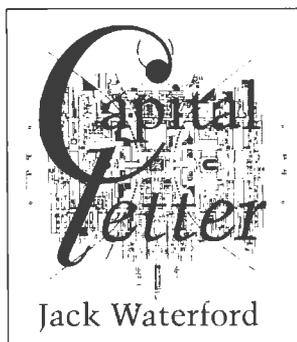
**T**HE INADEQUACY OF THE proposed compensation will be exacerbated by the virtual annexing of these measures as 'add-ons' to the core operation of the proposed tax system, making them vulnerable to reductions in periods of economic crisis. Recent statements from Treasury at the Tax Inquiry, conceding that compensation arrangements will be inadequate and eroded over time have debunked the officially sanctioned myths that 'the new tax system will be fairer' and that 'no-one will be worse off'.

Because Treasury's projections on economic growth are overstated in the tax package, it is also likely the Budget surplus will be smaller than estimated, so the pressure to rein in public spending will be considerable. The New Zealand experience shows that compensatory measures are the first to be affected when spending is reduced as a result of economic downturn.

To continue to justify the introduction of a GST on essentials on the grounds of efficiency with little or no reference to equity implications effectively ignores a primary goal of a just taxation system—the distribution of the goods and wealth generated in a community to its most poor and vulnerable members.

Just how non-Government Senators choose to deal with the above injustices remains to be seen. The Prime Minister won't be the only one holding his breath at five minutes to midnight on 30 June. ■

**Toby O'Connor** is National Director of the Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission.



## Of no utility

**I**S THE TIDE GOING OUT on privatisation, outsourcing and some of the other paraphernalia of the new economics?

In NSW, voters decisively rejected a plan which would have seen privatisation of the state's electrical generation system, despite promises from the Liberal and National Parties that the deal would involve a substantial cash or shares basis for every elector. In the ACT, public opinion, and the power of independents in the Legislative Assembly, killed off a proposal there for the sale of ACTEW, a combined electricity, water and sewerage utility. In Victoria and New Zealand, of course, one has only to mention the word 'reform' in connection with power supplies to bring to mind blackouts and complete failures. Victoria's electricity privatisations appear a considerable success, but public opinion has been much affected by a season without a gas supply, not to mention the unpopularity of requiring the amalgamation of shires and municipalities and the outsourcing of major local government work. At the federal government level, opposition to the full privatisation of Telstra is now a matter of National Party populism as much as a matter of wooing the uncertain vote of Brian Harradine.

And, at the bureaucratic level, a number of outsourcing projects have gone awry. The Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs recently had a week-long failure of the computer which contains all of its databases. The Department of Health and Family Services has been having similar problems. In each case, apart from the inconvenience created, it has not been clear that government is in a strong position to get recompense from the private service provider. In one case, I have been told, the problem for government is that the contract actually set out exactly what was required to do the job—terminals of this type, mainframes of that type, programs of this ilk and so on. Whatever has gone wrong has not been because of deviation from the contract. In another case, the agency was more specific in describing where it wanted to go rather than what brand of car should take it, but seems no better off.

Just as deliciously, the Department of Finance and Administration has a major problem with some money which has gone missing. The formal sum being described is about \$8 million, but it has already been said in court that up to \$100 million might be involved. This department—the apostle of the new style of management change—had outsourced the management of its day-to-day cash. There are now criminal charges, common law cases, and a host of injunctions flying around—all inhibiting frank descriptions of the disaster. What is clear is that there was a major stuff-up in government controls and, apparently, from the very body which lectures everyone else about it.

Add to this the fact that Government has plainly lost some of the sharp market-oriented zeal of 1996–97, partly as a result of the One Nation backlash, and is now frankly doing a bit of pump-priming and manipulation of particular markets. Add the fact that the Asia crisis and—if to a lesser extent—the focus in international diplomacy away from trade and back to war, has put many of the shifts towards liberalisation of world markets into hibernation. The downturn in world commodity prices, and the sluggishness of the Japanese economy, have in any event taken some of the impetus away from claims that mere economic soundness creates the buoyancy needed to bobble in the international sea.

In the meantime, politicians who have always tended to dismiss

mere 'social issues' as distractions which are not part of the 'main game' of getting the settings right have seemed increasingly focused on fripperies. They have been busy on the wording of the preamble to the constitution, the censorship of *Lolita*, hour-by-hour changes to the refugee policy according to the people meters on the John Laws show, or the alignment of federal policies on drugs with the convictions of the Prime Minister—convictions with which few even of his ministers agree.

So is it all on the way out?

Not necessarily, even if the players are now becoming more sophisticated. The distractions, for example, have allowed the main economic ministers to work on the budget without any real publicity, or assault from the lobbyists, most of whose activity, in any event, has been on the Goods and Services Tax fine print.

Outsourcing continues apace in government operations—a whole new tranche of outsourced functions, including the management of virtually all of the Commonwealth's remaining real estate, even the New Parliament House, will be announced in the Budget this month. Government is still looking hard at new models of delivery of government goods and services. A lot of work is going into fundamental changes to the social security system. The roles of various triggers along the stages of life (birth, going to school, marriage, divorce, illness, employment, unemployment, retirement, death of a partner and so on) are being analysed in the hope that services can be better timed and targeted. If it works, the system could prove considerably more efficient not only in actually delivering services (or 'outcomes' as the proponents would no doubt say) but also in the number of staff involved in, and the cost of, delivering the services. It will, incidentally, underscore the new role of social security as safety net rather than universal system.

**T**HE COMBINATION of devolution of government managerial power and the centralisation of policy power (in bodies such as the Cabinet Expenditure Review Committee and the Department of Finance) increases apace. So does the marginalisation of the public service as a policy adviser, with more and more power now resting in the ministerial office, without any of the checks, balances, transparency or accountability of older structures of government. The recent big salary increases to senior public servants—which give them the capacity to earn bonuses of up to \$40,000 a year (on the Prime Minister's recommendation) for success in helping the Government meet its objectives—have also introduced a new pressure on public servants to look to their own and the Government's interests, before looking to the public interest. Perhaps not entirely by coincidence, the Government has recently reintroduced its Bill—rejected last year by the Senate—to change the Public Service Act.

In more ordinary times, something like the preamble debate might be playing a quietly important role—as citizens and their representatives, by arguing backwards and forwards about different formulations of words, and about God, and Aborigines, and migrants, and mateship, sought to find some unifying ideas of citizenship and national purposes. In the background, however, the underlying ethos is less about citizenship than about consumers, stakeholders, inputs, outputs and the corporate style. ■

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



# The Month's Traffic



## After the deluge

**I**N MY JOB I GET PLENTY of letters from far-flung corners of the Pacific. Last July I received one from West Sepik province in Papua New Guinea: 'I am Mr John Sanawe OBE of Arop Village. I am 55 years old, married with five children.' Sanawe, a retired colonel from the PNG Defence Force, wrote of the village's need for development and his fear that, as the population grew, the village's already neglected condition would deteriorate further.

Before reading Colonel Sanawe's letter I'd never heard of Arop Village. A week later the whole world knew about it. On 17 July 1998, a tsunami swept across the north-west coast of PNG; television screens everywhere were filled with images of flattened trees and uprooted villages. There were front-page pictures of the dead floating among debris, and reports of horrific injuries. Television graphics tracked the path of the 15-metre wave that swept thousands of men, women and children from the villages of Sissano, Warapu, Arop and Malol, high above the coconut trees, and smashed them into the lagoon behind their homes.

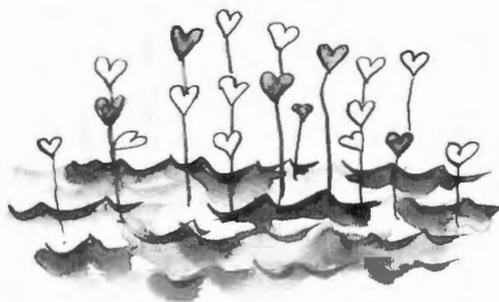
Watching the reports, I remembered the letter. Rifling through my desk I found it and turned to the last page. John Sanawe had drawn a sketch of the area around his village. It was virtually identical to the maps now on television. There in the centre was Sissano Lagoon. He'd marked all the neighbouring villages—now flattened. He'd drawn in the same mangrove swamps that were now filled with rotting corpses. It dawned on me that the person who'd sat down to write this call for help could now be dead.

Recently I pulled out the letter again, this time on a flight bound for Aitape, the town nearest the tsunami-devastated area. Tropical paradise stretched below—long white beaches and tiny reef islands, turquoise water and lines of glimmering palm trees. It was hard to match this scene with the images of disaster in the news reports, and with the picture of neglected, poverty-stricken villages painted in Sanawe's letter.

My image of paradise didn't last long once I landed. Aitape is a small, dusty town with a bank, a shop and a health centre—

the only ones in the district. Small groups of people wandered slowly through the heat, and sat dejectedly under rain trees, not talking much, staring into the distance and chewing betel-nut, spitting the blood-red juices on to the road. This was a far cry from other towns I'd visited in PNG, where life on the streets is animated and noisy. The people in Aitape sat well away from the beach.

I spent my first afternoon swimming with a group of young people who had lost many in their families during the tsunami. They had also lost limbs to infection after the disaster (medical teams had carried out many amputations, to prevent the spread of gangrene from untreated wounds). To get to the river, we travelled kilometres over a gutted dirt road in the back of a ute, each bump jerking these bedraggled kids with their bandaged stumps.



When we arrived, the boys started a rowdy game of soccer on the river stones. The young women, however, sat quietly in waist-deep water covering their injuries with their clothes. They talked, only a little, of the difficulties they expect to face in the future. Several felt they had almost no chance of getting married and having families of their own. Given that women in Papua New Guinea do almost all the work of survival—carrying water, growing food, bearing and raising children, cooking, fishing, house building and so on, what man would take them on? And without family, it is difficult to find a sense of belonging in the villages of Papua New Guinea.

The next day I took another bumpy truck ride to the new Arop village, relocated in the swampland several kilometres from the sea. John Sanawe, I was told, had survived, and had been taken to Port Moresby hospital with multiple injuries. I was unable to find him there.

But a quick look around Arop village showed me that much of what he'd written

in his letter remained true: *There is no economic development in the village, or in the area for that matter, since independence in 1975. Consequently the economic base is nil ... There is no road to the village ... To go to Aitape station one either walks east along the beach for nearly three hours [to catch a bus] or travels by casual boat trip ... once every two days.* This isolation means that the people have virtually no access to basic services like health care, schools, or even a trade store. Worse still, with their houses and gardens now gone, people are living under makeshift shelters and surviving on the dwindling relief supplies and whatever they can forage from the bush.

One of the older women, Margaret Otto, invited me into her home to sit and talk. The house was a hastily constructed wooden frame, with a large blue tarpaulin thrown over as a roof. The rain dripped steadily on to the floor. Her few remaining possessions were crowded into the centre to stop them getting wet—a single mattress with a mosquito net, a pot, a spool of green string, a few tins of fish and a bag of rice. We sat quietly for a while before she began to tell me her story.

Otto had lost three of her children in the wave. Her remaining family moved inland on to land belonging to another clan, but after three months fighting began. The landowners become jealous of the aid received by the tidal wave victims, and forced the family to move. So they packed their belongings and started again, this time on land belonging to their own clan. Otto spoke slowly and with difficulty about her missing children, and her attempts to rebuild her life; as she talked she made a *bilum*, a string bag used for carrying everything from food to babies.

This is a community in shock. People are slowly starting to recover, but the trauma of this event will remain for life, and the loss is extensive. At a memorial service marking All Souls Day in Aitape, families held poles with paper hearts stuck to them for each person they had lost. One woman sat alone in the crowded service, with a pole carrying more than 20 hearts. In contrast to the excited rush of international attention after a major disaster, the process of real recovery is slow and difficult.

There are a few aid agencies still working in the area, but many left in the weeks

following the disaster, with a number of serious problems unresolved. Jealousy over aid distribution is rife. Some members of communities that were unaffected by the wave express their anger through fighting and theft. Local committees have been organised to distribute assistance, but the difficulties of transport and communication make it hard to ensure that representation is fair. Women, particularly, do not have a strong voice—they find it difficult to express their needs and the needs of their families. These issues compound the difficulties caused by severe trauma, and the loss of so many capable people and leaders.

Aitape still needs help. The survivors of the tidal wave are traditionally seafaring people, and they are not yet well adapted to living inland. They may eventually return to the sea, but the terror could keep them away for a long time.

This means developing new ways of living—collecting water, growing food, organising sanitation, and building different kinds of houses. In the new Arop village for example, where Margaret Otto and her family are settling, the nearest river for washing and drinking water is now a 20-minute walk away through a swamp. The women are just starting to build gardens for their new villages, and these gardens need to be more varied and productive than before, when the sea provided plenty of nutritious food.

As my short time in Aitape came to a close, more and more people began to tell me their stories. Many spoke of fear, tragedy and loss. But there were also tales of miraculous survival. One mother told how Elijah, her three-week-old baby, had been flung from her arms by the force of the wave. His head had wedged in the 'v' of a large stick and he was found floating the next day, fast asleep and unharmed, his head still stuck in the 'v'. A young man spoke of his blind friend, who had been washed from a chair on his verandah. Holding his hands outstretched before him, he had found the branch of a tree and clung to it for over 24 hours, relying only on sound and touch to tell him what was happening. I also met a small baby called 'Tsunami', born only hours after the wave.

Debra, a nine-year-old from Arop village, described clinging to a floating coconut tree for a night and a day after the wave, until she heard her uncle calling the names of family members across the swamp. Hers was the only voice that responded. *'Mi stap, mi stap!'* (*'I'm here, I'm here!'*).

—Becci Fleischer

## Drag race

IMAGINE Dame Edna Everage touring the whole of Australia, complete with an Aboriginal off-sider, as she sets about convincing people to vote for the republic. In recent weeks a very similar spectacle has been available in South Africa.

For 20 years or more Pieter-Dirk Uys has been satirising politics in the country—'Politicians, bless them, will always write my scripts'—but the one character that has lodged in the public mind, and on whom he now centres his work, is Evita Bezuidenhout, Afrikaner matron and former ambassador to the (mythical) homeland of Bapetikosweti. Evita resembles Edna—Uys is every bit as quick as Humphries—but instead of being a conservative dandy, he is totally committed politically to a democratic South Africa.

Uys therefore conceived the idea of hiring a train to convey Evita around the country to encourage people to register to vote. For a number of reasons—not the least of them the elimination of multiple voting—the government had decided to insist on registration involving new identity papers as a necessary preliminary to voting in the general election on 2 June. Registration was slow; it was only after a blitz of television advertising and extended deadlines that 77 per cent of the population were eventually induced to participate. Uys' helping hand was therefore well-judged. But instead of the train, which would have cost him \$500,000, he decided to hire a bus, which was a great deal cheaper and gave him greater mobility. While the Independent Election Commission was prepared to authorise him, it gave him no money; the venture was financed from the takings Uys had recently collected on a European tour, plus sponsorships. 'Evita's People's Party', he told the newspapers, 'is not a political party; it is a party for all South Africans who have forgotten what fun an election can be.'

After a warm-up with recorded songs—in which she is described as 'born in Bethlehem (it exists) to be a star'—on comes Evita, dressed in an outfit marked by lashings of batik. This theme continues in

her turbanesque hat, modelled on the traditional *doek*, while the black core of the dress is almost invaded by a slit at the side. Thus far it could be an afro-chic outfit, of the kind seen at the opening of the South African parliament. (Evita says it was actually run up for Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, but she defaulted on the bill.) But wig, lipstick and massive earrings complete her montage; the marriage of absurdity and apparent respectability is consummated by an adjacent phallic cactus.

It is the absurdities of contemporary South Africa which are highlighted in the initial warm-up. Eleven official languages! By the time the Pedi burglar has found the line in a notice intended for him, the watch dog has already bitten him on the bum. And all those black homelands the late government devised. 'Nowadays,' says Evita, 'there's just one big black homeland: it's called South Africa.' For the basically student audience, Evita includes a few more references to the past than she often does. Then comes her punch line: 'We're very sorry about apartheid. We're very sorry it didn't work.' When the laughter subsides she adds, 'And we Afrikaners promise that we'll never never do it again.' Just like a child. It's refreshing to see the current wave of apologeting getting one in the eye.

Unlike Humphries, Uys has not developed a fruity falsetto; his natural voice is unusually flutey, and with very little adjustment serves Evita and Pieter-Dirk equally well. The Afrikaner-matron-who-isn't, standing up there turning a lot of cherished assumptions on their head, has been quite subversive enough. 'The Great Trek!', she exclaims. 'Which one? The one to Australia?' There are some who argue that Uys was, in the apartheid era, a kind of court jester. Indeed in our later meeting, clobber discarded, he reveals the sharply etched features of a medieval fool. The criticism is put to him: 'Not a court of power,' he retorts, 'a court of law. Bad politicians deserve to be laughed off the stage.'

Uys is optimistic about the new order in South Africa, seeing it as 'a culture of life' rather than 'a culture of death'. Evita will joke that 'we knew the value of the vote—that's why we kept it away from so many of



you for so long', but often her tone is buoyant, encouraging, alluding to the serious work of building a democracy, and then concluding the act with her *indaba* (formal meeting), in which one by one representatives of the different parties put their cases. This part is deadly serious, though Evita hovers with her cactus to prod the prolix. In Grahamstown, a traditional English-speaking area among the whites, there are no Nationalists or Afrikaner Freedom Fronters; but they have appeared on stage with her elsewhere. 'Evita's *indaba* is good news,' says Uys. 'There are no bad guys.' And so a spokesman for God's People's Party, looking like a pony-tailed Jimmy Carter, is indulged as his thick Afrikaans accent pronounces the need for parliament to enact God's laws. Equally, there is no Humphries-style victimisation; audience participation consists of asking serious questions of the spokespeople, albeit under the eagle eye of Chairma'am Evita.

Uys says he has found this tour 'the most exhilarating experience of my life'. Instead of being the 'minstrel' playing to the gallery, there he was hot gospelling to the country. It brought home to him—with a forcefulness a foreigner finds surprising in its previous absence—a sense that South Africa is truly a black country. Eighty or 90 per cent of his audiences for the show have been black, he says. Sometimes there has been suspicion, a want of belief, because it has been provided free (a suspicion shared by whites); but nonetheless they have come. Moreover, Uys' off-sider Basil, a young Coloured comic, has been seen by talented black youths as a role model.

The tour was undertaken because, says Uys, 'I want to grow old in this country. I want there to be a healthy democracy.' He delights in the way audiences share the experience together. At Fort Beaufort the previous night, most white people there had probably never sat in an audience with black people. 'By the end of the evening,' he notes approvingly, 'people were talking to each other.'

There is an awfully long way to go. At the end of Evita's *indaba* in Grahamstown, one could not but feel how remote most of the issues raised by the Green spokesperson seemed, despite their global significance. Similarly, when the ANC candidate went into orbit with the litany of the government's achievements when it came to building houses and providing utilities, the predictability of the expected vote made him unassailable, even indifferent. 'The future of South Africa,' says Evita, 'is certain.

It's just the past that is full of surprises', which is one way of referring to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 'We are,' she adds, 'a very, very successful democracy, because we are all equally unhappy.'

—Jim Davidson

## Singing into silence

I SAW NARURAM and his wife Shupiyara as they sat quietly with a small baby outside a school just above the main gate to the fort at Jaisalmer, in Rajasthan, India. Naruram wore a torn but spotlessly clean white shirt and *dhoti*, and a red turban. He had a bag and his own instrument, a *ravenhatta*, and another smaller one. Shupiyara held the baby, which was naked except for a thread tied around its waist. The baby was healthy but I thought the parents were looking rather thin. I went on past them up to the fort. It was Sunday, and very quiet. It was September and still very hot. There were relatively few tourists about and those who were, one saw repeatedly in the different restaurants and temples.

On my way back down the hill I stopped and asked Naruram to play something. He did, most brilliantly. He showed me the smaller instrument which was for sale. I declined, but asked him if he also sang. Shupiyara came and sat down and Naruram played while they both sang—a rhythmical chant, canonical in type, with him leading, the next bit in parts and with her repeating the last phrase. I thought this was pretty marvellous.

Then he produced from his bag a cassette tape, with RAVENHATTA, the name of the instrument on it in hand lettering. I bought it willingly for what he asked, since he was the artist, and also paid them for the music. Shupiyara was rather moved and, naming me as her sister, put a little pewter chain on my ankle. I think what I gave them were their meals for the next week. She said they had had no business for a month. I asked who they were and she

said '*Bhopa bhopi*'. I was most impressed with their music, and asked them if I could videotape them performing. We agreed to meet at the same spot the next day.

I came to realise that they were not untrained buskers or beggars, since they did not busk and did not beg. A man I asked about them accused them of being thieves and fakes. In the course of the day, I worked out that the musicians are a caste (these, from central and west Rajasthan, are Nayaks) and the music is handed down from parents to children. They do not come from Jaisalmer, live in a special part of town and are very, very poor.

The Bhopa are the singer-priests who perform the liturgical narrative which goes with the painted scrolls of the lives of popular deities like Dev Narayan and Pabuji, like the one I saw painted on the wall at the Sanskriti Kendra, New Delhi, where I was staying as an Asialink writer-in-residence.

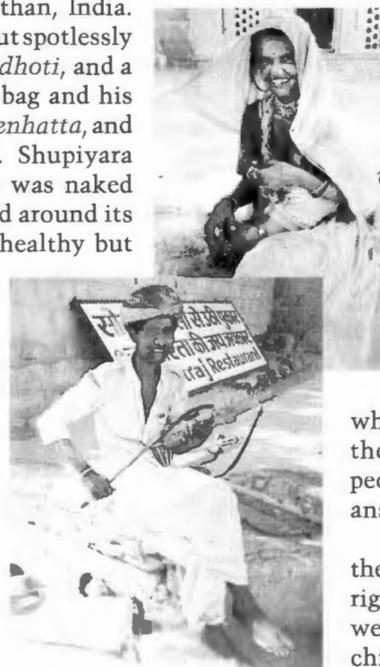
This leads to two questions: how have they come to be singing for tourists, and why, when they are mentioned to any of the inhabitants of Jaisalmer, do people pull the sort of faces Europeans do at the mention of gypsies?

The next day I went to videotape them. Unfortunately their pitch is right outside a school, so during the week they cannot sing while the children are in school, and they cannot sing after school as the children hassle them, as we found out.

Naruram and his wife speak admirably effective English. He told me that they are religious singers and have come from Pushkar to stay in Jaisalmer while the tourists are there. In November they will return to Pushkar. We went to a tea shop, where I videotaped Naruram playing. He suggested we go to his tent, and agreed to meet me the next day.

His tent was a frail piece of black plastic on a neat clean little terrace on a hill with a wonderful view of the fort, the town and the desert. It's a bit like Rio—the poor get the view, to console them for their rattling stomachs. Naruram and Shupiyara have four children—a boy who also sings beautifully, a younger boy, a delicious little fat girl and the baby.

Naruram showed me his scroll, battered and water-damaged. He offered to sell it to me, but I refused, saying he needs it. I failed



Bhopa musicians Shupiyara (top, with baby) and Naruram (playing the *ravenhatta*).

to realise that if I had bought it, he could have used the proceeds to commission a new one. But that was three libraries and three towns later. I videotaped Naruram and Shupiyara singing part of the Pabuji liturgy and paid them for their efforts.

I asked them if their children go to school. Naruram replies, 'School is for rich people and I am a poor man.' Seeing her major source of income about to depart, Shupiyara hit me with the facts of her life, no money, four children, no house back in a village. She is quite right but I depart nevertheless.

Then next day I went back to take some still photographs. Shupiyara got me a tape of part one of the full Bhopa performance, which I was happy to buy. When later someone tells me I should have only paid 30 rupees for it (A\$1.50), I ask how much a blank tape is. He says 20 rupees. I point out that 10 for the artist (45 cents) is hardly fair.

To my question as to why they are so despised I received these answers: they are like beggars and prey on tourists (although they do neither), they are not proper musicians because proper musicians (native to Jaisalmer) play the tabla and the harmonium and understand music; and (the main and operative reason) they are itinerant and do not come from Jaisalmer, which is a city in the desert built entirely and exquisitely of golden sandstone and as parochial as Cornwall.

After consulting scholars and various texts, I get my hands on a book by John Smith which transcribes and explains the entire Pabuji story. He writes that the text is fixed, although transmitted orally, and relatively free of ornament—the Bhopa can, however, decide which sections of the epic to perform and which to leave, depending on time, audience and circumstance, and his own knowledge. Where the artist-priest is free to make his own decisions is first in the music, as there are a variety of forms for different set pieces, and second in the dance.

John Smith, and O.P. Joshi, an earlier writer on scroll performances, agree that it is in the amazingly virtuoso performance, playing and orchestrating the music as he goes, singing and narrating, pointing to the relevant parts of the painted scroll, and dancing, that the art of the Bhopa resides. His wife, who also sings, dances, and holds a lamp to display the painting, shares this virtuosity.

Now I am in a position to return to my questions about the lowered social position of the Bhopa. Dr Jyotindra Jain, author of *Picture Showmen: Insights into the*

## God in politics

**P**OLITICAL THEOLOGY IN THE CHURCHES of the developed world needs renewal. Our recent and impoverished discussion of whether God has a place in the preamble makes this all too clear. One recent book (*Studies in Christian Ethics*, 11/2, 1998) devotes an entire issue to it) underscores the point. It is Oliver O'Donovan's *Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge University Press, 1996)—a spring tide of political theology.

But what of liberation theologies of the developing world? Acknowledging that they are more adequate political theologies than most, O'Donovan nevertheless finds them inarticulate before the political questions of the developed world. The problem is that, in struggling against government, 'the Southern school has lacked a concept of authority' (p16). Yet, while all must struggle against poverty, the political questions for the North are ones of government: 'can democracy avoid corruption by mass communications? ... Can civil rights be safeguarded without surrendering democratic control to arbitrarily appointed courts? ... Can ethnic, cultural and linguistic communities assert their identities without oppressing individual freedoms?' (p18). What is more, because the concept of authority underpins the priority of theology over politics, without a positive account of authority we are always at risk, in the political realm, of hearing 'nothing from ... [God] but the echo of our own practical energies' (p14).

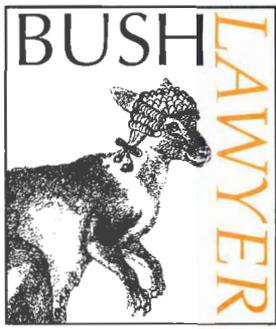
Central to O'Donovan's analysis is a rich account of the Kingdom of God. Having traced the revelation of God's kingship through the Old Testament, he turns to develop an account of Jesus as the representative of the Kingdom of God who both embodies the rule of God and mediates its presence. As the embodying representative of this Kingdom, four 'moments' of Jesus' life—Advent, Passion, Restoration and Exaltation—tell its story. The final sequence beginning with the passion is decisive for the future of politics, constituting the final judgment upon the secular politics that seeks to derive its authority from human will and the restoration of the kingly rule of God. Although the rule of God is restored, the fulfilment of the Kingdom lies beyond time in the eschaton. It is this temporal gap, which, as O'Donovan observes, has always been the core of the complexities of political theology, that shapes the political nature of the Church and its relations with government.

The community that lives and witnesses to the rule of God is the Church. This makes the Church the political society—not one that simply fulfils a particular function but one whose members live a distinct life answerable to no another authority. This makes the catholicity of the Church central for O'Donovan—only what orders and reveals the presence of the Church is not the order of ministry but the order of the sacraments.

When this reconciling community of radical equality whose relationships are ordered without coercion relates to government, the contrast to the 'secular' government of this passing age is not the 'sacred' or the 'spiritual' but the 'eternal' (p211). For O'Donovan, the relationship of the Church to government is mission—a relationship which has led some to the mistaken conclusion that he is advocating a new form of a tradition, which he understands and explains with unique clarity, namely, Christendom. There are three movements to this mission. The first is to press government to create the space for this new political society to grow. The second is to encourage government to exercise its function of judgment according to the stable rule of God in creation (sometimes known as natural law) rather than as a projection of the human will. Finally, to promote acts of government that reflect the political life of the Kingdom—an example of which would be a government apology for the Stolen Generation.

A few line sketches do this book little justice because so much of its insight lies in O'Donovan's finely crafted detail. The positive engagement with this book by a range of eminent scholars, including Christopher Rowland, Stanley Hauerwas, Richard John Neuhaus and David Novak in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, suggests it is detail worth exploring. It is a book that, in the best tradition of Anglican theology, speaks provocatively across the Catholic/ Protestant divide by drawing upon both traditions in the attempt to set a benchmark for an adequate political theology. ■

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BUSH LAWYER  
SÉAMUS O'SHAUGHNESSY

## Guilty secrets

I CAN'T SPEAK FOR ALL magistrates but the cases I find most difficult and disturbing are child sex matters. They present a number of problems, some of which I will deal with in another column. I want to suggest here that the moral and psychological issues are more murky than is sometimes acknowledged.

When I was a student, I shared a house with a young couple who had a little daughter. One evening, 'Jim' and I were sitting on his verandah shooting the breeze over a couple of beers. He said that he would like 'child-molesters' to suffer the death penalty. I was shocked. The taboo against sexual abuse of children is very powerful, but this was a bit steep I thought, and said so.

Now that I have two small children whom I adore, I understand more fully the passion which underlay Jim's outburst. I don't mean to make a claim of moral superiority, however, when I say that I have a different perspective on 'child-molesters' or 'paedophiles'. They have been so routinely and extravagantly demonised in the media that it is difficult to view them with any objectivity, let alone any compassion or understanding.

Some years ago, I spent some time visiting the Cooma Gaol in southern NSW for the Ombudsman. It was then a prison for sex offenders. A large number of men denied their guilt and wanted to complain about being convicted. In most cases, they did not dispute that something had happened, but claimed that their actions had been 'misunderstood' or, even worse, they blamed the victims, claiming that they had been 'led on' by the children in question. There was nothing to be done for them and I got away as quickly as I reasonably could.

There was a more interesting group of inmates. A counsellor, an ex-Army warrant officer, ran a voluntary program based on AA principles for child-sex offenders. As a precondition the members of the group had to admit to themselves and the group that they were guilty of their offences. They felt liberated when they could say to one another, 'This is what I have done. I am sorry.' Not only was it cathartic to come out into the open from their secret, guilty

world, but they found that they were not alone with their guilt.

What were they like? They varied in personality and intelligence, but all lacked self-esteem. Almost all had themselves been the victims of sexual or psychological abuse as children. Many were lonely people who felt inadequate and uncomfortable with adults. Some were inarticulate and appeared to be psychologically damaged. Others were talkative and quite immature, glad of an audience. To a greater or lesser extent, however, all of them seemed to have developed the insights that they had harmed children and might do so again if they did not address their own psychological problems. It takes considerable courage to do that and I came to respect those men.

Just as we need to take special care of child victims, and rehabilitate suitable offenders, I think we also need to take pains to avoid witch-hunts.

Recently, I acquitted a man whom I am convinced was falsely accused by an 11-year-old girl of having indecently assaulted her. He had been investigated and was charged with having had digital intercourse with her younger sister. He had pleaded guilty. Some time after he was charged with that very serious offence, the older girl came forward with her accusation. He was charged again. He denied the less serious allegation.

He sat in court, head in hands, the picture of a broken man. The girl was bright and effervescent, apparently truthful. But between the time she was initially interviewed by the police and the hearing, her story changed in a number of significant respects. It slowly emerged in cross-examination that her younger sister had been the focus of an enormous amount of attention, and she had felt left out.

The man had done something very wrong, but had admitted his guilt, and shown obvious contrition, saving the real victim the trauma of giving evidence. He did not deserve to be victimised by a false witness. ■

Séamus O'Shaughnessy is a country magistrate.

*Narrative Tradition in Indian Art*, thinks that changes in the social structure of Rajasthan (the end of the feudal system), while not displacing the Bhopa directly, have affected them, causing them to seek an audience in tourists as well as villagers. He believes that the general disapproval in which they are held is because they are, and have always been, itinerants. Like gypsies, they are convenient scapegoats, not trusted.

It seems to me that one can see in Naruram and Shupiyara's journeys an adaptation of a traditional practice to a new audience, the tourists. Once they would have followed a known route through a number of villages for whom the *phad* (the painting) would be read each year. Now this seems to be required by fewer and fewer villages.

Apart from the fact that singing for tourists is over-subscribed not only by the Bhopa but their half-trained imitators, the danger with the tourist audience is that its completely secular context will separate the performance from its serious ritual purpose, and the whole tradition will rapidly decay.

If the Bhopa only sing for tourists this will happen. If, however, they continue to minister to communities of believers as priests, then these almost miraculous narrative performances of the exploits of Pabuji and Dev Narayan will continue with the same seriousness and intensity they have today.

—Lee Cataldi

## Count nothing human foreign

IF I SAID I'D JUST BEEN TO see a film that left me heavy with fear, grieving for slaughtered family never met, feeling desperately human, would you guess I was talking about the recent Italian comic sensation, *Life is Beautiful*?

Commentary has focused on how funny this two-part film is. Its first half is high slapstick: Guido and Dora fall in slapstick love, have a slapstick son, and career down Italian cobbled streets on a slapstick bicycle. The second half is set in a concentration camp, where the family is taken, and where Guido, to protect his son from the horror of their situation, spins him an elaborate and often amusing tale about its all being a big game.

It seems that opinion, like the film, is split in two. One view is that the Holocaust's unprecedented horror is off-limits to humour. The other rejoices in the film's 'redemptive' properties—life is indeed

beautiful, there is laughter amid horror, sunshine in the end. Both read the film as comedy, and find that, respectively, offensive or redemptive.

Both views are reductive. *Life is Beautiful* is not funny; it has humorous aspects, for good reasons, but that's not the same thing.

Ultimately, it's a black tale, an inspired dark fable. The voice-over at the beginning informs the viewer straight up that it's a fable; throughout the film the magical sets, lighting and thematic sounds spin a surreal mood. Things happen in this film that could never have happened in reality; no child ate strudel in a concentration camp. But anyone, particularly a Jew, has the right to object, to stand back, not to step into the fable.

I'd like to take that step, because if you think this film mocks the Holocaust then you're just not getting it, not getting the fact that the child's prize for winning the 'game' is a full-size military tank. Not getting that Dora sorts the clothes of gassed prisoners, son Giosué goes hungry and narrowly escapes having his clothes added to the pile, and Guido, the life of the film, is shot to death while trying to rescue his wife.

If you think it's redemptive, you're not seeing every dark, shadowed, portentous, apocalyptic shot in the film and that the ending is anything but sunny, that the child and the woman lose father and husband. The final scenes with sunlight and Yanks in tanks are not some sort of Christian redemptive take-over of a gruesome Jewish tale. This man doesn't die for a greater purpose. No victim of the Holocaust died for a greater purpose. They died because they were gassed, shot and burned, because humans are capable of killing each other tribally, because they can kill each other without guilt, with bloodlust, with God on their side, with might and right, technological smarts and political know-how. Children kill children, adults kill adults, armies slaughter, and we're none of us better off.

So this film is not funny. And yet it contains abundant humour. Hardest of all, Guido's manic story in the camp, though mostly impossible to laugh at, is indisputably funny. There's Guido providing a mock translation of the fierce German guard straight out of *Hogan's Heroes*, there's Guido pretending that he spent the day playing hopscotch.

Comedy and tragedy often go hand in hand, as director and lead actor Roberto Benigni has pointed out in response to

criticism. But that's not all there is here. The humour in *Life is Beautiful* creates a common thread of humanity in the film. It's an aspect any viewer would readily accept. The first half makes us feel so jubilantly human. We've all fallen in love, found joy in a child, had the sun shine on us and laughed at the simplest of idiocies. The humour is beguiling—this is truly the human spirit. But then, by a plait of humour and horror, the film leads us to the dreadful humanity of the second half. How can we then deny it? If we are humans capable of laughter, we are also humans capable of the Holocaust, as victims and perpetrators both. The Holocaust was a human creation; allowing it to be spun through a fable is one way of bringing that home. If we all belong in the first tale, we all are responsible for the second. It is a realisation that does not necessarily come from a stark documentary or an unmitigated drama.

To make the Holocaust off-limits to humour or fable is to sever it from our understanding. It is natural to look at history and experience through different lenses variously tilted. Which is not to say that the Holocaust could ever be viewed as just another historical episode. We circle it carefully. In *Reading the Holocaust*, Inga Clendinnen writes:

My own conviction is that our sense of Holocaust uniqueness (and we do have that sense) resides in the fact that these ferocious, largely secret killings were perpetrated within 'twentieth-century Western society', and that both our sense of portent, and of the peculiar intransigence of these actions before puny human interpretation, finds its ground in the knowledge that they were conceived, executed and endured by people very like ourselves.

It bothered me that people in the cinema laughed at spots I thought impossible and left immediately the credits started rolling, chatting happily. Others' reactions, particularly only perceived reactions, are not an argument against any work of art; but it is worrying to think that, at only 50 years on, the 'Final Solution' may be fading from memory enough for them to have viewed *Life is Beautiful* as simple humour that could just as easily have been set elsewhere. But that is all the more reason to keep telling the story. When I left the film, the Holocaust was heavy on me; the humour had evaporated, like the alcohol in a tincture, leaving only the active ingredient behind.

—Kate Manton

## Danny boys

**I**N THE END Daniel O'Connell (d. 1847) has come off better, even if his statue has been banished to the north yard of St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne. There was once talk that the Great Liberator would be removed not just from the western cortile, where he had stood since 1891, but to other precincts, to make way for Archbishop Daniel Mannix (d. 1963). It was rumoured that this would be in the nature of a political statement: a reaction against the liberalisations of Vatican Council II and an icon for the National Civic Council.

The statue (and statement) were unveiled on the Sunday before St Patrick's Day.

However, perhaps it was understood that Mannix (b. 1864), may well have been proud, even as Daniel the Less, to share the forecourt with the man after whom he was probably named. He had himself fostered lay initiatives during his long regime. So

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Fogolar Furlan Club,  
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Proceeds of the evening go to the  
Aboriginal Catholic Ministry.

O'Connell was moved. An earthy non-celibate—in the posture of a ruggedly clad Apollo Belvedere—he now strides away from the city he once confronted as he did the Protestant establishment in Great Britain. There is esteem in the gilded cursive identification, 'O'Connell', on his pedestal and pathos in the plaque, 'Presented in trust for the citizens of Melbourne by a group of Irishmen'. Foolish fellows, they could not have envisaged that O'Connell's position would one day be usurped, especially by a bishop who, for all his virtues, did more to provoke continued discrimination against Catholics than any of his peers.

There was, after all, space for both.

The Cathedral took pains to devise a fitting tribute to Mannix, although how prescriptive it was about iconography is unknown. It consulted the forthright art critic of *The Australian*, Giles Auty, an Englishman, whose 'leadership and advice ... was crucial in our choice of sculptor', said Archbishop George Pell. 'We looked at photos of the works of many sculptors and eventually chose Mr Nigel Boonham from England, among whose commissions was one of Diana, Princess of Wales.' He charged \$100,000.

Boonham came to Melbourne and consulted a number of persons—one hesitates to say 'authorities'—not excluding, at the tolerant suggestion of the Cathedral, the author of the entry on Mannix in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 10, which Archbishop Pell had described (in *Quadrant*, 1991) as 'snide' and 'unworthy'. It was said to have made B.A. Santamaria apoplectic.

Boonham's 'English background', acknowledged the Archbishop, 'was something of a disadvantage ... but we wanted the best available'.

Whether Boonham has 'succeeded brilliantly' as claimed will be disputed. My enduring image of Mannix to whom, like many ageing Melburnians, I had once

confessed, by whom I was confirmed, and in whom my mentors (mostly) had inviolate trust, derives from witnessing, often enough, his entry to Sunday High Mass at St Patrick's, preceded by his full-throated juvenile choristers marshalled and (as occasion demanded) cuffed into line by the ebullient Dr Percy Jones who shunned the edifying hoot in the voice production of their English counterparts.

Near 90 but steady, not shuffling (under spires with which in 1939 he had capped his cathedral), eyes hooded, hands steepled, ascetic but not cadaverous, instinctively dutiful though no pedant in rubrics, Mannix emblemised the gothic traditions of the Universal Church.

The portals rang with the éclat of Palestrina's motet, *Tu Es Petrus*. More so that morning in 1951 when his guest, the Scottish tenor, Father Sydney McEwen, celebrated a dulcet High Mass. Believe me, I heard nothing so elevating in the year I spent in Rome under Pius XII. But in St Patrick's week 1999 the choir numbed the nave with 'Faith of Our Fathers'—which has its place, but surely not there or then.

Somehow the anthem fitted the Boonham statue. One hardly expected the spirituality of late Michelangelo (*nel modo bozzato*) or the spectral egoism of Rodin's *Balzac*. Yet hardly this representation of a chaplain-general addressing the national constabulary either. Boonham's prelate is didactic, with puckered commanding brow under an authoritatively set biretta, complacent smile, left hand clasped over the right



Two studies in capes.  
Above: Archbishop Daniel Mannix, as interpreted by Nigel Boonham. Right: Thomas Brock's Daniel O'Connell, with his face towards Fitzroy.



wrist at navel height suggesting a satisfying communion breakfast, and gathered, massive wintery (in fact, hyperborean) garments swirled by a following breeze. Only the rough foliaged Maynooth cloak with its slightly theatrical chain delivers the whole from banality. (What ambience, which hemisphere is Mannix in?)

Thomas Brock's neo-classical O'Connell, buffeted by the wind, was more expressive and—incorrect though it may be to say it—probably the more recognisable. And although the Cathedral did not promise the Great Liberator a rose garden, he nevertheless now stands in a decorative one—with a neat herbaceous border, albeit in a declivity looking towards yuppy Fitzroy. The Great Perturbator, on the other hand, is on bare tarmac and dull, mundane.

But who are we to complain when Giles Auty, a resident of Australia these last four years, can suggest that Boonham has captured Mannix's 'psychological essence', and can enjoin his readers: 'Go see the bronze when you are next in that area of Melbourne. (*The Weekend Australian*, 27–28 March 1999).

Thirty years ago, St Patrick's College, with its bluestone tradition, was demolished in defiance of the National Trust, to make way for underground diocesan bureaux in the Cathedral grounds. Today we have a comparable diminishment. There were inspiring aspects of Daniel Mannix which transcended politics. It is unfortunate that an image has not been created that will speak to future generations, appositely and aesthetically, as Brock's O'Connell will continue to do, though facing in an inappropriate direction.

—James Griffin

*Afterword:* Since the statue was erected there has been news (Melbourne *Herald Sun*, 4 April 1999) that an Archbishop Mannix Foundation has been set up, with the approval of Archbishop Pell, to advance the cause of Mannix's canonisation.

*This month's contributors:* **Becci Fleischer** is the program co-ordinator for Community Aid Abroad's Pacific Program. CAA is currently helping communities set up water and sanitation systems in the Aitape district, and welcomes donations; **Jim Davidson** is currently spending 12 months in South Africa; **Lee Cataldi** is an Asialink Literature Resident in New Delhi, India; **Kate Manton** is *Eureka Street's* assistant editor; **James Griffin** is an historian and author of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on Daniel Mannix.

## Green makes greenbacks

**T**HE STANDARD GREENIE VERSUS INDUSTRY slanging match never ceases to irritate me. On the one hand, corporate executives typically fail to understand that making a product environmentally friendly is almost bound to make it more efficient and profitable. And on the other hand, the average environmentalist seems incapable of understanding and coping with industry on its own pragmatic terms.

There is no reason why being green should necessarily hurt company profits. 'That's old-fashioned thinking,' says John Gertsakis, acting director of the National Centre for Design at RMIT University. He should know. For the past nine years, the Centre has been demonstrating how little substance there is to many of the debates between environment and industry. The Centre has been collaborating with innovative companies on clever redesigns of consumer products for better environmental performance—using lighter, more appropriate materials, microprocessors which demand less energy, and simpler layouts which can be easily disassembled for maintenance or recycling.

The approach has met with great success, as the Centre's director, Professor Chris Ryan, told an OECD workshop on Eco-Efficiency in Sydney recently. For instance, one of the Centre's products, developed with Zoom Systems and known as Swap Shop, is now being manufactured in the US. 'It's a hi-tech Coke machine,' says Gertsakis, 'which vends office supplies—paper, toner, ink-jet cartridges.' Computer giant Hewlett-Packard has just bought 200 and is busy installing them in American businesses, supermarkets, office blocks and universities. Not only is the machine energy efficient, it also comes equipped with a return slot to allow used cartridges to be collected for recycling. And the computer system used to manage the machine also collects marketing information on who is buying what. But perhaps the most important innovation, says Gertsakis, is its convenience. It saves energy by stopping people from constantly having to drive to a retail outlet to buy supplies.

Another product, the Global Dishlex Dishwasher, is the first Australian appliance to be awarded a full 6-star rating for energy efficiency together with a AAA rating for water conservation. And Schiavello Commercial Interiors now manufactures better-performing office furnishings, workstations and partitions out of recyclable materials. The new products, designed with help from the Centre, use less hazardous material, less material in total, and have won the company international accreditation for environmental management. This has allowed it to sell into new markets.

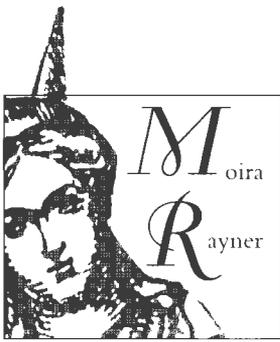
Good design is a matter of creative thought and an awareness of materials. The staff at the Centre have clearly learned a great deal about both over the past nine years. To increase corporate awareness of design, the Centre has developed the *Eco-redesign Manual*. It is a step-by-step guide of about 100 pages with accompanying video. The Centre is also working on the *Eco-specifier*, which will be a searchable database of commercially available, environmentally sensitive materials for builders, designers, architects and engineers.

Overseas, where environmental efficiency has become corporate policy at enterprises such as Bosch, Philips and Miele, the latest trend is towards taking responsibility for products over their entire life cycle. So, products are being designed to be disassembled and recycled when they have outlived their usefulness. In line with this, the Centre recently published *Return to Sender*, a booklet detailing 10 case studies of how extended product responsibility works.

The National Centre for Design was originally established using federal government funding as a kind of industry assistance package. It advertises nationally, inviting expressions of interest from companies who wish to avail themselves of its services. Nowadays, says Gertsakis, most of the money comes from progressive state government agencies such as the NSW Environment Protection Authority and Eco-Recycle Victoria.

But although public money is often used to kick-start the design process, it is the companies themselves who pick up the sizeable tab to develop the products that emerge. As Gertsakis says, 'Companies, big companies, are becoming aware that environmentally efficient design is not just about being green and doing the right thing, it is an important part of the serious pursuit of making money.' ■

**Tim Thwaites** is a freelance science writer. For further information, visit the website of the National Centre for Design at: <http://daedalus.edc.rmit.edu.au/>



# Running errands for the government

*'The aim of all government is the well-being of the society governed. In order to prevent anarchy, to enforce the laws, to protect the citizens, to support the weak against the ambitions of the strong, it was necessary that each society establish authorities with sufficient power to fulfil these aims.'* —Diderot

**W**E KNOW, from experience, that no human being with power can long resist the belief that the people's interests are identical with his. As Lord Acton famously observed, 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' It is a rare person who, having gained power, willingly fetters it or gives it away. Thus our Westminster system, cautioned by history, divides political power three ways: among our lawmakers, administrators, and the judiciary.

Now that modern government has reinvented itself as a market for goods and services, re-badged its citizens as consumers, and blurred the divide between public and private business, those old 'authorities'—the three arms of government—have been largely overtaken. Prime ministers and premiers have the greatest concentration of power.

The second part of Lord Acton's observation is not quoted as often as it should be: 'Great men are almost always bad men ... There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.' Prime ministers, premiers and their ministers, claim the legitimacy of the will of the people and, as High Court Chief Justice Gleeson recently remarked, they do not like being 'checked and balanced'.

The institutional checks and balances on executive power have increasingly been rendered ineffective. We have created instead a new, statute-based, administrative law regime which recognises or limits particular interest claims, and commissions statutory officers, ombudsmen and commissioners to 'watchdog' the public interest. Those who accept such government commissions have a high and lonely destiny, and a risky one.

The new administrative law regime has not worked. Worse, it may have weakened the rule of law. I say this with some regret, having been an early enthusiast for the new regime.

We started with good intentions. Our odd, three-personed government had worked over the centuries to control government hubris—rather better than one might have expected. It works less well in the new environment.

Parliaments had checked, and finally destroyed, in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the absolute, discretionary authority of the sovereign, subjecting even the King to the rule of his own law. Executive authority fell into the hands of his 'servants'—bureaucrats and officeholders, who accounted to parliament. The courts helped to contain their 18th-century excesses when parliaments sought to silence critics as criminals uttering 'seditious libel'. Courts went on to protect and preserve citizens' rights by developing the 'Common Law' and, by the late 19th century, the fundamental principles of good, executive decision-making—good faith, proper intentions, compliance with legal limitations, natural justice—by developing ancient prerogative writs. In this century Australian courts have developed constraints on executive power by interpreting laws in context, particularly our international political obligations, and through the natural justice requirements arising from the 'legitimate expectation' that the government meant to put them into practice.

Then we began to abandon the courts, starting more than 30 years ago. The law's development was too slow, haphazard, and expensive, we said. Our new administrative law was to be premised on the democratic virtue, and necessity, of openness, participation, and accountability in government.

We paid a price.

Part of that price has been the lessening of the status of our judges. Yes, the courts were a clumsy tool for protecting citizen and consumer rights, but this could have been remedied by better access to legal representation, more and better judges,

research and resources to help them adapt.

Of course, when courts do act to protect citizens against government authority, governments react. One way they do this is by closing up 'loopholes' or passing new laws. One example was the Native Title Act, in response to the *Mabo* decision.

A second form of response is to exclude the courts entirely. All governments routinely restrict access to the courts, in favour of 'informal' or administrative remedies, or unreviewable ministerial determinations that override the remedies. A more subtle exclusion is—where possible—to remove the 'government' flavour from its public business, by turning it over to private enterprise, or corporatised entities, whose commercial activities are not subject to administrative review at all.

The third response is to create alternative 'accountability' mechanisms. These include statutory regimes, such as Freedom of Information, guardianship, protection against discrimination and unfair treatment at work, and requirements that bureaucrats give written reasons for their administrative decisions. Some of these regimes have tribunals that look and behave very like courts, and most are headed (at least initially) by lawyers who behave like judges.

When I did a quick review for this piece I found scores of these tribunals: the Commonwealth's Administrative Appeals Tribunal, Industrial Relations Commission and tribunals dealing with Competition, Copyright, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity, Immigration Review, National Native Title, Social Security Appeals and Refugee Review. The states have their own—NSW's AAT, Community Services Appeals Tribunal, Compensation Court, Dust Diseases Tribunal, Land and Environment Court, Residential Tenancies Tribunal and Strata Schemes Board—to name but a few. Victoria has rationalised most of its tribunals under the umbrella of a Victorian Civil and Administrative Appeals Tribunal, with specialist 'divisions'.

Governments have set up a plethora of other, statutory bodies to 'keep them honest'—Auditors-General, Ombudsmen, bodies such as NSW's Independent Commission Against Corruption and Queensland's Criminal Justice Commission. And then there are commissioners of every hue: privacy, human rights, industrial relations, even healthy rivers. These office-holders usually have a wide range of responsibilities, including educating the public; receiving, investigating and publicly reporting on complaints and government

failings. They are not supposed to be 'public servants', but *are* supposed to be independent of government.

Recently, governments have begun to delegate watchdog roles to non-government bodies, sometimes set up and funded by industry (the Electricity Ombudsman in Victoria is one example).

So the patterns are clear enough: packs of watchdogs to protect the public interest. The intentions are laudable. But just see what has happened to them.

Statutory tribunals may be restructured easily, and their members may be contractually obliged and accountable to the very government from whose acts a citizen seeks relief. If they have been difficult, 'judges' of statutory tribunals have simply lost their jobs, without redress, once the government has decided to abolish the bodies. Take the examples of Commonwealth industrial relations commissioner Jim Staples, or of the 11 judges of Victoria's Accident Compensation Court and, later, all members of its Employee Relations Commission. Their removal fundamentally undermined the convention that judges who may be called on to review government decisions, must be free from the threat of retribution. Protests were unavailing: they were 'not real judges'. But who is?

The ease with which politicians may appoint and remove tribunal members, dislodging inconvenient obstructions to the achievement of their will, has led to the perception that 'real' judges can be criticised and dismissed too. In an editorial on 5 April this year the *Sydney Morning Herald* remarked that judges will evoke displeasure when they insist that forms of the law, such as those protecting human rights, are recognised, '*because it is their job to administer justice according to law, rather than submitting it to government policy as public servants would*'.

This is the heart of the matter. The new 'checks and balances' on the executive are servants to its will in ways that judges and the Common Law have not been for centuries.

What happens to other statutory office-holders when they act 'independently' and irritate their masters? They quickly come under attack.

In 1993 my own office of Equal Opportunity Commissioner, in Victoria, was statutorily abolished after a series of tribunal decisions concerning citizens' challenges to the discriminatory effects of new government policies against school-children, women prisoners, and Aborigines.

After the Victorian Auditor-General, Ches Baragwanath, released a damning report on the child protection system, the Kennett Government brought forward, by two years, a planned review of his office. At the review's end, and despite its widespread condemnation, Baragwanath was stripped of many of his responsibilities, most of his staff, and his ability to perform, rather than oversee, government audits—disingenuously justified in the name of 'national competition policy'.

The head of Western Australia's 'independent' Legal Aid Commission resigned after the Attorney-General, Peter Foss, told her Board he wanted her out, immediately, in the middle of her term. Foss recently stated that he would not approve of any appointment by the Commission's Board with which he was personally unhappy.



Roger West, NSW's Community Services Commissioner, could not obtain adequate resources for his work: in his brilliant five-year term he investigated and critically reported upon the quality and delivery of services to our most vulnerable citizens—children, old people and people with disabilities. His appointment was simply not renewed.

The lessons are clear enough. Statutory watchdogs, commissions and tribunals are ephemeral, their essential democratic function neither constitutionally recognised nor politically respected. Without structural protection they become vulnerable on a number of fronts.

Government thinks it owns them. In my own case, ministers and senior public servants were genuinely astonished that I continued to exercise my statutory duty to receive and try to resolve complaints, even against the discriminatory effects of government policy. They really believed that a Commissioner for Equal Opportunity should subject her statutory responsibilities to the policy direction of the government of the day, whatever the Equal Opportunity Act, and instrument of my appointment, said to the contrary.

The distinction between courts, and tribunals, has been blurred, to the gross

disadvantage of the former. Politicians have come to believe that, since they can freely create tribunals and appoint their members, who seem like 'judges', and equally freely dismiss or abolish them, then perhaps 'real' judges should be equally subservient to the 'will of the people', rather than the rule of law. The argument that the dismissed tribunal members were 'not real judges' is applicable to all Australian courts: they are all legislatively based, even the High Court (its judges are, fortunately, protected by the Constitution, which can't be conveniently changed by a simple majority vote of both houses of parliament, as in Victoria).

'Independence' becomes stripped of meaning. To review government decisions requires freedom from threats or inducements. A commissioner, these days, may be appointed by the Queen's representative in council, but she must also contract and co-operate with Her public servants for services, remuneration, superannuation and resources (withholding them is a classic way of taming the beast). Governments control the legislature, by and large. Most 'commissioners' *are de facto* public servants. They know that they are accountable. They have heard the screams of their predecessors.

The power of the executive grows daily. Creatures of statute can be as easily unmade, however great the outcry. Restructures are always plausible, and need not accommodate the contracts of the incumbents—the Commonwealth will clearly not, for instance, preserve Chris Sidoti, a critic of its immigration policies, as Human Rights Commissioner, when that Commission's 'restructure' is complete. Its Administrative Appeals Tribunal is to become a body headed by a non-judge, its presidential members gone, and its new members on short-term, performance-based contracts. The Prime Minister personally vetoes appointments to the bench, boards and honours lists.

How much do we value our watchdogs on government? Max Moore-Wilton, our most senior Commonwealth public servant, is paid three times more than the High Court's Chief Justice. Whose authority does this government respect the more?

Which leaves the last word to Chuang-Tzu, 369–286 BCE: 'People who make themselves useful for government service risk the dangers of intrigue and unjust punishment: better to be useless to others, useful to oneself, and thus to survive.' ■

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# Integrity: the long walk

*Antony Campbell continues his series on  
an unconditionally loving God.  
This month: unconditional love—the challenge.*

V

*Because you are precious in my sight,  
and honoured, and I love you.  
(Isaiah 43:4)*

*An unease has prevailed in faith's attitude to human life, imaged as 'mourning and weeping in this valley of tears'. This unease can be honest witness to the intolerable aspects of injustice and oppression, ranging from the domestic tyrant's raised eyebrow or raised fist to the secret police, torturers, and armed forces of global dictators. Something is right in faith's conviction that the sinful mess we are in is not the place where we ought to be. It does not mean that we are unloved; but it can inhibit our acceptance of a God who loves deeply and unconditionally.*

I BEGAN THIS SERIES WITH AN ADMISSION: 'I am not sure people are taking on board the full reality of the loving God they're talking about.' As I see it, there are some major aspects of the standard presentation of Christian faith that get in the way of the idea of a loving God. I believe Christian faith can be presented in ways that encourage acceptance of a loving God. Often, however, a standard presentation of faith can inhibit acceptance of a God who loves deeply and unconditionally. Re-visioning is a challenge.

♦

## *Our sinful world*

Our human world can be wonderful. Our world can also be miserable, wretched, and thoroughly sinful. But even at its worst, it may not be unlovable. This insight demands a place in Christian faith. Some residual aspects of doctrine work against it.

Open conviction of the innate goodness of human beings is a relative latecomer to the Christian scene. An unease has prevailed in faith's attitude to human life, imaged as 'mourning and weeping in this valley of tears'. This unease can be honest witness to the intolerable aspects of injustice and oppression, ranging from the domestic tyrant's raised eyebrow or raised fist to the secret police, torturers, and armed forces of global dictators. Something is right in faith's conviction that the sinful mess we are in is not the place where we ought to be. It does not mean that we are unloved; but it can inhibit our acceptance of a God who loves deeply and unconditionally.

Theology's attention whether to the origins of life or to its end entails a risk. Both the image of a beginning where humankind *was* radically better than it is now and the image of an end where humankind *will be* radically better and enjoy perfect peace and justice—'the wolf shall live with the lamb' (Isaiah 11:6)—are images that risk cheapening our view of the present time and devaluing us who live in it. Behind these traditional positions seems to lie the belief that God could not possibly have wanted and created a world like ours. In our world, there is too much sin and suffering. God could not possibly want it or find anything lovable in it. It has to be the result of original sin; it will become lovable in the kingdom. So the theology of a loving God goes out the window. We're second-best.

We can never settle for a compromise with injustice and oppression. God's passionate love for the poor and the oppressed has to energise our struggle against the structures of poverty and oppression. Precisely in the quest for faith and in the fight against injustice we can be deeply and passionately loved by God. God's love for us need not wait until our world is just. Unutterable human anguish may want the pain of separation from God for its oppressors—but what we might want we may not get. Justice may be satisfied by the awareness revealed to oppressors of God's love for the oppressed and God's anger at the oppression as well as by their eternal sharing in God's regret and grief. Sin in our world is obvious; beyond God's anger and grief, it can be met by God's forgiveness and God's love. A vision of faith is possible in which God loves us and sees into us deeply enough to perceive the lovable in us even in our worst sin or our worst suffering.

Any hint that humankind might have been intended to be radically better than it is or will end up in a future situation that will be radically better is open to the suggestion that we now are second-best and that God could not have wanted this world. We are cast in the role of playing Leah to Jacob's Rachel. Says Jacob: I didn't want this one; I wanted her sister (cf. Genesis 29:25). Love relates to us as we are, not as we were or as we might become.

### *Our salvation*

Redemption language has a lot loaded against it. Salvation—if we free it from the ‘Jesus saves’ glibness—has richer associations by far. Radically, salvation for us is our being loved by God. We need it. We’ve got it. It is about putting a troubled situation right. It is about being in a right relationship with God. The idea of redemption is burdened with the overtones of buying back and repayment. Love does not demand redemption; love forgives. A loving God does not need to redeem us; a loving God forgives us. A couple of biblical passages keep coming back to me. Job to God: ‘If I sin, ... why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?’ (7:20–21). Isaiah quoting God: ‘I, I am the One who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins’ (43:25).

Only justice insists on redemption, on repaying what is owed, paying for the fault. Love, like the father of the prodigal, moves to forgiveness.

A vision claiming that God loves us, that God’s compassion is deep enough to perceive the lovable in us even in the most sordid of our suffering, and that God forgives us our transgressions is a vision that calls for a theology of salvation rather than redemption. It dawns on us, whether slowly or in a flash, that we are loved by God, that in our mess God forgives us, that despite our fragility our relationship with God is right—from God’s side always, even if from our side sometimes only maybe. That is salvation—and it is gift, God’s gift to us.

Such a vision needs the incarnation and needs it badly. In such a vision the incarnation is not a means of divine redemption but an expression of divine love. God so loved the world that God entered the world and took human flesh, becoming one of us. The incarnation is, in this vision, an act of unitive love, of unitive passion. Those who love want union with those they love. God wants union with us. God became one of us. The incarnation is the unique and unsurpassable expression of God’s love for us.

A belief in God’s utter love is wonderfully expressed in the apocryphal Jewish book of 2 Esdras, a writing roughly contemporary with the gospel of Matthew—available in the deuterocanonical section of the NRSV. The book’s thinker, a prophet Ezra, is arguing with God about human destiny: ‘Spare your people and have mercy on your inheritance’ (8:45). God replies: ‘You come far short of being able to love my creation more than I love it’ (8:47). We need to take this on board. Our thinking and our theology and our language must make room for such love. Even if we draw a different conclusion from it.

The God of 2 Esdras shares Jesus’ view in Matthew that ‘the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it’ (Matt 7:14). Ezra is told that ‘the Most High made this world for the sake of many, but the world to come for the sake of only a few ... Many have been created, but only a few shall be saved’ (8:1, 3). Ezra resists various appeals to mystery and, echoing Job, protests: ‘But what are mortals, that you are angry with them; or what is a corruptible race, that you are so bitter against it? For in truth there is no one among those who have been born who has not acted wickedly; among those who have existed there is no one who has not done wrong. For in this, O Lord, your righteousness and goodness will be declared, when you are merciful to those who have no store of good works’ (8:34–36).

At the beginning of the Bible, Ezra’s hope is anticipated by the God who brought on the flood because of human wickedness (Genesis 6:5) and who declares at the end of the flood, accepting the inevitability of human wickedness: ‘nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done’ (Genesis 8:21). Love is shown to those who have no store of good works. That such texts exist invites us to choose between such images of God—the God of the narrow gate or the God who will never again destroy.



### *Seriousness of our life*

God, in dialogue with Ezra: ‘You come far short of being able to love my creation more than I love it.’ In 2 Esdras, such love did not mean the salvation of all; for us though, it may. Then the question might surface whether, if all are to be saved, we are wasting our time being good. Selective salvation offers a guarantee for the seriousness of life. Paul writes that ‘the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us’ (Romans 8:18). For many, this life is too serious and its sufferings and miseries too appalling for eternal salvation not to be somehow at stake.

For many, too, fear of the apparently easy is a powerful argument against belief in a loving God, a God whose love affair with humankind will not allow for loss.<sup>1</sup> Deeply rooted, it is one of those things that make me say: ‘I am not sure people are taking on board the full reality of the loving God they’re talking about.’ At least one reflection, too often neglected, safeguards for me the seriousness of life and the vision of a loving God.

Memory is essential to our human sense of identity. When we lose our memory, we lose our sense of who we are. I do not see how memory can be overlooked in our life with God. The comforting Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory has overtones for me of a car wash or a finishing school. The car goes in dirty and comes out clean. The person goes in a rough diamond and comes out a polished gem. But what about memory? Is it likely that with death our memories would be erased and our identities retained?

Certainly, it is Christian belief that those with God will be beatifically fulfilled. Is there any

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incompatibility with the retaining of memory? We would know ourselves to be deeply and unconditionally loved by God and we would be aware of all that we have been—including every moment of meanness and jealousy and evil. We would remember every significant moment of our lives, for better and for worse, and at the same time we would know ourselves to be beloved of God, deeply and unconditionally loved by God. There are human analogies enough to suggest that this is possible—and possibly true.

If so, this life is utterly serious. What I do now, I will remember for all eternity. I will know myself to be loved by God and I will remember every moment of my life—what I have been and what I have done, the rough and the smooth, the good and the bad. It is a vision that includes both a loving God and a view of human life that could not be more serious.



*Our prayer*

Intercessory prayer, what's been called 'selfish prayer', troubles me as an obstacle to faith in a loving God. Prayer for help is natural and spontaneous. People pray to God for help for themselves or others. They pray to God for the church and the world. But I don't hear a strong sense in this prayer that God loves them—or the others, or the church and the world—more than they themselves do. The tone of such prayer can often work against belief in a God who loves us passionately and unconditionally.

In my vision of a loving God, prayer is primarily relational. It functions in much the same way that communication does in my human relationships. To be fully myself in relationship, I need to be still enough at times to know myself. So too with God. At times in a deeply loving relationship I need to say what I know or what I feel, so that I hear myself say it. So too with God. At times in such a relationship I find myself silent in the other's presence. So too with God; I call it contemplation. At times in a deeply loving relationship, I need to share what is going on for me. So too with God. At times I may need to ask the other to share with me. So too with God—but trickier. Above all, those who love me support me, encourage me, challenge me, hang in with me, and are present to me in so many ways. So too with God. As a rule, I don't ask God to do anything that I would not ask of a good friend.

The demands of faith do not stand in the way of belief in a loving God. What belief in an unconditionally loving God may demand of us is a vision of Christian faith where the reality of sin does not exclude being loved, where God's forgiveness replaces redemption, where the reality of memory gives seriousness to every moment of human life, and where our prayer is primarily relational, trusting in a God who loves.

Faith in a loving God may not be easy but it may be unbelievably rich. ■

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1. Theoretically at least it is possible that God's gamble could sometimes be lost and a human being emerge who becomes wholly unlovable. Judging, we might assassinate the living, loving, God might annihilate the dead.

IN MEMORIAM

MICHAEL MCGIRR

## The shadow puppeteer

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE to think of an individual who has filled the role in Australian society that Y.B. Mangunwijaya played in Suharto's Indonesia. Mangunwijaya was affectionately known throughout the country by the Javanese title, Romo Mangun. It's a sad irony that Romo Mangun survived by less than 12 months the regime he did much to subtly discredit.



Y.B. Mangunwijaya  
1929–1999

Romo Mangun was an enigmatic figure. He was a prolific novelist in a language with a limited market for literary fiction. He lived with squatters whose poverty and illiteracy precluded them from reading the endless stream of lectures and columns which came from his pen. He was a Javanese cultural insider without being a

cultural imperialist. He was a Catholic priest in a predominately Islamic country, an architect in a country with basic housing problems.

Mangunwijaya's life was one of deft adaptation. At one stage, he was close to a group of urban squatters in Yogyakarta who had constantly to contend with being moved on by the authorities and having their shanties demolished. Romo

Mangun noticed that the squatters buried anything they had which was of value so that, after their places had been razed and they had been locked up for a time, they could return and recover watches, wedding rings, photos and the like. When the time came to design a church for the community, Romo Mangun simply marked off a

vacant area with wire fencing. In the middle of the area, he buried the blessed sacrament. The gesture indicated something precious.

Romo Mangun cast himself as both a marginal and a central character in Indonesian society. He compared his role to that of the *panakawan* or comedians in Wayang shadow puppetry. These figures appear during breaks in the action to offer a commentary on what's been going on. The commentary, known as *goro-goro*, is witty, entertaining and often improvised. But it tends to reveal deep undercurrents in the drama as well its relevance to a contemporary situation. The *panakawan* are clowns, but more than clowns. They are permitted to disregard etiquette and breach accepted norms of behaviour without actually threatening the existence of those customs—subversive without being destructive.

**R**OMO MANGUN HAD A KNACK of being able to side with *personæ non gratæ* while himself remaining in favour. During the 1970s, for example, he spent time as a chaplain on the infamous Buru Island on which dissidents and intellectuals, including writers such as Paramoedya Ananta Toer, had been imprisoned. He sided with those writers deprived of their liberty. But he was still the only person on Buru who chose to be there. Others did not have the luxury of choice.

Mangunwijaya used his position with skill. After the Dili massacre in 1991, he became vocal in support of a changed disposition towards East Timor. He wrote simply that Javanese can tend to look at a situation exclusively from their side and that they needed to look at the situation in East Timor 'with human eyes'. He said that the East Timorese had their own history, their own aspirations and had to be accepted for who they were. For Australian readers, these points sound bland and obvious.

'I could have written more explicitly,' said Mangunwijaya in 1992, 'but if I did no newspaper or magazine could publish me. I had to be *very* moderate. But the government knew what I was saying.'

Sometimes, Mangunwijaya did transgress the boundaries established even for him. His best known novel is *Burung-Burung Manyar* (1979) which was published in English as *Weaverbirds*. As in much of his fiction, Mangunwijaya chose an historical context in which to deal with contemporary issues. *Burung-Burung Manyar* is set in the years after the revolution of 1949. It is told from the point of view of someone who fought on the side of the Dutch and who, in spite of this, is neither more nor less virtuous than his opponents. Once again, the point seems obvious. But it did not suit the requirements of Indonesia's governing ideology. When the book was nominated for a prestigious literary award, the Minister for Education stepped in to prohibit the nomination.

'I was actually glad. It showed that the officials understood the real meaning of my story.'

Mangunwijaya was later the first to propose a federal system of government for Indonesia, as opposed to a centralist system. Amien Rais has since adopted his model.

He was concerned by the erosion of traditional Javanese culture, but did not canonise that culture. He

was alert to the way blindness can become deeply ingrained. He was disturbed, for example, by the rigid division between good and evil in his culture and saw this as the foundation on which tyranny could be built.

'In traditional contexts, such as Wayang puppetry, good and evil always exist together. In other words, people think that evil is not something you have to fight and eliminate but that evil is simply part of life. It has an existential necessity. You don't dare resist it.'

Romo Mangun used traditional stories and forms. His novels were shaped like Wayang performances. But he was unafraid to mould those traditions. A celebrated example was his novel *Roro Mendut*, based on the exploits of a 17th-century Javanese warrior. In traditional versions, Roro Mendut commits suicide. In Mangunwijaya's novel, he is killed by someone else. When the book was turned into a film, the author was furious because the producers reverted to the traditional ending.

It's not easy to understand how a figure such as Mangunwijaya takes to himself the authority to alter traditional tales. You could not imagine Peter Garrett, whatever his moral authority, changing the ending of 'Waltzing Matilda' so the swagman does not take his own life. The mystique that surrounded Romo Mangun does not translate easily across cultures.

Mangunwijaya's explanation for his action was simply that Roro Mendut's suicide made sense within the Hindu framework which first generated the story. But within the contemporary Islamic framework, suicide is sinful. He had the choice of letting the story grow or allowing it to be preserved as a museum piece, no longer a vital part of a culture. Romo Mangun made an anti-fundamentalist gesture in support of Islam and in so doing weakened the arguments of Islamic fundamentalism.

He was passionate about education. He also believed that the future peace of Indonesia lay to some extent in the appreciation of a Javanese style of Islam, different from the hard-edged Islam encountered in Aceh or Minangkabau. He described Javanese Islam as more 'tolerant, human and eclectic'.

It was ironic, then, that when he died suddenly on 10 February, Mangunwijaya had just delivered a paper on science and technology in education. He had a heart attack and collapsed into the arms of an Islamic intellectual, Mohamad Sobary.

'You are my *kiyai*,' said Romo Mangun, using a term of Islamic respect. They were his last words. It was a scene that could have been scripted for a Wayang performance, and it showed the profound reverence of this profoundly irreverent man. ■

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Above: A squatter community where Romo Mangun lived, by the River Code in Yogyakarta.

# The Phosphor of a City

## Peter Porter's Imagination

**T**HE POEMS OF PETER PORTER never have cities out of mind for long. On the face of it, these may be various indeed, ranging all the way from a palpable London to a resplendent New Jerusalem or a ruinous Babel, with any number of European or Antipodean massifs thrown in. But because Porter's imagination is so given to intervention and transformation, his envisaged cities come to seem analogous one with another. This is not to say that they are cut, interchangeable, from whole cloth: but they do have something of the same hang. I want to reflect here upon some of their typical features.

It is convenient to begin with a poem in which Porter is out of his habitual city, London, but in which attention constellates in a way naturally thought of as urban. It is 'At Ramsholt'.

The harvest is in early. Across the paddock,  
where we raise the bull's head with mimic  
bellows, through the salt-dead trees and thatcher's  
rushes, yachts navigate on seeming land.

This is the Deben, not the Mekong, but a sail  
curves round a copse; masts for Woodbridge  
crowd three degrees of the horizon, edging  
a painterly Dutch sky. Clouds are curdling.

A golden rain of ladybirds falls in the lap  
of Suffolk. Drought has driven the wasps mad,  
they butt the kitchen glass. A cucumber,  
like Masolino's Satan, rears under grass.

To townsmen everything is like something  
from a book—most noticeably in this  
made landscape. The swan on the canal,  
with nine cygnets, is the Home Fleet, 1936.

Ezekiel in church: shall these bones live?  
The pheasants live another month and then  
go plumply down. A nightingale sings  
politely through the dangerous summer.

*(The Cost of Seriousness, Oxford: Oxford  
University Press, 1978)*



The Phosphor  
of a City

The Phosphor of a City: Peter Porter's Imagination



Thinking of parks and gardens as a kind of *rus in urbe*, and then taking a line through proper names in this poem, one can see that it is a kind of *urbs in rure*. Pastoral poetry is always that to some degree, of course, but not often to the terse, concentrated extent of 'At Ramsholt'. The name designates a locale as firmly of the country as, say, 'Oxford', and harvest, paddock, bull and rushes fortify that sense: but harvesting and the making of paddocks are examples of human designing, mimicry is a ubiquitously though not exclusively human affair, the rushes are for thatching, and yachts and their navigation print calculation on the scene.

And 'scene' it is, with the word's overtones of theatre and of the painter's art. One rarely goes far in Porter's poetry without at least one of those forms of conduct appearing, often (as at the end of this poem) in association with music. Mahl-stick, measuring-rod, conductor's baton—they flourish in his lines. Each of those emblematic instruments evokes change, an othering. The Mekong is evoked even while being

denied, a Mekong brought to Western attention entirely because of Western military involvement in the countries through which it flows: the painterly Dutch sky is dislodged from its natural milieu to do duty in an English shire: the mythical rain of gold falls upon a Suffolk made Danaëan.

All this is magical, and some such word has to be invoked whenever Porter's poetry is at its most characteristic. And if, nodding over the summery page, one were missing this, a single unmistakable touch would prompt attention—'A cucumber, /like Masolino's Satan, rears under grass.' The reference is to Masolino da Panicale's 'The Fall', a fresco in the Brancacci Chapel of Santa Maria del Carmine, in Florence. In it, the serpent twined about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil rears above Eve, the tempted and the temptress. The serpent's face is notably like Eve's own, and the roughened green body is indeed much like a cucumber.

What does one make of this cross-reference? Two things, I should say. The first is suggested by a remark

Left: *Resting Place*, Clarice Beckett c1927, oil on board, 22 x 30cm, collection: Paton Forster. Above: *Bay Road, Beaumaris*, Clarice Beckett c1927, oil on board, 34 x 44cm, private collection.

*We no longer  
engage in  
foundation-  
sacrifice when  
instituting new  
cities, but  
sacrifices aplenty  
there are in cities  
new and old  
alike. Porter's  
business is often,  
in his poetry, to  
smell the smoke  
from these.*

of Paul Joannides in his book on Masaccio and Masolino, who says of 'The Fall' that 'Masolino has attempted ... to combine the narrative and the iconic' (London: Phaidon Press, 1993). I think that this describes very well one of Porter's major imaginative attributes. He wants to name processes, sequences, the shape of stories—he is, deeply, a narrator—and he reaches constantly for the emblematic, for the figure-cutting entity. A citified imagination has to hand a reality which encompasses both of these, insofar as the outline of every city declares a set of agendas or records a set of events, while being a thing which is solidly there. It is like a book, occasioned by a tale but having its own being in the world. A poem of Porter's is likely to have many signs of dynamic run to it, and as many of pause and gaze—as in, for instance, 'Clouds are curdling', and in 'Ezekiel in church: shall these bones live?'

The second, connected point is that, just as civic reality has a variety of pitches or levels, Porter's imagining of experience is variously keyed. He has often written of Renaissance and Baroque churches and their paintings and statuary, and I would guess that, while disavowing the whole kit and caboodle of their theologies, he finds something highly congenial in their mingling of different ontologies, mythologies and psychologies. To swag together beings from Graeco-Roman myth, Jewish aetiology, Gospel narration, Medieval legend, Counter-Reformation celebration, and to do it with an ensemble of manners, and with a view to framing sacred theatre with or without music—this might well engross a hospitable if sceptical mind. In a similar fashion, Porter's books have a long tally of titles which point to specific ways of attending, to evoked tilts of the mind: 'Reading MND in Form 4B', 'Two Merits of Sunshine', 'Preaching to the Converted', 'On First Looking into Chapman's Hesiod', 'A Study of a Bird', 'Sonata Form: The Australian Magpie', 'Landscape with Orpheus', 'A Chagall Postcard', 'Night Watch', 'Sacred and Profane'—the list could be extended.

It does not need much stressing that this abundance of 'ways' is one of the main things found, variously, repellent or attractive about the city. To an appetite still fresh, such a menu or repertoire of experiences, processes and roles may be highly attractive: to a heart wearied or, in the title of Porter's early book, 'Once Bitten, Twice Bitten', it may have more the air of a labyrinthine nightmare. Porter, who is exceptionally fluent and copious for so intelligent a poet, has no constant gambit in the midst of the citified experience. As music itself may shift with astonishing rapidity, and authenticity, from one mood

or mode of the spirit, he can play supply and variously across a register of attendings.

The last two stanzas of 'At Ramsholt' are a case in point. 'To townsmen everything is like something/ from a book—most noticeably in this/made landscape.' That some are more bookish than others goes without saying, but the multi-leaved experience of town or city tends to fortify the ancient trope of world as a legendum, there for the scanning or the decoding: far from telling against the significance of countryside, it can enhance expectation, as is indeed the point of seeing land as landscape. It may, momentarily, be a merely startling thing that swan and cygnets should be seen as the Home Fleet of 1936, but the ethos of 'England, Home and Beauty' was not then a dead thing in the common consciousness, and the rural, the domestic and the patriotic could be apprehended coherently. Porter's binding glance here, as very often, spans time as well as space.

The poem's last stanza plays ominously against what has just preceded it. Ezekiel's name, splendid and funebrous, resonates with reminders of how thoroughly doom has been breathed into the 16 previous lines—in the salt-dead trees, the Mekong, the Dutch sky *d'antan*, the maddening drought, the death-bearing Satan, the obsolete fleet from the trembling Thirties. But Ezekiel is not plucked as from nowhere by a mordant imagination. Like several other of the 'major prophets', he writes of the siege and retrieval of a civilisation, its barrenness and fertility; and some of his complexity comes through in the famous passage to which the poem refers. In it, God tells the prophet that 'these bones are the whole House of Israel. They keep saying, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are as good as dead"', and retorts that he will in fact revitalise them.

There is no sign in the poem that so consoling a claim is to be vindicated; the later 'House' of Christians hearing it proclaimed has the prospect of itself being among the slayers, if only of pheasants. Ezekiel, in short, is ironised, in a fashion typical of Porter: and this skewing of the conventional is rounded off with the two unexpected adjectives 'politely' and 'dangerous'—we had not thought to find a nightingale invested with civic decorum, nor benign, harvest-bearing summer turn menacing.

**A**LL IN ALL, THEN, Porter's attention to what surrounds him registers spectacle but declines predictable interpretation. *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, a play which interests him, says at one point that 'This world's a city full of straying streets' (William Shakespeare and John Fletcher) and that state of affairs is one which Porter addresses with instinctively ramifying imagination. I have suggested elsewhere the importance of Browning as an early sponsoring presence in Peter Porter's work, the Browning of intricacies named with dramatic attentiveness; and although Porter's voice could rarely be mistaken for

# The sound and the silence

**T** Collected Poems 1961–1999 (2 Vols), Peter Porter, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1999. ISBN 0 19 288097 7/288098 5, RRP \$69.95

ELL ALL THE TRUTH, but tell it slant'. Emily Dickinson's injunction might have been made for Peter Porter, at least in his poetry. One of the most striking features of the almost 600 poems in these twin volumes is their blend of the emphatic and the oblique. This is a rarity at almost any time, and certainly at present, when the field seems often to be divided between descendants of Uriah Heep on the one hand and Ancient Pistol on the other. Porter's idiom—intellectual, emotional, and social—is all his own.

From the first, he has been one for remarkable dicta, which (as with Dickinson) seem to defy the misgiving they provoke. From 'The Conservation of Energy', 'Despair/ Is energy too. For fire you rub together two dead sticks'; from 'My Late T'ang Phase', 'Ambition fights talent more than sloth does'; from 'The Shining God and the God of Correction', 'I am haunted, how can I doubt it?/ My taxi driver had the face of Anubis'; from 'Three Poems for Music', 'Yet beauty who indulged the swan/ At death completes her with a song'; from 'Thomas Hardy at Westbourne Park Villas', '... each house knows/ As many stories as in the iron sublime we call/Victorian'; from 'The Delegate', 'The truth/ is a story forcing me to tell it. It is not/ my story or my truth.'

This taste for the vatic or the sapiential goes in Porter with two other enthusiasms: for the musical and for the dramatic. He has earned much of his livelihood by writing about music and drama; in his poetry both modalities make their claim in the shifts and sway of language. To read even very short poems by Porter is to feel that one has gone a considerable distance, partly because the pitch of imagination keeps changing and partly because the range of sound is visited in unpredictable ways. Schooled as he is by, among others, Shakespeare, Browning, Auden and Rochester, he knows that intense feeling and its lamented absence can both be succoured by the ingenious disposition of words. For him, 'phrase' is as much a musical condition as a linguistic one, and 'line' as much actorly instruction as part of a logic.

In 'Sonata Form: The Australian Magpie', Porter writes, 'You can upbraid the magpie,/ saying "What do you know of Kant?"/ It

might shift a claw an inch or two./ It can tell when an overlord is unhappy./ When one sweeps out in tears to clatter/ the petrol mower, magpie flies off./ But never flies far. Big feet/ are moving to their place in dreams— / a little delay in the sun won't count.' The narrative looks plain, but the overtones are complex. To 'upbraid' a magpie is both comic and faintly esoteric; to drop Kant into a milieu of petrol mowers widens the gap between them; to endow an overlord with unhappiness is to undo him even while it enrages him; to remodel the intransigent claws as feet in dreams is to recast the narrative after all. At the end of a poem by Porter the question is not only, 'where have you been?', but 'how have you been there?'

The preface to these *Collected Poems* tells us that they include 'the work of about forty years', a work which reflects the life-experience of a man between about 30 and 70. Porter changes all he touches, whether it be what he calls 'music's huge light irresponsibility' or the death of a wife. But to 'tell it slant' is not to falsify—after all, to get things in on the slant may be, as with a needle, to get them in most decisively. So, for instance, when he writes 'An Exequy', this is modelled after a celebrated poem of the 17th century, also about a wife who died too young, and the ceremony of emulation helps to keep grief tolerable: but Porter's own urgently disbelieving spirit demands expression even while he invokes the presence of the one who is lost, and the last thing his poem looks like is the replication of an earlier accomplishment.

**H**OPKINS SAID THAT, faced with fine accomplishment, he was prompted to admire and do otherwise. Such a disposition has often been understood as a fear of engulfment by one's betters, but it can in fact be a resoluteness in keeping faith with that wish for originality which brought the mentoring poem into being. Porter's work seems to me to flow from the second hope. Of course, we get our schooling wherever we can find it, and in poetry as in every other area of life to play the sedulous ape is the inevitable prerequisite to finding our own way. Among the poems in this *Collected* are those *After Martial*, where

that tartly fluent poet offers his benediction to an Australian in London acutely conscious of life's many incivilities; and there is not, I think, a single page in the two volumes which does not in one way or another allude to a procedure from which Porter is deviating.

Sometimes this is astringent, as when he writes, 'My friends find new forms which make kites/ Of confessions', or, in a vein which has had its own temptations for him, '... you know the kind of thing/ *The water I boiled the lobster in/ is cool enough to top/up the chrysanthemums*'. Often, as the titles suggest, an existing work or habit of mind prompts dialogue or dialectic. 'Doll's House' has an intricate modulation of grief beyond Ibsen's framing: 'Talking to the Lizards' offers that maestro of unease, Cicero, become for a while its victim: 'Listening to Shakespeare' matches the garrulity of one of the playwright's contemporaries with Shakespeare's foreshadowed silence.

As well it might, since one of the things most constantly dramatised in Porter's poetry is the challenging, and sometimes maddening, relationship between language in its vaunting and the silence from which it emerges and to which it returns. Hundreds of times, he has designated or implied the frail durability of music, of painting, of architecture, of the scenic itself; in poems early and late, he lights the riot of degradations to which our species is prone. His real point of central command, though, is in enacting the precarious, festal nature of the only intellectual thing we all have in common, namely language.

Here, too, the effect can be illustrated to a degree with succinct quotation, but at its most striking it depends upon modulation and cassation within poems, and sometimes from one poem to another: I would commend, as cases in point, 'Clutching at Culture', 'And No Help Came', 'Pigeons, Gulls and Starlings', 'A Honeymoon in 1922'. Reading these, I am reminded of two reflections of Elias Canetti's, which might seem to be at odds but which complement each other: 'He will never be a thinker: he doesn't repeat himself enough', and 'Whoever wishes to think has to give up promoting his own thoughts.' With extraordinary tenacity, Porter has been re-addressing an agenda put to him by life itself—has been a poet because he could not help it—but has been, in the process, the least proprietorial of poets. I hope that he and Emily Dickinson will have further dealings. ■

—Peter Steele



Browning's, they are alike in a Thesean confidence in the world's labyrinth.

Browning too is a great donor, celebrator and scrutiniser of cities, particularly as named in colloquy or soliloquy. Porter knows that way, as can be seen in, for example, *Soliloquy at Potsdam*:

There are always the poor—  
 Getting themselves born in crowded houses,  
 Feeding on the parish, losing their teeth early  
 And learning to dodge blows, getting  
 Strong bodies—cases for the warped nut of the mind.  
 The masterful cat-o'-nine-tails, the merciful  
 Discipline of the hours of drill—better  
 Than being poor in crowded Europe, the swan-swept  
 Waters where the faces dredge for bread  
 And the soggy dead are robbed on their way to the grave.  
 I can hear it from this window, the musket-drill  
 On the barrack square. Later today I'll visit  
 The punishment block. Who else in Europe  
 Could take these verminous, clutching creatures  
 And break them into men? What of the shredded back  
 And the broken pelvis, when the side-drum sounds,  
 When the uniformed wave tilts and overwhelms  
 The cheese-trading burghers' world, the aldermanic  
 Principalities. The reformers sit at my table,  
 They talk well but they've never seen a battle  
 Or watched the formed brain in the flogged body  
 Marching to death on a bellyful of soup and orders.  
 There has to be misery so there can be discipline.  
 People will have to die because I cannot bear  
 Their clinging to life. Why are the best trumpeters  
 Always French? Watch the west, the watershed  
 Of revolution. Now back to Quantz. I like to think  
 That in an afternoon of three sonatas  
 A hundred regiments have marched more miles  
 Than lie between here and Vienna and not once  
 Has a man broken step. Who would be loved  
 If he could be feared and hated, yet still  
 Enjoy his lust, eat well and play the flute?

(*A Porter Selected*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)

Above: *Walking Home*, Clarice Beckett c1931, oil on board, 49.2 x 59.5cm, private collection.  
 Centre: *The Red Car*, Clarice Beckett c1928, oil on board, 16.5 x 21.5cm, collection: Mr Allan Cullen and daughters.

Hawthorne said that a city was a 'paved solitude', which puts vividly a predicament explored by many before and after him. The Potsdam of Frederick the Great might have seemed such to him, for all that one of its palaces is called 'Sans Souci'. Historically, he had as a young man been thrashed in public and forced to kiss his father's boots, been court-martialled and made to watch the beheading of a confrere: later, in battle, he was hungry for death and blamed the bullets for not hitting him. He was avid for fame, which he achieved at great cost to his own army and to those of other nations; and in the end, he died of a chill caught while reviewing his army in the rain. None of this was calculated to abate solitude. Sorrows may come in battalions, but the sorrowing go alone. Frederick would probably have agreed with Belloc's 'Most of us live alone. We all die alone.'

Soliloquy as such does not presume the full force of this, but does lend itself to it: Porter's Frederick in his court is some kind of kin to Hamlet in his. This, though, does not do away with the fact that Frederick's Potsdam has an array of roles, of realities. It is palatial: it is a military headquarters: it is the centre of civic administration. This having a number of facets is one of the most typical features of Porter's cities—his Rome or London is likely to glint as it is turned in the light—and he gives himself with intensity to imagining Frederick *in situ*.

The poem has many striking expressions, from which I single out two. One is the repeated word 'discipline', and the other 'the warped nut of the mind'. The first can mean either a learned teaching (as in Captain Fluellen's 'the discipline of the wars') or the imposition of such teaching (as in the use of a whip called 'a discipline'). Frederick is for both of these, not, at least in his own eyes, because he is a monster, but because they avert what he sees as chaos—'the merciful/Discipline of the hours of drill ... There has to be misery so there can be discipline.' Historically, Frederick held the intelligible but paradoxical position that the monarch was the supreme servant of an absolute state, a position which he embraced with the soul of a conquistador. Hence conscription, press-gangs, abduction: hence too his introduction into the Prussian army of the cadenced march of imperial Rome, so that 'A hundred regiments have marched ... and not once/ Has a man broken step.' To 'break them into men' was no doubt a real ambition of Frederick's, even if what was in mind was not individuals as such but a 'broken-in' citizenry, even humanity. The nightmare is seductive, as the history of 200 years and more since his death displays.

As for 'the warped nut of the mind', this in its 'case' is like 'the formed brain in the flogged body', one insufficiency compounding another, but both



brought under control. That this should be brought off is a tricky business. The proneness to 'warping' is a commonplace of moral commentary, whether in the biblical allusions to the heart's being of all things most deceitful and desperately wicked, or in Kant's notion that out of 'the crossgrained timber of humanity' nothing straight can be made. Frederick's wish to make the crooked places straight is neither arcane nor sheerly archaic: it is what a reformer of any stripe aspires to have happen. That all of this, every last time, comes from a convoluted brain is not something which seems to give the reformers pause.

Porter's soliloquist, then, for all his peculiarities, is followed widely. This is no great surprise, since although Porter is as ready as the next writer to be intrigued by esoterica and by curious performances—by what might be called the English Eccentric gone Continental—his real subject is always one of the common human experiences or forms of behaviour. Probably one reason for his attachment to the portrayal of life in the city is that it is there that they can best be studied in their complexities and contrarities—in their intensity, in fact. In 'Soliloquy at Potsdam', while much of the rhetorical high ground is taken by the repeated 'I', two other elements help to keep the rhetorical field lively. The first of these is the array of parities and paradoxes, as in 'masterful/merciful' and 'formed brain/ flogged body', in 'There has to be misery so there can be discipline', and in 'the aldermanic/Principalities', where 'alder-manic' catches perfectly a mixture of



the conventional and the obsessional, which in turn redounds upon Frederick himself. The second is the rhetorical interplay between exposition and question in the poem, which gives a matrix of

militancy entirely appropriate to the figure from whom everything is flowing.

And then there is the matter of the music. 'Now back to Quantz. I like to think/ That in an afternoon of three sonatas/ A hundred regiments have marched more miles/ Than lie between here and Vienna and not once/ Has a man broken step ...' Johann Joachim Quantz, master of this king's music, wrote more than 500 pieces for his own master, whom he both taught and, by exceptional licence, criticised. Porter, immensely if informally knowledgeable about music, declines to sentimentalise either it or its makers, and he is certainly not one to muddle dicta about music with others about poetry: but he is singularly alert to its power, and to its rootedness in and its branching away from the deeds and priorities of the world, and like Auden he keeps a wary eye on the traffic between the realm of music and whatever other realms we inhabit.

Nobody is more likely to notice the incongruity of Frederick's being lessoned by Quantz and performing so zestfully on the flute until the loss of his teeth stopped him, at the same time as side-drum, trumpet and no doubt that pragmatic flute, the fife, dictated the movements of those stepping to a *marche militaire*. In another early poem, 'Walking Home on St Cecilia's Day', Porter concludes by naming 'a practice of music which befriends/ The ear—useless, impartial as rain on desert—// And conjures the listener for a time to be happy,/ Making from this love of limits what he can,/ Saddled with Eden's gift, living in the reins/ Of music's huge light irresponsibility', and much of his poetry, like much of his prose, testifies to an indebtedness of this kind. One can also, though, as in 'The Orchard in E-Flat', find plenty of occasions in which music is invoked to more elaborate, and somewhat bitter, ends.

Either way, to write poetry about music shows one of Porter's constant fascinations, that of the relationship between liberty and command: 'the disciplines of the war' have more analogies than it is pleasant to contemplate with sundry musics, military or other. Frederick plays the flute, but to the tune of Quantz's *Versuch einer Anweisung die Floete traversiere zu spielen*, and there are no two ways about that: the gift of huge light irresponsibility comes only if the king keeps taking orders.

Only Potsdam was Potsdam, only Frederick the prototypical Prussian, though his father tried hard



Above: *Beach Road*, Clarice Beckett c1933, oil on canvas on board, 44 x 49cm, collection: Mr and Mrs R. Johnson.

enough. But every social condition which is to have any chance of lasting has to go on testing the relationship between the absolute and the gratuitous; and if (as Auden, once again, insisted) every utopia is cancerous with dystopia, the character of civic compromise has to be pressed again and again to find how tolerable it is at a given moment. We no longer engage in foundation-sacrifice when instituting new cities, but sacrifices aplenty there are in cities new and old alike. Porter's business is often, in his poetry, to smell the smoke from these.

Not that he is likely to concede that, an acceptably liberal verdict given, there is no more to be said. The passion moving many thinkers about the condition of the city, from at least the time of Augustine's *The City of God*, has been one of cosmic dismay: the concern, that is to say, is less for pragmatic outcome than named enigma. Augustine had his hopes, but he no more expected a short-term vindication of them than Job expected to make money for The Dunhill Press.

**P**ORTER TOO IS GIVEN to the asking of primal questions. Such answers as he gives emerge not from a philosopher's study or a mystic's retreat, but from the thick of crowds, or from the cross-currents of thought and feeling. The rhetorical form may be as simple as that of, say, 'A Consumer's Report' or 'Essay on Clouds', but the discerned pressures of experience are not simple. When Porter asks questions, things can turn out as they do in 'A Clumsy Catechism'.

What is the purpose of our life?  
Question the butter why the knife  
Goes through it, clear the pond of weed  
And watch rapsallion beetles breed.

What power put us on the earth?  
The lack of rhyme, the pious dearth  
Of consequence, the one-way flow  
Of dripping curds through calico.

What is the challenge of the New?  
A freshness of the morning dew  
Turned automatic hosing-down  
Of thoroughfares throughout the town.

What do we mean by tragedy?  
A rather bigger you and me  
Than any that our neighbours know—  
Fire in Heaven but lights below.

What, after all this time, is truth?  
Research reveals that Pilate's tooth  
Was troubling him, he couldn't stay  
Debating with the Bench all day.

Where may an honest man be found?  
The singer hears a different sound

Inside his head than discs record,  
Herbert alone can say, *My Lord*.

What is the reason for our death?  
To find the only rhyme for breath,  
To bottom-out both Blake and Dante,  
The genius proved, the Profit scanty.

(*The Chair of Babel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

'Death is not an event of life', said Wittgenstein: 'Death is not lived through'; and Heidegger, 'Death is a strange and unhomely thing that banishes us once and for all from everything in which we are at home.' From the first, Porter has written as if under this double legend: he is like someone who, in the midst of a gathering of whatever sort, is prone to ask unbidden, 'But what about death?' All sorts of societal retorts are possible in the customary elision of death-talk, but Porter is quite undeterred by them. At the end of Yeats' poem about Plato's interrogating ghost, when all that is most encouraging is named, 'But louder sang that ghost, "What then?"' This is Porter's question, too, and it is a question not only about death's timing but also about its being the horizon of everything in life.

The point to be made just now is that, in his poetry, death's ubiquity colours Porter's sense of public reality as well as his sense of the private. This is not inevitable in poets of mortality. For some, the demeanour is largely confined to their private psychic realm, and the worried man singing his worried song prescinds for the most part from what is going on 'out there'. But for Porter this is impossible: the world's arcades run all the way into his mind. And one of the ways of seeing the city available to him is in effect to see it as a necropolis.

'Within the mortal temples of a king/ Keeps death his court, and there the antic sits,/ Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp', Shakespeare's Richard the Second says. The king is the realm's embodiment, not simply an individual; and for Porter, 'there the antic sits', at the heart of any polity, or of any *polis*. Accordingly, when in 'A Clumsy Catechism' he asks those questions which (by common consent, as we say) are taken for the big ones, his answers convene evidence or illustration from all sorts of areas in shared civic life, from the most to the least domestic. If, as usual, death has the last word—'What is the reason for our death?/ To find the only rhyme for breath,'—this is partly because death *always* has the last word, is always asking 'what about me?'

'A Clumsy Catechism' has for context not only many earlier poems by Porter, but poems of reductivity or scepticism by, for example, Housman or Hardy, or the Clough of 'The Latest Decalogue'—'Bear not false witness; let the lie/ Have time on its own wings to fly:/ Thou shalt not covet; but tradition/ Approves all forms of competition ...' The line goes

back a long way, to at least the Martial who modelled early poems by Porter. The present poem is seen in profile against these its cultural companions, just as, more sardonically, it presumes the existence of more conventional catechisms. Historically, these last were often polemical documents, as with Martin Luther's *Shorter Catechism* or the Council of Trent's *Catechism*: but the genre is also capacious enough to include, for example, Caleb Bingham's *Astronomical and Geographical Catechism for the Use of Children*, or Lieut-Col. Arthur Wagner's *Catechism of Outpost Duty: including Advance, Rear Guards and Reconnaissance*. There is, or there has been, a lot of catechising about.

In Porter's, cell after cell of the human hive is opened. The knife going through butter, the curds in calico, the hosed-down thoroughfares, the singer at his discs—all are civilisation in action, and each carries the trace of mortality. In more complex fashion Pilate, caught between toothache, elemental question, and a tried Christ who is also the tryer, betokens a 'kingdom of this world' under formidable stress; and Porter's much-admired Herbert and those perpetually wild cards Blake and Dante have their own minglings of singularity and exposedness.

The line quoted earlier from *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, 'This world's a city full of straying streets', is paired in a couplet with, 'And death's the marketplace where each one meets.' Porter, catechising his reader, does so partly as a campaigner against the God of Death, but partly too in the spirit of Caleb Bingham or Arthur Wagner, letting us know just how things are in Porter's *agora*. There the antic sits, old scoffer and old grinner.

**P**ERHAPS THEY ORDER these things better in Italy or in Greece? By instinct, Porter would answer, in the words of Evelyn Waugh's sycophantic Mr Salter, 'Up to a point, Lord Copper', but his poems are often meditated qualifications of that reply. From many possible examples, I think of 'Pienza Seen by Prudes'.

There is so much which poetry turns its back on,  
The Rout of the Past, the you and you and you  
For whom I don't exist, the crossing  
Of these hills in our over-powerful car,  
Up and down the fawn of Tuscany  
To the Pope's town: clouds sail to worlds  
Beyond us as we motor into visions  
Harder than paint. Scattered by tyres,  
Angels disperse to fresco-bearing trees.

The mind is made of Guide Books, factitious  
Chapters of a biased history. Where local boy  
Made good, things stay looking good, dust sheets  
Over faction, and deracinated ankles  
Swell on the way to Calvary. A little  
Renaissance is put in the palm of hand  
To keep the wonder venial. Today

Our poets are not fit to be provincial  
Governors, nor will they fruit like olives.

The town has made a sculpture of the sky.  
Pale prudes of their own blood approach  
This vine-upholding vale looking for  
Simplicities of everything too difficult.  
Why, when the grandest of us little men  
Is whisked away to Heaven, should survivors  
Flounce to the parapet explaining things?  
Sausages and wine are placed before us,  
The wheel of work rolls past the perfect town.

(*English Subtitles*, Oxford: Oxford  
University Press, 1981)

At one point in his poem 'The Rest on the Flight', after naming some of the customary horrors or consolations of a long journey by air, Porter says that 'the nose will dip/ Towards the phosphor of a city', an image all the more engaging if one remembers both that phosphors are extremely numerous and that Phosphor is the morning star, the planet Venus before sunrise—also known as Lucifer. Pienza is a distinctive 'phosphor', or has one, but Porter is poetically incapable of being, simply, a gazer; interlocution is his constant way, whether it is landscape or cityscape that is in question.

In Pienza, the two are closely related. Between 1459 and 1464 a medieval hamlet was transformed into what was in effect a showcase Renaissance city-state, at the direction of a 'local boy/ Made good', Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, alias Pope Pius II. Pius had plans to alter the surroundings with, for instance, the introduction of a lake. These did not succeed, but the new cathedral and palaces and almost 40 other new or refurbished buildings were conceived of both in relation to one another and, as an ensemble, with regard to the setting. If it is not 'the perfect town', it is not for want of trying. It is clear from Pius' own *Commentarii* that the whole thing was devised as a work of art, 'urban and urbane', as one writer puts it, 'a concrete illustration of the humanist principles of rational thought and reasoned living, designed both for individual reflection and group discourse' (Charles R. Mack, *Pienza: The Creation of a Renaissance City*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, pp162–3).

Such a place, honouring the architect's perpetual aspiration to make things both coherent and dynamic, is bound to stimulate an imagination like Porter's, since he is as sympathetic to such achievements as

*He wants to name  
processes,  
sequences, the  
shape of stories—  
he is, deeply, a  
narrator—and he  
reaches constantly  
for the  
emblematic, for  
the figure-cutting  
entity. A citified  
imagination has  
to hand a  
reality which  
encompasses both  
of these.*

he is eager to scrutinise them. 'Pienza Seen by Prudes', like a number of his poems, shows him brought to a stand less by the particularities of a place than by its ethos, and then prompted to devise a coherence of his own amidst what Yvor Winters once called 'the rain of matter upon sense'.

Cities and poems are monumental in both senses of that word—they mark death and they aspire to endurance. The American architect Philip Johnson's 'All architects want to live beyond their deaths' speaks

to more than psychology, and tells us something crucial about an art form which seems at first glance to be all about space but is as certainly all about time. Poetry is prone to repeat Horace's 'exegi monumentum', but is always subject to the humbling truth of Porter's first line—'There is so much which poetry turns its back on'. Wallace Stevens said that poetry 'makes silk dresses out of worms', but when this is true it leaves the worms out of account—who will, as it happens, have the last word.

I take it that, as very often happens with Porter, his concession of human frailty tries obliquely to make amends. 'The Rout of the Past' encompasses both the past's fashionable convenings (which we call history) and its being made mere 'alms for oblivion'; and it also sounds like the title for some grand scenic Victorian painting where disaster stamps itself after all on the memory. 'The you and you and you/ For whom I don't exist' might be a salute to Auden's Old Man without

concrete or grapefruit, or to his acknowledging that 'to most people/I'm the wrong color'. It certainly acknowledges that the imagination in its poem, like the selves in a car, is carried along with extreme selectiveness through a world whose 'everything that is the case' mostly goes on beyond earshot or eyeshot.

Chesterton claimed that tradition is democratic in that it gives the dead a vote; Porter is constantly alert to the presence of the past, a presence which sometimes asserts itself whether or not we want it, or even notice it. A Pienza seen by the temporally or even ontologically prudish—'clouds sail to worlds/ Beyond us ...'—is dormant, not domesticated: those references to Calvary, Renaissance and even Heaven, ironising though they may be, still open vistas well beyond the 'Sausages and wine'.

'The mind is made of Guide Books, factitious/ Chapters of a biased history'—'experto crede', Porter might add, since a staple of his poetry has always been the making of quasi-Guide Books, ostensibly to this or that physical or psychological locale, but really to what might be called The State of Ultimacy. 'At the

Porta Humana', 'Cities of Light', 'Cyprus, Aeschylus, Inanition', 'To Venetia's Shores Have Come', 'The Tomb of Scarlatti', 'Le Jardin Suspendu'—there are dozens of poems which, as certainly as these, re-confect the territories they offer to describe. It is true that some of the earlier accounts of Pienza's building are questionable, but it would not have needed this to prompt a claim with the scope of Porter's. He is one of the imaginatively restless ones in the historical city.

Another way of putting this is to say that, lodged there, Porter usually declines the lyrical. It is not a matter of incapacity, for even at improbable moments his poetry can be suffused with lyricism—as it is, for instance, in 'The King of the Cats is Dead', or in 'Talking to You Afterwards', or in 'Die-Back' or 'Little Buddha'. But wariness is the way to go in most of his cities, most of the time, as for instance in this passage from 'Delphi':

You can have

A bathing hut and a packed lunch and if you speak  
Quietly and take the occasional hand of cards  
With the doyen of landladies she may utter through  
Her muslin one of the aboriginal truths.  
Our gardens are planted too late again  
And the jittery clock at the Town Hall has forgotten  
If Salamis or Mafeking was the time of its life.  
The oldest resident, summing up sanctity and  
The bracing air, says we have the seediest of  
Perihelions, our tone of prophecy is due to  
The prevalence of sunburn and the number of  
Vegetarian restaurants ...

(*Preaching to the Converted*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972)

Delphic or sibylline locales have fascinated poets and other makers of narrative, from Virgil to William Golding, and from the end of the *Commedia* to the beginning of *The Waste Land*. They hold writers and readers alike for a variety of reasons: because of our pricked curiosity in the face of the unknown; because of a mixture of timidity and resolve in the shadow of menace; because of a hankering for more-than-human voices; and because others seem to be interested. This melee of emotions finds its equivalent in people's reactions to the preternatural or the supernatural: the hustle without dramatises the hustle within. It is not surprising that Porter should find his attention solicited, since what we find here is, in effect, the staging of the soul, or the soullessness, of the city. It is, then, all the more striking that, in 'Pienza Seen by Prudes', acknowledging that 'the grandest of us little men' is an absentee, he should concede, as if with one foot still in Eden, that 'The wheel of work rolls past the perfect town'.

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Porter is given to the asking of primal questions. Such answers as he gives emerge not from a philosopher's study or a mystic's retreat, but from the thick of crowds, or from the cross-currents of thought and feeling.

## Snail Bait

*In Memory of Barney  
our dog*

### Vacuum

It's a strange thing, absence,  
that lack of substance,  
something, anything,  
positive because it is negative  
in the end,  
because absence,  
true absence,  
bespeaks  
(unspeakable word)  
signifies  
(insignificant word)  
requires  
(at last)  
presence.

Now,  
after all of this  
philosophy  
and doggerel,  
I would like to absent myself from the present.

### Grief

As slow as a snail,  
and as ponderous,  
it expands, contracts,  
an inch becomes a mile.  
The eyes protrude,  
seem disembodied,  
remote on stalks,  
as they roll and swivel  
in search of green  
among the grey  
concrete and dust.  
The hard shell protects,  
entrails and lymph,  
the heart's pump,  
enabling locomotion,  
the next distant meal,  
and lubrication,  
a slow glissando  
that leaves in its wake  
a faint silvery trail.

### Hope

I'm still alive  
and at large,  
though my soul  
resembles a half-dried chive  
on a large barge,  
or an owl  
trapped in vicious sunlight:  
two shrivelled eyes  
waiting for moisture, dew,  
rodents around a yew:  
the revelations of night.

### Cats and Dogs

Odysseus' dog, deserted, died of gloom on a dunghill: poor Argos.  
The gaze of Baudelaire's voluptuous cat is 'ocean-deep and aloof'.

Dogs are as different from cats  
as a koala bear is from a rat.  
Hounds habitually love their master or mistress,  
while cats are insouciant, could not care less—  
until meal time, or when they crave warmth  
and leap on to a cat-detester's groin.  
Mutts, like Cerberus, keep watch at the door,  
while toms circumnavigate the parish, whores.  
Dogs wolf down their food with epicurean lust  
while cats eat neurosurgically: delicate thrusts.  
Moggies torture their prey: consummate sadists.  
For fleabags a hunt is sport: foxes, criminals, rabbits.  
Dogs can be comic, even grin, in their love attacks.  
Cats are sarcastic, melancholy, humourless, unabashed.  
Indeed they pad and silkily strut the rims of evil,  
while dogs bound, loll, lick, in a good commonweal.  
These days, it seems, there is much more cat in humankind,  
and much less dog: at least to my tormented mind.

# Wrestling with Old Horrible

Xavier Herbert: A Biography, Frances de Groen, University of Queensland Press, 1998, ISBN 0 7022 3021 9, RRP \$39.95

**M**AROONED ON PHAROS after the siege of Troy, Menelaus learns that the only way he can return home is by wrestling Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, to a standstill and forcing him to reveal the secret. Proteus resists by assuming one bodily form after another, and a titanic struggle ensues:

First he shifted into a great bearded lion  
and then a serpent—  
a panther—  
a ramping wild boar—  
a torrent of water ...

—*Odyssey*, Book 4, Robert Fagles' translation.

But Menelaus and his men hang on to their quarry and eventually force him to disgorge the vital details.

In writing his biography, Frances de Groen has had a similar experience with Xavier Herbert, whose protean self-transformations were the material of both his life and his fiction. She reports ruefully that, while many writers jealously guard their privacy and destroy the records of their life, Herbert eagerly welcomed biographical inquiry, encouraged a number of scholars and eventually gave some 500 boxes of uncensored papers to the University of Queensland. With many subjects the main problem for a biographer is lack of information; with Herbert the problem is too much.

Well, one of the problems. The big difference between the Old Man of the Sea and Herbert is that while the former could not lie, the latter could not tell the truth. Throughout his long life he fabricated various accounts of his experience and left numerous conflicting versions of events. Every detail of Herbert's life—from his parentage and date of birth to the editing of *Capricornia* and the circumstances of his army service—is shrouded in controversy and obfuscation. A large proportion of his



Xavier Herbert quarrelling with his 'beloved patroness', Beatrice Davis, Adelaide Arts Festival, 1962.

vast hoard of papers consists of lengthy autobiographical fictions from which it is difficult to disentangle fact from fancy. De Groen negotiates her way through this labyrinth with great assurance and provides a judicious and reliable guide to the most likely scenarios; the result is a thoroughly demythologised, warts-and-all version of the great myth-maker. It is not a pretty picture.

De Groen convicts Herbert of nearly all the seven deadly sins, barring sloth and gluttony, and describes in often painful detail how he displayed aggression, anger, ingratitude, manipulateness, egocentrism, homophobia, racism and, above all, misogyny. For all the passion with which his novels demand justice for Aborigines, Herbert himself was not always free from the racist attitudes his fiction condemned. In a notorious article for the *Bulletin* in 1962, he defended

the decision of white parents to withdraw their children from a school in the Northern Territory when five Aborigines were enrolled, described the race of the latter as 'degenerate' and concluded that they could never become civilised (p195). He was not above calling Aborigines 'black bastards' when an individual offended him or he was treated in a way that miffed him (p242).

His atrocious behaviour at public occasions in the later years of his life became legendary: when *Poor Fellow My Country* won the Miles Franklin Prize he turned up to the award ceremony in a bad mood, mocked the guests as 'bunyip knights' and 'snobs', called the chairman a silly old fool and pretended to refuse the cheque (p249). At an informal meeting of the Australian Society of Authors to honour the memory of his wife Sadie, he flew into a rage when

some members tried to leave as he told the story of her death at length, and he began to throw punches (p259). He held an exaggerated estimate of his own importance in Australian literature and was bitterly jealous when other writers received praise. He poured scorn on intellectuals and academics, yet cadged shamelessly for an honorary doctorate.

**H**ERBERT'S HATRED and fear of women was expressed more in words than in action, but it is clear that he was a chauvinist even by the standards of the 1930s. He developed strange theories about male and female sexuality and the proper relations between men and women which received expression in his novel *Soldiers' Women* and a number of (mercifully) unpublished manuscripts. He had numerous affairs outside his marriage, but always broke them off to return to his wife and heap curses on his erstwhile paramours. De Groen is understandably exercised by such behaviour, but in her zeal to show what a pig he was she raises the converse problem: how to explain why Sadie stuck by him so loyally and why, throughout his life, women apparently kept throwing themselves at him and usually refused to say a word against him even after they had been callously dumped (as in the case of Beatrice Davis). Such a response seems to suggest either the truth of the old adage about treating 'em mean or that his bark was a lot worse than his bite.

Herbert does seem to have had an almost Wagnerian power to compel loyalty and assistance from men and women, senior academics not excluded, who often went miles out of their way to help him, so there must have been some magnetic force in his personality that was hard to resist. The biography covers Herbert's marriage in some detail, but I feel that de Groen is too disapproving of Herbert's infidelities and general mistreatment of Sadie to come to grips with the dynamics of such an enduring relationship. What I would also like to have learnt is why they had no children, a question that is not raised.

It must be said that the worst of Herbert's vices, particularly the aggression, appeared only after the success of *Capricornia* and, more precisely, in the 1950s, when nothing seemed to be going right for him. He was struggling with the manuscript of a novel about life in Sydney during the war that was meant to have been finished in time to be bought by US service personnel in Australia. He did not complete it until 1961, and the

resulting anxiety that he would never be able to publish again produced some of the stress which made neurotic behaviour more likely. De Groen does not raise this possibility, but the furious aggression he displayed so often in the last 30 years of his life sounds very similar to the 'roid rage' experienced by bodybuilders who take heavy doses of steroids; it might well have been the result of the regular injections of testosterone that he was apparently giving himself as part of his program to maintain a vigorous masculinity into old age.

Chemistry may be part of the explanation, but much of the anger was always there, fuelled by both personal and political factors. On the political side, some of Herbert's rage arose from knowing that most Australians did not share his sense of national destiny and his hatred of colonialism. This obsession is clear in many places, including the letter to the Fellowship of Australian Writers in which he explains why he will not contribute to the collection of anti-fascist essays ('Australian Writers in Defence of Freedom') planned for release in 1939. De Groen describes this letter as 'monomaniacal', and, insofar as it makes the claim that he is the only man in the world fighting for Aboriginal rights, it is both arrogant and conceited.

But some of the other points in the letter cannot be dismissed so quickly. Herbert was correct to say that the FAW did not have much awareness of Aboriginal rights as an issue in the defence of democracy; and he also had a case when he asserted that the practice of most Australians (despite the stand of a few rebels determined to oppose the tide) did suggest that the real national ethos was based on sycophancy and compliance, not the liberty-loving insubordination dear to the myth the FAW was trying to foster. This letter contains passages of striking political rhetoric in support of Aboriginal rights and against tyranny, but it also betrays a jaundiced attitude towards the Australian people in general:

I maintain that the Australian people—these people who will starve and exploit a poor black savage, or allow it to be done ... who will sneer at a poor, down-trodden immigrant and call him a Pommy but lick a rich Pommy's boots and call him Sir—are, considering their chances to be otherwise, the most slave-minded people on the earth.

The vision of the rabble fleeing the test of nationhood, so powerfully dramatised in

*Poor Fellow My Country*, is already well developed.

On the personal side, Herbert had a rough life and many psychological problems. Christened Alfred Jackson, he always thought he was illegitimate and could never be quite confident that Ben Herbert, whom he called 'Dad' but who treated him as one might a suspected cuckoo in the nest, was his real father. He has consistently asserted that he never felt loved as a child and always carried the bitter taste of this rejection in his mouth. A few months before he died he told an interviewer, 'I was never a wanted child ... nobody ever wanted me. They didn't want me as a bloody pet even.' ('Last words', p20). De Groen softens the picture of childhood misery given in *Disturbing Element* and numerous interviews, but there is a depth of alienation here that seems strong enough to resist all appeals to reason. It led directly to Herbert's profoundly uncertain sense of self, the numerous masks he continually assumed, 'his need to define himself through the presumed enmity and ill-will of others' (as de Groen put it in a selection of Herbert's writing she edited with Peter Pierce) and his inability to feel comfortable with anybody, least of all those who 'ought' to have been his natural colleagues. P.R. Stephensen characterised Herbert's 'self-sought isolation' as 'the product of a hermit's dodging away from his equals and superiors'. As de Groen observes, this is acute (p94), but it seems to me that part of the reason why he shied from judgment by his peers was that he did not know who his peers were. How could he, when he did not know who he was himself?

**T**HE OTHER BIG PROBLEM Herbert faced was the battle to establish his masculinity, as he put it shortly before he died ('Last words', p19). Throughout his life he was beset by anxiety as to his masculine identity, his sexual potency, his physical fitness and his heterosexuality, and de Groen gives plenty of evidence to suggest that he was embattled on all these fronts. In his defence he resorted to all manner of desperate stratagems: strenuous manual jobs like wood-cutting and mining, heavy drinking, punishing work-out schedules, learning to fly planes, riding a motorbike, retreats into the desert, injections of testosterone and vicious diatribes against women and homosexuals. The fact that he was mainly a writer made the situation worse: 'I grew up with a lot of tough people', he said in 1984, 'and they despised anybody who wrote'. He often

recalled the incident when he won a prize in an essay contest while at school: 'I was ashamed of that. It was a boys' school and that was a sissy thing to do ... the teacher said nothing and the kids said nothing, but I said to myself, "He writes stories and he sits down to pee".' De Groen throws doubt on Herbert's claim to have won such a prize, but even if the incident is an invention his shame at engaging in such an effeminate activity as writing is apparent. Such chronic obsession with the appearances of masculinity suggests comparisons with

Ernest Hemingway; at least Herbert did not take up elephant shooting.

**H**ERBERT'S GARRULITY, both in speech and on paper, was of epic proportions. Marjorie Barnard recalled that when she and Flora Eldershaw stayed with the Herberts at Collaroy over Easter in 1938 or 1939,

Xavier met us at the bus stop. He had a loaf of bread, half a pound of butter and a toilet roll. He slammed them down on the table and said, 'Now you won't have to go shopping, you'll have to listen to me.' So we had to listen to him for the whole of Easter, a most exhausting experience.

Paradoxically, this endless loquacity was a form of writer's block. After *Capricornia*, Herbert found it increasingly difficult to be an author; he wrote non-stop but could not organise the flow of words into a finished composition. *Soldiers' Women* was meant to be a pot-boiling quickie along the lines of the stories he had written for the popular fiction magazine, the *Australian Journal*, in the 1920s; it took 15 years. The bizarre rituals he instituted when writing *Poor Fellow My Country*—trips to the desert, marathon writing sessions, living in a tin shed, avoidance of sex—all testify to the extreme difficulty he faced when trying to finish anything. Not for him Anthony Trollope's 3000 words of final text before breakfast and a day spent running the Post Office.

And what of the garrulity itself? J.J. Healy makes the perceptive remark that Herbert used words to assault reality—'a continuous verbal assault on experience' (*Literature and the Aborigines*, p167), and a number of de Groen's comments are even more suggestive. As she and Peter Pierce put it in the selection of Herbert's writing they prepared, his enormous written output 'testifies to Herbert's dependence on the act of writing as a means of apprehending the reality of [his] existence and of forging for himself an identity which he signified

in terms of Australia's national destiny'. It was, in other words, related to both his uncertain sense of self and his tendency to identify his illegitimate status with the bastard Australian nation. When Herbert was not writing 'he was literally talking himself into existence' (pxv–xvi). He once remarked that he was not really happy unless he was writing (p198) and seems to have felt that he would cease to exist if he ever stopped. Marjorie Barnard commented ambiguously that he 'talked himself out of his best books'. Did she mean that in his best books he was able to erase the signs of his own presence, or that his inability to shut up marred even his best work? Both positions have been argued.

And so a definite psychological profile of the artist emerges: a child whose uncertainty of parentage and insecure sense of self allowed him to make two identifications vital for his later fiction. The first was with Aboriginal half-castes, people caught between two cultures and accepted by neither. The second was with the 'bastard nation' Australia, as Herbert often referred to it, a country which never developed its own sense of independent identity and whose people retreated at every challenge of nationhood. Herbert was very conscious of the parallels between his own life and the history of Australia: born 1900, too young for World War I, the larrikin streak, not clever enough to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the European crisis of the late 1930s. Some of the bitterness in his work and his self-destructive personal behaviour have a common source in his despair at the refusal of his fellow citizens to run the risks of going it alone; even in his final years he was waiting for the revolution that would provide him with a stable sense of self and his country with an independent identity. De Groen does not draw the connection explicitly, but her biography suggests strongly that Herbert's resentment of his anglophile, respectability-plagued mother had its analogue in his hatred for Mother England: the one oppressed and ridiculed her son, the other bullied the infant nation, sought to use it for her own purposes and demanded an unending sacrifice of blood in the Great War. From

such a fusion of personal anguish and political disappointment was the novelist forged.

From the reader's point of view at least, it was probably worth it. *Capricornia*, with its drama, tragedy, comedy and rollicking cast of Dickensian characters, took the 1930s by storm and made nearly every other novel of the decade seem bloodless by comparison; only the work of the young Christina Stead and perhaps Brian Penton's *Landtakers* equals or surpasses it. It is one of the tragedies of Australian literature that Herbert destroyed the manuscript of his next novel, *Yeller Feller*, while preserving his tedious and self-serving autobiography,



Xavier Herbert, aged 64 in Mackay, 1966.

*Me and My Shadow*. Still, *Poor Fellow My Country* (PFMC) is probably a greater work than the one that was lost and achieves a union of historical, political, psychological and mythological themes that makes reading it a unique experience for the scholar and general reader alike. It was published at a propitious time, exactly when a certain colonial relic, presumed moribund, stretched out its dead hand to extinguish the government of Mr Whitlam, provoking the strongest upsurge of republican sentiment since the 1880s; but its appeal to the short-lived new nationalism of the period accounts neither for the immediate impact of the novel, nor for its enduring readership. One must look deep into the Australian psyche for an explanation of that.

If the politics of class were the dominant style of cultural commentary in the 1930s

and '40s, race the 1970s and gender the 1980s, it seems that the 1990s give primacy to personal identity. Herbert's star waned after the success of *PFMC*, but the intensity of his yearning for landscape, place and roots suggests that he might be due for a revival. De Groen writes mainly from the perspectives of 1980s feminism, but she is sensitive to the politics of belonging which colour the mood of the late 1990s. As you might expect, she is most fascinated by Herbert's misogyny and focuses closely on his personal psychopathology; she tends to downplay the class and national politics of his writing, to dismiss his political aspirations as 'utopian nationalism' and to

give us a rather summary treatment of his involvement with the various political causes he espoused at different times. These included Aboriginal citizen rights, a half-caste association, the environment, the Communist Party, republicanism and a brief enthusiasm for Judaism and Israel in the 1970s, but his most important affair was with the Australia First Movement.

All these flirtations had a somewhat faddish air to them as Herbert strove to find a cause worthy of his loyalty, but in Australia First he thought he had come home. De Groen is too repelled by the movement's

anti-semitism, Hitler-worship and general crankiness to be able to show why it held such strong appeal for nationalists like Herbert and even liberal pacifists like Miles Franklin. She contrasts it with the left wing FAW, when in fact the two organisations shared a fervent cultural nationalism, and likens it to the conservatism of R.G. Menzies and the New Guard (p113). Nothing could be more misleading: Menzies, as we all know, was British to his bootstraps, while the New Guard was established precisely to fight disloyalists like Jack Lang; Australia First was so anti-Empire it was willing to do a deal with Japan. Herbert became bitterly disillusioned with the movement's increasing adulation of German and Japanese fascism, and the anger he allowed to break out in *PFMC* is proportional to the hopes he must originally have

held. As Jeremy Delacy tells the Bloke (a cruel caricature of Stephensen):

You're as mad as the bloody lunatics overseas you worship! Can't you see it's because of your silly aping of fascist and Nazi systems that the whole idea of Free Australia now stinks. ... You've fouled up for ever any hope we had of true nationality. (*PFMC* p. 1079)

Unfortunately, and probably as a long-term effect of this, de Groen makes little attempt to recreate the atmosphere of the Yabber Club, where a bevy of opinionated intellectuals must have made for a number of very lively evenings. The cut and thrust of discussion that goes on at this sort of gathering is notoriously difficult to recover, but an agent of the secret police was present at many of the Australia First conversaciones, and their reports are preserved in the files of the Investigation Branch, so more could have been done. This is one of a number of instances where the biography misses the opportunity to bring Herbert to life while it catalogues how various details of his experience became the basis for a passage or character in a later novel.

**I**T WOULD BE UNFAIR to say that de Groen does not take Herbert's politics seriously, but they are of less interest to her than the murky depths of his personality. Such a priority normally runs the risk that an author's work (the reason he/she is of biographical interest) is overshadowed by the colourful details of his/her life, but de Groen's book is saved from this fate by its strategy of approaching the life through the art: it is as much a study of the biographical sources of Herbert's fiction as a conventional life and work.

Such an approach does have its irritations, as when we are repeatedly told that one or other person or experience became character X or Chapter Y of one of his novels, claims which are usually either dubious or trite, but this strategy does work better for Herbert than it would for an author whose work is less autobiographical, and up to a point it works well: clearly there is much in *PFMC*, for example, that is based directly on the author's experience with the Australia First Movement. In relation to *Capricornia*, however, in which no character is remotely based on the author, it does not work so effectively. Certainly Herbert drew on his experience of life and the people he met in the Northern Territory to help create the characters and incidents of the novel, but all authors do that sort of

thing, and most of *Capricornia* is exuberant story-telling. What matters is the imaginative transformation of the raw material and the role it plays in the finished work. De Groen suggests that the bastard half-caste Nawnim is a projection of Herbert's uncertain self, but, while his own family circumstances might have enabled him to empathise with bastards and half-castes, it does not follow that any bastard or half-caste in the novel is a projection of the author.

Even in the case of *PFMC* one can take the autobiographical slant too far. A novel has many layers, and to suggest that this one is primarily a working-out of Herbert's psychological demons is to fall, perhaps, for his own egocentrism. Much of *PFMC* is based on Herbert's observations and responses to the course of Australian history in the 1930s and '40s, and to this extent it can be read as history; Humphrey McQueen went as far as to describe the novel as the best general history of the period ever written, anticipating the perspectives of David Day by many years. This is not autobiography, however, but Herbert's vision of and commentary on the events of his times. It is a political history written from the standpoint of a nationalist in angry despair at the failure of the Australian people to develop national consciousness. Not only this: *PFMC* projects an imaginary history in which all the forces for good—those who are broadly on the side of the Land, the Aborigines and the patriots and against the foreign beef barons, bureaucrats, generals and so on—are annihilated. It is a vision of history as Herbert did not want it to happen. All these manoeuvres take a great deal more imagination and inventiveness than de Groen seems to give Herbert credit for; they also refer to real social forces and historical possibilities, and they represent more than an attempt to resolve psychological obsessions.

Herbert explained in an ABC radio broadcast in 1975 that *PFMC* was a lament for 'the tragedy of our nation ... [which] lived thirteen years and died' in the trenches of World War I, and then missed its second chance to be a nation when it failed to take an independent stand against the German and Japanese threats in 1939–42. He considered that he sorrowed for his 'lost country' in the same way as Aborigines prevented from returning to their tribal lands would mourn and cry 'poor fellow my country'. Herbert was clearly among those who believed that Australia did become, in Bernard O'Dowd's words, a place where 'the West/In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest' and 'a new demesne for Mammon to

infest' rather than the 'millennial Eden' which might once have lurked as a possibility before the King and Empire mob stuffed things up. In both *Capricornia* and *PFMC* Herbert symbolises the process whereby their cohorts violated Eden and ruined millennial hopes with amazing dramatic force.

**H**IS TRAGIC VISION of Australian history will not endear Herbert to those who complain that the 'black armband' view has become too popular among intellectuals. There is more than an echo of *PFMC* at the end of the fifth volume of Manning Clark's *History of Australia*, where the Gallipoli landing is seen as a tragedy which tied the new nation to the old world: 'Australia's day of glory had made her a prisoner of her past, rather than the architect of a new future for humanity ... The ideals of Australia had been "cast to the winds"' (*The people make laws*, p426). And of course his undying anger at the dispossession and mistreatment of the Aboriginal people is another reason why Herbert will not be an Approved Author among those who want us to forget the past. Our great fear as (British) white Australians has historically been that somebody else (French, Russians, Chinese, unspecified Asian hordes, Germans, Japanese, Russians again, Chinese again ...) will come and take the country from us in the same way as we took it from the Aboriginal people. Formerly the fear was of armed invasion; today the concern is Asian immigration. Herbert has no such anxieties and takes great delight in probing this sore point. As Billy Brew, the donkey driver, puts it to Jeremy:

Hain't I told you a 'undred times there hain't no 'ope for that Australia Felix lunacy? We're an Asiatic country. It follers that some kind o' slant-eyed bastards, Japs or Chows, are goin' 'o grab the place someday ... same's we grabbed it off the poor Abos. Only 'ope I'm 'ere to see it. 'Oly bloody 'olocaust ... but wouldn't I love to see them squatter bastards and silvertail turds takin' poor ol' Jackie's place with the stock-whip round 'em ... doin' the dirty work for five-bob a week and 'avin' to live on stewed dawg and bird-shit, eaten with chopsticks ... Pohetic justice! (*PFMC* p1095, ellipses in original)

Yet as Bernard Smith has remarked, it is not guilt that Herbert is offering us, but a way of escaping from it by righting past wrongs, and hope for reconciliation. He points out that *Capricornia's* Nawnim is the first half-

caste in Australian literature to be presented as a suffering human being with whom the reader is expected to feel sympathy. With his creation (following Prichard's *Coonardoo*) 'Australian culture begins a process of atonement, the concerned conscience is pointed a way by which it might be quietened, and Truganini laid to rest behind her mountains' (*The Spectre of Truganini*, p31).

It is difficult to estimate the impact of *PFMC* on modern Australian sensibility, but a book that sold 69,000 copies in four years (p260) must have left some trace in the public mind. The novel gave many readers their first positive and non-patronising exposure to Aboriginal culture, and it left many of them with a sympathetic interest in both the Aborigines' traditional way of life and their modern plight. It would, in fact, be impossible to read the novel and not come away with at least some respect for tribal culture, particularly its attachment to the land, and at least some concern that the plans of the developers will destroy these relationships. We cheer every time Prindy evades the troopers and shudder at the threats to Lily Lagoons. In this way the work of Herbert did much to develop public support for the Aboriginal land rights

movement of the 1970s and helped to create a climate of opinion in which the Mabo and Wik judgments were possible.

Xavier Herbert does not emerge from this book as an attractive or sympathetic character, yet even on the evidence presented it seems that he endured more suffering than he inflicted. For all the difficulties of his personality he gave us two great works of art that have enriched our politics and culture and which will stand as signposts to their times in years to come. History has shown that his politics were utopian, but it is not the function of creative writers to formulate practical political blueprints; it is enough that they provide us with material to nourish our dreams of a better world. This is the first complete biography of Xavier Herbert, but it will certainly not be the last, and it will be interesting to see what other writers make of him. Dr de Groen has given us a very full and mostly convincing picture, but there can be little doubt that Proteus has a few masks and tricks that have not yet been revealed: we are likely to be wrestling with Old Horrible for many years to come. ■

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BOOKS: 3

PETER PIERCE

## Mentioning the war

**The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War,**

by Keith Beattie, New York University Press, 1998

ISBN 0 8147 13262, RRP \$75

**T**HE SUB-TITLE of Keith Beattie's *The Scar that Binds* indicates a copious ambition. He promises no less than an analysis of 'American Culture and the Vietnam War'. In fact the focus of Beattie's book is much sharper. Beginning with the deathless words of George Bush's inaugural address ('no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory'), he seeks to understand how official rhetoric from both sides of American politics has foregrounded Vietnam as 'a rupturing presence within American culture while at the same time it is used to evoke the need for unity'. This leads him to a 'decoding and critique of

the operation of what I call the ideology of unity'. This ideology represents a bland but profound kind of coercion: 'the commonsensical notion that an essentialised form of social, cultural and political unity is necessary to the good of all Americans'. Thus a simple patriotism is restored from the unlikeliest source: the damaged and once-despised survivors of America's only lost war.

In *The Scar that Binds*, Beattie enterprisingly and forcefully identifies three dominant 'strategies of unity', each of them metaphorical. They are 'the wound', 'the voice' (of the Vietnam veteran) and 'home'.

The first presupposes the need for a healing more symbolic than it can be literal. The second examines a sinister paradox. While at first veterans were often portrayed as inarticulate, psychopathic, functionally silent, when given a talking part 'the veteran's heavily mediated speaking voice was heard to speak only of unity'. Finally Beattie traces the processes, abetted by popular culture, in which in the 1980s 'the notion of a consensual, convivial "home" was reinforced in the nostalgic agenda of the Reagan administration'.

The first of these three sections of the book is the most complex, and also the most persuasive. Writing of 'The Healed Wound', Beattie contends that:

Contrary to common assumptions, the war in Vietnam did not cause the 'wound'. Rather, the war exposed the existence of 'wounds' already present within American culture.

Returned home, the suffering veterans were afflicted by emblematic maladies which illuminated those cultural divisions: paraplegia, madness, impotence. The long line of paraplegic veterans, who feature in such films as *Coming Home* (1978) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) begins with the plaintive twang of country-and-western: 'Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town' (1969). Beattie has bravely confronted the sentimental, the shocking and the schlock-ridden in his research: pop songs and so-called Vietnam westerns, *Magnum* and *The A-Team* (war experience uniting otherwise marginalised characters), the sub-genre of missing-in-action movies and depictions of the veteran literally as a fiend (see *Blood of Ghastly Horror*, 1971).

'The Healing Wound' also interrogates 'stab wounds', that is the theory so memorably mumbled (in different words) by John Rambo, that American soldiers in Vietnam, like their German counterparts in the Great War, had been stabbed in the back. Beattie also highlights the pathological condition which he calls 'Vietnamesia':

the various nostrums to forget signal the end of the war on two counts: the wilful effacement of memory erodes the effect of the war, and it translates into a form of death for all those who participated in the war.

Australia, too, favoured that amnesia about its experiences in the war, until the American Welcome Home marches prompted a sentimental enfolding of our Vietnam veterans (as we came to call them,

in the American way) within the legend of Anzac, and healing was facilely proclaimed.

The second and third sections of *The Scar that Binds*, 'The Vietnam Veteran as Ventriloquist' and 'Bringing the War "Home"' extend Beattie's analysis of the spurious image of national unity that was forged after 1975 and the American abandonment of Vietnam. The foot-soldier was known as the 'grunt', hence reduced to language's lowest common denominator. The silenced veteran naturally inclined to physical violence and, by a cyclical process, 'Depicted as mentally deranged, violently emotional, or hysterical, the veteran is forced into silence, the mark of hysteria.' Yet when the veteran found a voice, or had one found for him, 'he was virtually condemned to speak of unity'. Coming home, veterans found that their war had already, if vicariously, been fought in the nation's living rooms, on nightly television. The idea that Vietnam had been repatriated with the veteran was the pernicious but 'the standard device employed to evoke the ruinous impact of the war'. Yet gradually American popular culture began to attest (on the evidence of its own desires) that the family had been healed. Top-rating programs of the 1980s included *Family Ties* and *The Cosby Show*. Even ET was able to go home.

Beattie concludes persuasively that the constant assertion of home in political rhetoric and popular culture collusively evokes a condition that bears the traces of a sedimented common sense that has invested the word 'home' with a number of meanings: security, succour, conviviality and unity.

But the judgment that he reaches is more ambitious, and in line with the subtitle of *The Scar that Binds*. These are his final words:

This is what it has come to: the reworking of the American identity within the history of the operation of ideological strategies of unity is the devastating outcome of American involvement in the Vietnam War.

Noun-heavy and verb-poor, this prose eerily echoes official pronouncements of those who prosecuted and sought to justify the war in Vietnam. Appropriating their language may be Beattie's parodic strategy in this summary of a stark indictment. In any event, the full ironic implications of his title, *The Scar that Binds*, are at last exposed. ■

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# Burmese days

*The Voice of Hope*, Alan Clements and Aung San Suu Kyi, Penguin, 1997, ISBN 0140266151

*Freedom from Fear*, Aung San Suu Kyi, Penguin, 1995 (revised edition), ISBN 0140253173

*Letters from Burma*, Aung San Suu Kyi, Penguin, 1997, ISBN 0140264035

**H**OW CAN YOU DECIDE between visiting your dying husband for the last time and leading your countrymen's fight against tyranny? Can such a stark choice be carried out while maintaining a sense of equilibrium?

This almost surreal scenario presented itself to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at the end of March as the culmination of two all-too-real themes that have dominated Burmese politics in the last decade: the desire of the ruling military junta to harry its most famous citizen into exile and her determination not to be cowed by the tactics they employ.

It's hard to avoid the impression that the 1991 Nobel Laureate knew what personal sacrifices were to come when she helped launch the National League of Democracy (NLD) in 1988. Her father Aung San, revered in Burma for his role in ending British rule, was assassinated by a rival politician in 1947 when Suu Kyi was two. Most of her colleagues in setting up the NLD were former military men disaffected by Ne Win's 1962 coup. They had served in the army, and had also been imprisoned by it, so were all too familiar with its paranoia and singular brutality. The NLD was created the month after unarmed civilians were gunned down for daring to go out on strike, and a week and a half after the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) announced itself the legitimate government of Burma.

It could even be suggested that Suu Kyi had long anticipated that she might be where she is today. In his introduction to *Freedom from Fear*, her late husband, Dr Michael Aris, quoted from one of the letters she wrote him prior to their marriage in 1972. She was worried that her marrying a foreigner—in this case a subject of Burma's former colonial ruler—might be misinterpreted by the people who loved her father as a lessening of her affection for them.

'I ask one thing,' she wrote, 'that should my people need me, you would help me to do my duty by them.'

'Would you mind very much should such a situation ever arise? How probable it is I do not know, but the possibility is there.'

The respect and admiration the Oxford academic had for his wife's convictions is apparent in the few pages he contributed to the edition of her writings he himself revised. His application for a visa to visit his wife in Burma before he died (from prostate cancer) was the fulfilment of Suu Kyi's request. Machiavelli might remark that it was a political act calculated to invoke the international community's loud condemnation of the junta's refusal. Suu Kyi once observed, after one of the countless occasions on which the military blocked off access to her house in University Avenue, that she tried to maintain as normal a lifestyle as possible but that circumstances often made that impossible.

'My colleagues and I agree that were we to write about our experiences in the form of a novel it would be criticised as too far-fetched a story, a botched Orwellian tale.'

**A**UNG SAN SUU KYI'S observations of Burmese politics, history and society, spread across interviews, newspaper articles, and her academic work, display an unruffled intelligence. She employs a plainness of expression that accords with the core democratic principles to which she has devoted herself. It cuts against the more florid language that fawning and less determined personalities use to describe her.

Someone said once that a strong will is dependent upon a formidable intellect but in the case of the leader of Burma's democratic opposition it seems the other way around. Her erudition is not wasted on clever rhetoric or distracting the reader with witty asides but put towards one goal: an end to military rule and the creation of a multi-party democratic state.

Her frankness is pointed to by her colleagues, such as NLD Deputy Chairman U Kyi Maung, as one of the reasons for the popularity of the weekend talks she gave outside her residence after she was released from six years of house arrest in 1995. She is also admired for her ability to empathise with any and all. In *Letters from Burma*, a collection of articles she wrote for a Japanese daily over the course of the year, she introduces the reader to Burmese culture and philosophy as much, if not more than she does to the platform of her party.

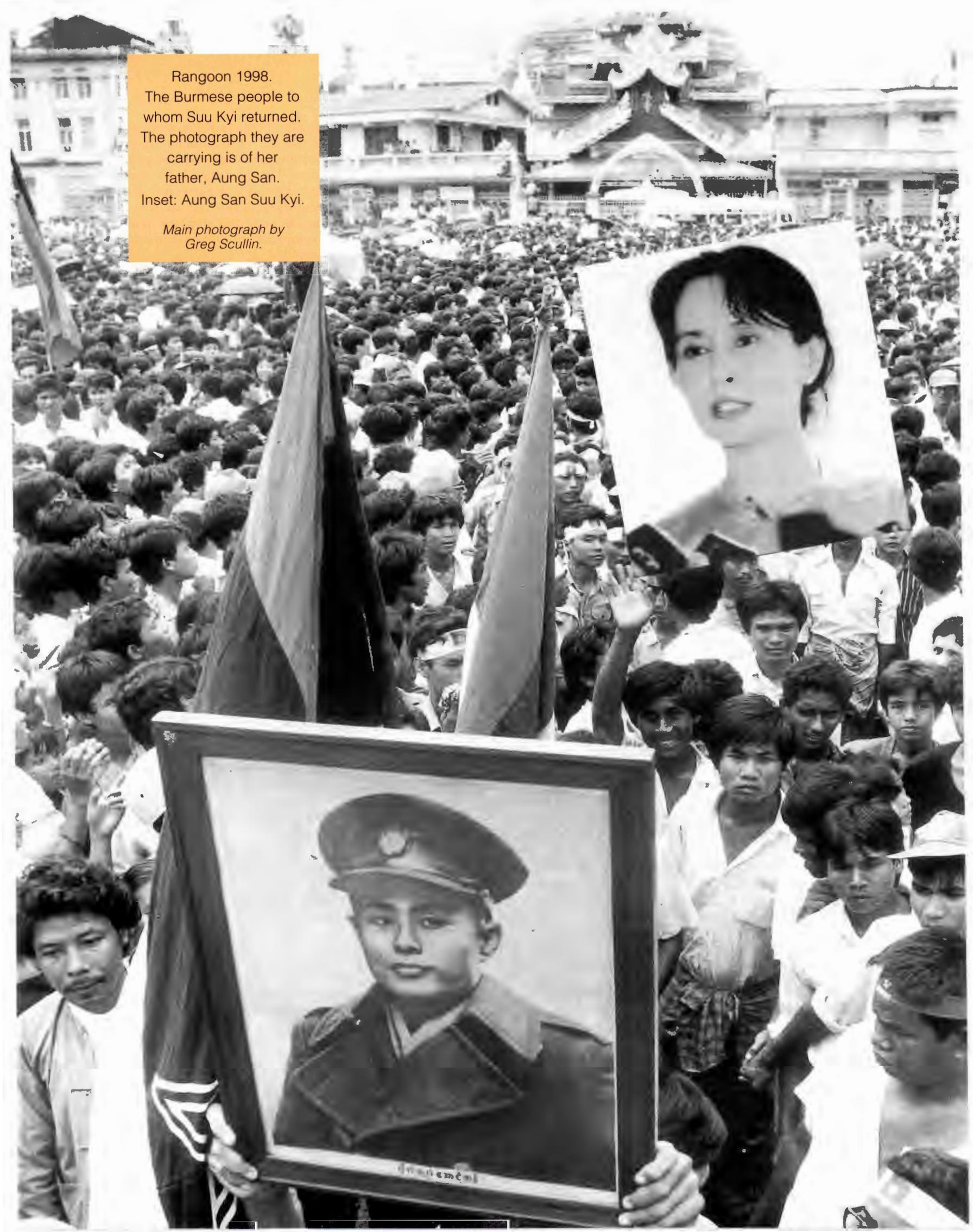
In one piece she refers to the Japanese occupation of Burma during World War II. Japan was originally invited by her father's Burma Independence Army as a means of evicting British administration. But the Burmese quickly realised that what they had done was replace an old colonial yoke with a new one fashioned by war. Aung San's troops switched allegiances and fought with the allies to push the Japanese out. Suu Kyi quoted lines from songs that the Japanese troops sang while in Burma. She asks whether words such as 'Old horse are you feeling sleepy? The reins I hold are as a vein that links your blood to mine', are particularly militaristic.

She concludes that extremism can turn even a pretty song into a war chant.

The kind of democracy Aung San Suu Kyi would like to bring to Burma appears to be less a client of free markets, as it is in the OECD, than a system of government based on civic responsibility and Buddhist morality. This is understandable, given she is in opposition to a military junta that has no respect for such values. But one might wonder whether there is a kind of enforced naivety here. Because Suu Kyi and her colleagues must constantly make stands on principle, they delay the emergence of more sophisticated models. In *The Voice of Hope*, a series of interviews with Burma scholar Alan Clements, Suu Kyi declares a preference for managing foreign influence.

Rangoon 1998.  
The Burmese people to  
whom Suu Kyi returned.  
The photograph they are  
carrying is of her  
father, Aung San.  
Inset: Aung San Suu Kyi.

*Main photograph by  
Greg Scullin.*



'If it comes in too quickly in this way, we may end up with a very superficial kind of non-culture. I am very much for openness—people studying other cultures. But this kind of quick invasion can be unhealthy.'

Could a democratic Burmese government manage to limit the spread of MTV, Coke and McDonalds if it also wished to bring prosperity to its people?

But that is not the question of the moment. The pressing issue is when the junta will sit down and negotiate a peaceful transition to democracy with the ethnic minorities and the NLD—which nine years ago this month won over 80 per cent of the vote in an election result never honoured by the military.

There are few signs that the State Peace and Development Council (as SLORC retained itself in 1997) is loosening its grip on power. Nor is there any indication of a willingness to bring Suu Kyi and others into the picture.

The possibility that Burma is on the brink of insolvency and that the edifice will crumble for lack of funds has been over-estimated. Through much of 1997 and last year, its official reserve of foreign capital was put as low as US\$50 million, but this includes no reference to the black economy which is where most economic activity takes place. When a top civil administrator earns a wage barely the equivalent of US\$20 a month, survival for most is dependent on abusing your position to extract gifts and bribes. To pass examinations, students must have extra-curricular tuition by teachers. Hospital workers charge for everything from syringes to comfortable rides in wheelchairs. Without gratuities, bureaucrats perform at glacial pace.

The black economy is made liquid largely through drug profits. Burma still produces more than half of the world's opium in Northern Shan state and drug lords are now opening up the amphetamine market as well. The government regularly allows amnesties on declaring money, and the Wa and particularly the Kachin syndicates have been able to launder their profits through legitimate businesses in Rangoon.

Nor does the State Peace and Development Council look likely to split apart or be riven by internal fighting. When the junta rejected the awkwardly appropriate acronym SLORC for SPDC in 1997, questions were asked about whether this meant there was movement around the two most powerful figures in Ne Win's

army: Khin Nyunt, head of military intelligence, and Than Shwe, General-in-Chief. As yet there have been no purges, or cracks in the SPDC's stony face.

The wars with ethnic minorities continue but are less intense than in years gone by. The ceasefires with the Kachin, Wa and Mon people are still holding, though shaky, and while the Shan are fighting again now that the resistance has picked itself up, they constitute no more than nuisance value. The Karen are holding out, though at the end of each dry season they seem to lose a little more ground to the junta's forces. Nobody has the ability to bargain with Rangoon, least of all the many thousands of Karen, Shan and Mon refugees in Thailand.

But despite few prospects for change and the death of her husband on the other side of the world, it is hard to imagine Aung San Suu Kyi abandoning her peaceful, Gandhiesque approach to forcing change. She has always made a point of meeting extremism with moderation. In *Voice of Hope* she answered a question about whether the junta had ever captured her 'inside'.

'Have you ever read a book called *Middlemarch* by George Eliot? There was a character called Dr Lydgate whose marriage turned out to be a disappointment. I remember a remark about him, that what he was afraid of was that he might no longer be able to love his wife who had been a disappointment to him.

'I've always felt that if I had really started hating my captors, hating the SLORC and the army, I would have defeated myself.'

**T**HERE ARE SOME democracy activists, particularly students, who would have Aung San Suu Kyi take a more forceful approach. Last year when elected representatives were being locked away to prevent the NLD carrying out its plan to convene the parliament elected in 1990, there were muted calls for a tougher stand. However, to oppose SPDC directly means facing up to an army of 500,000 and an intelligence operation with staggering reach.

As an example of this last point, the Jesuit Refugee Service in Bangkok—for which I work—was infiltrated by an SPDC informer posing as a client last year. Extremely accurate information about what help we offer to Burmese seeking refugee status from the Thailand office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was published in an intelligence journal.

We were publicly denounced, along with the George Soros-funded Open Society Institute, for trying to foment revolution in Burma. The accusation led to the delicious suggestion of a massive Jewish-Catholic conspiracy, captured in the headline 'Vatican and Soros combine to undermine government: junta' published in India's *The Asian Age*.

It would be wrong to think Aung San Suu Kyi believes in non-violence and appealing to the military's better nature because she hasn't the courage to engage in armed struggle. A story of her walking through a line of armed soldiers while drumming up support for the NLD, which she recounts in *The Voice of Hope*, has become legend. She was leading a march in rural Burma when they came across a line of soldiers with guns drawn. They were given an order to stay off the road, which she asked her followers to comply with, but she continued to walk towards them while a major who was accompanying her rally argued with the officer in charge.

'We just walked through the soldiers who were kneeling there and I noticed that some of them were actually shaking and muttering to themselves but I don't know whether it was out of hatred or nervousness.

'Apparently the captain [in charge of the soldiers] tore the insignia off his shoulder. He threw it down and said, "what are all these for if I'm not allowed to shoot," or words to that effect.'

Perhaps greater international pressure for change in Burma will be the catalyst. There are signs that ASEAN, which accepted Burma as a member in 1997, is starting to take a more aggressive approach on human rights abuses in Burma, led by the more dynamic foreign ministers of Thailand and the Philippines.

This is something Aung San Suu Kyi has always aimed for. Prior to the beginning of this year's general session of the office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights she asked that they not forget what is happening in her country, as she has done every year over the last decade.

Maybe this will be the year. Indeed she offers this conclusion towards the end of *The Voice of Hope*:

'Something that moves people to identify themselves with what is happening in Burma will raise the level of their consciousness. And you can never tell what that is.'

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

# On the case

*That Disreputable Firm ... The Inside Story of Slater & Gordon,*

by Michael Cannon, Melbourne University Press, 1998.

ISBN 0 522 84787 0, RRP \$39.95

**L**IKE MANY WHO HAVE read *That Disreputable Firm* I expected an account of the great battles fought by Slater & Gordon. Almost all within the legal profession admired the persistence with which this firm fought for asbestos sufferers, particularly from the Wittenoom mines in Western Australia. Somewhat more controversially, their recent work for the New Guinea landowners affected by the Ok Tedi mine attracted much interest, with the successful outcome of that bitterly fought case appearing to speak for itself. Less successful, but equally well fought, was a battle for the victims of abuse by the Christian Brothers in Western Australia. And underpinning all of this has been the sterling work carried out by the firm for hundreds of thousands of victims of accidents at work or in motor vehicles. It has been this work through which members of the Australian and, particularly, Victorian community have had contact with Slater & Gordon and for which many are grateful.

The accounts of these battles are grippingly told, the chapters dealing with Wittenoom and Ok Tedi being particularly moving. But, to this reviewer, the book's attraction lies first in its account of Labor history from World War I onwards.

How, one might ask, could Bill Slater possibly have gained election to the Victorian Parliament in 1917 as a Labor candidate, representing Dundas, the principal towns in which were Hamilton, Coleraine and Casterton? Perhaps the answer is that he was elected without campaigning for the very good reason that at that time he was immersed in the mud and blood of France while serving in the ambulance corps. Indeed, his sole contribution to the election was to sign a blank nomination form before departing for Europe.

Readers throughout the legal profession will be fascinated to learn that in 1924, Bill Slater succeeded Sir Arthur Robinson as Attorney-General and that thereafter, Sir Arthur gave young Bill a fearful bucketing from his elevated position in the Upper House. Both founded great, though entirely different, law firms. For those who have observed that 'Arthur Robs and Slaters'

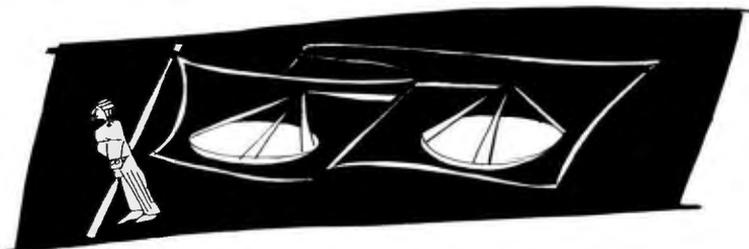
seem to have been fighting cases forever, this book provides confirmation. That is—if 70 years can be regarded as 'forever', which in a history as short as Australia's, it pretty well can be. Another extraordinary fact also emerges. At least in the last 30 years the turf wars fought between the 'labour firms' have been as robust as those against their conservative opposition. How ironical, therefore, that when Bill Slater needed legal work at Hamilton it was provided by Maurice Blackburn and that for a time the two practised as Blackburn & Slater—a combination which had not surfaced again until Slater & Gordon and Maurice Blackburn & Co recently announced that they are pooling their resources to represent the victims of the Longford gas explosion.

But it is the book's description of the firm's relationship with communism that I am sure will attract most interest. There is first the detailed and sympathetic portrayal of the late Ted Hill. What an extraordinary character! Born of parents who were by no means impoverished, Ted's uncompromising support of his political belief attracted interest as early as 1936. When Hugh Gordon, Bill Slater's partner, departed for service in the RAAF, Ted more than filled his shoes. He fought every battle there was to be fought for workers in Victoria. He also represented the Communist Party in its battles against the Menzies legislation designed to get rid of it. In his support for Stalinist communism, Ted attracted many unions to the clientele of Slater & Gordon and his subsequent declaration of support for the Chinese variety led to the loss of many friends, and a great many clients.

And then there is Ted's younger brother, Jim. He did not join Slater & Gordon until 1953 (and served as a much-loved partner for 20 years) but what an extraordinary eight years had preceded his arrival. Intelligence files first released in 1996 appear to make it certain that Jim was a Russian spy. Recruited by the infamous Ian Milner

to Foreign Affairs in 1945, he made information available to the Russians that was usually intercepted—by a technical unit based near Darwin—while being transmitted to Moscow. The only problem was that once our technicians had intercepted the material, the problem of decoding it was left to the British or the Americans. Once they saw what they were dealing with and Jim's role in it, they froze Australia out of secret communication without telling the hapless Dr Evatt why. The Department of Foreign Affairs was astute enough to transfer Jim to a variety of less sensitive positions. Those who have been critical of that Department in relation to the Petrov affair may need to reconsider their position once they have read this book.

In recent years, Slaters, previously very reliant upon trade union referrals for their work, have pioneered the advertising of 'no win—no fee' as a means of attracting clients from far and wide. As Cannon points out, for decades, solicitors, and indeed some barristers, practised on this basis, well



knowing that if their client was unsuccessful in a court action, the lawyers would not be paid. When the Law Institute freed up the advertising restrictions in the early 1980s, Slater & Gordon saw the potential. In turn, this has led to the recent handling of massive class actions which, again, are regarded with suspicion in certain quarters. But the truth is that they have opened the doors of the justice system to many victims of injury or other disaster, and for this the firm deserves great credit.

While the book is laudatory, the writer has not ignored the recent disastrous handling of the litigation brought by Cheryl Harris against Ian Smith MLA. And a number of other matters in which the firm was unsuccessful do receive the author's attention. Nevertheless, he reaches the conclusion that there are far more pluses than minuses, a conclusion that might not necessarily be shared by our Victorian Premier, whose contribution to the book was its name. ■

**Ian Dunn** is chief executive officer of the Law Institute of Victoria.



# PLAYTIME LIVE

**T**HE MELBOURNE *Age* of 1 April ran an obituary of Joan Rayner who died in March, just a few months short of her 100th birthday. The New Zealand-born Rayner sisters (Betty died in 1981) were among the pioneers of theatre for young people in Australia; they not only toured their own children's theatre shows throughout the country from 1948 to 1965, under the name of Australian Children's Theatre, but they also brought overseas attractions to Australia and gave countless local artists a start in the trade once they gave away performing themselves. Master puppeteer Richard Bradshaw was one artist who was nurtured by the Rayners; in fact, puppetry generally received great support from the sisters' entrepreneurial phase.

An event that must have given the Rayners considerable satisfaction (though they had no direct hand in it themselves) was the inauguration of the biennial Come Out Youth Arts Festival in Adelaide in 1975. Australia's first, and still most prominent, young people's arts festival, Come Out emerged from a youth arts program of the Adelaide Festival, which ran a small young people's component for some years prior to 1974. The Festival Board decided that a major metropolitan and regional festival of professional performances, workshops and school-based activity would take place in every 'odd' year (the Adelaide Festival itself occurring in the 'even' years) from 1975.

From 1975 to 1983, Come Out gained such strength and popularity that it outgrew its Adelaide Festival base and, in 1984, became an entirely separate body, with its own legal identity and an administrative centre based in the Carclew Youth Arts Centre in North Adelaide. In the meantime, many of the standard features of the Festival had become established. These included a substantial menu of professional theatre productions (many of which toured regional centres and schools in addition to their in-house metropolitan theatre seasons); a

young writers' program; a massive street parade and many other participatory activities which involved thousands of South Australian school-children, plus professional and school-based music, dance and visual arts events.

Interstate and overseas performing arts companies joined the many Adelaide-based companies to present specially commissioned or invited Come Out shows. By 1983, Come Out was regularly hosting (in association with Carclew and ASSITEJ—the international association for children's and youth theatre) a major conference of all of Australia's young people's theatre companies, plus many from abroad, alongside the festival itself. These were the salad days of Australian young people's theatre.

Not surprisingly, generational changes occurred and a new broom swept through the organisation in 1997—renaming the festival Take Over: Australian Festival for Young People. It focused on the work of local emerging artists aged 18–26, multimedia and technologically driven performance and visual arts, cyber arts, fashion and dance parties plus a substantial overseas performance component. Its centre was located in a specially built site (named Capital City) in Elder Park and the idea was for the whole thing to be staffed by young people who would thus 'take over' the festival city. In some ways, this makeover was designed to capitalise on the success of the 1996 Adelaide Festival's Red Square performance venue, and Take Over did make some appeal to the young adult age group but failed to capture the imagination of the younger age groups for whom the festival had traditionally catered. Even a planned National Youth Arts Forum was cancelled.

This rather ambitious experiment only lasted for one festival (if it wasn't broken, why try to fix it?) and this year Come Out has come back with most of its traditional elements intact, although with no international component. My sampling of the 1999 professional theatre program revealed

a judicious blend of local and interstate companies targeting audiences across the school-age spectrum from Kindergarten to Year 12. And while audiences for some evening performances were disappointing, the festival board's decision to revert to the old Come Out formula was clearly vindicated by the fact that the daytime shows for schools (which constitute the bulk of the programme) were 92 per cent sold out.

One show for littlies was *Playpen*, by the composer and performer Linsey Pollack. Commissioned for last year's Out Of The Box Festival of Early Childhood in Brisbane, *Playpen* is a deft little piece about a baby (artfully played in a giant nappy by Pollack) who discovers and explores the musical potential of his oversized playpen and the objects within it. The pen's rungs, for example, are tuned like a giant upright marimba; they also light up spectacularly when played. His teddy bear is equipped with a microphone and a sampler, which provides the 'rhythm beds' for the percussive melodies on the 'marimba'—as well as a very loud fart or two! Likewise, a feeding bottle becomes a flute and balloons become bagpipes. It's a terrific idea but, for all its digital and luminescent technology, the show runs out of steam a bit before the end.

Another show for primary-aged kids was an adaptation of one of the ubiquitous Tim Winton's stories, *The Bugalugs Bum Thief*, from Fremantle's Spare Parts Puppet Theatre. I found this extremely popular show limited in its means; it is essentially a three-handed spoken-word narrative illustrated by some attractive dance, slide projections, a couple of rod puppets and an effective bit of shadow puppetry. But the kids loved the obvious bum jokes, the simple detective story and the visual gags of the characters trying to go about their lives minus their bottoms, not to mention the antics of a giant crayfish. *Bugalugs* will be back for a return season at Spare Parts' excellent Fremantle theatre from 7 June to 10 July.

One of the most impressive shows for secondary students was an original work entitled *Visible Darkness* from Patch Theatre Company, which is now the only professional young people's theatre company in Adelaide, following a restructure occasioned by the recent drastic reduction in Australia Council funding to theatre in that city. This very high-tech show is a complex amalgam of dance, puppetry, film, 'smart lighting', a driving rock soundscape and a brilliant set whose mobile components are endlessly reconfigured to make prison walls, a skateboard ramp or a playsheaf for expertly operated long-rod puppets. The whole thing is put together by Patch's new Artistic Director Ken Evans (late of Handspan Visual Theatre) and Jonathan Taylor (founder of Australian Dance Theatre in Adelaide many years ago) together with lighting designer Philip Lethlean, puppet maker Colleen Crapper and costumier Anne Rabone. It's one of those pieces whose collaborative whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The show focuses first on two alienated individual teenagers (a latter-day Juliet and Romeo?) and their relationship to a darkly surreal urban world which confines and threatens them in different ways. This is all portrayed in contemporary dance; not a word is spoken. Both are reinforced in their attitudes by the demon of peer-group pressure, represented by a 'chorus' of dancers from the Out-Rageous Youth Dance Company. But he finds an outlet for his pent-up energies when he rediscovers his prison walls—now tilted at impossible angles—as a surface for some dazzling skateboarding. She has an inkling of better things in the form of a film showing a future self projected on to her blouse. Both receive visits from illuminated little guiding-light spirit puppets and soon enough the two meet in a joyous *pas-de-deux* of lyrical grace alternating with gawky teenage energy. *Visible Darkness* might suffer a bit from repetitiousness and an over-abundance of special effects

but it speaks powerfully to its teenage audience.

**A**T THE OTHER END of the technological spectrum is *The Stones* from the Melbourne-based Zeal Theatre. This is a two-hander written and performed by Stefo Nantsou and Tom Lycos, who play several different characters each with no more than a couple of carpenter's saw-horses, an aluminium ladder, the most minimal of costume alterations and their own vocalised sound

effects to support their superlative acting skills. *The Stones* is based on an incident in Melbourne when two teenagers throwing stones off a pedestrian bridge over a freeway killed a motorist passing below.

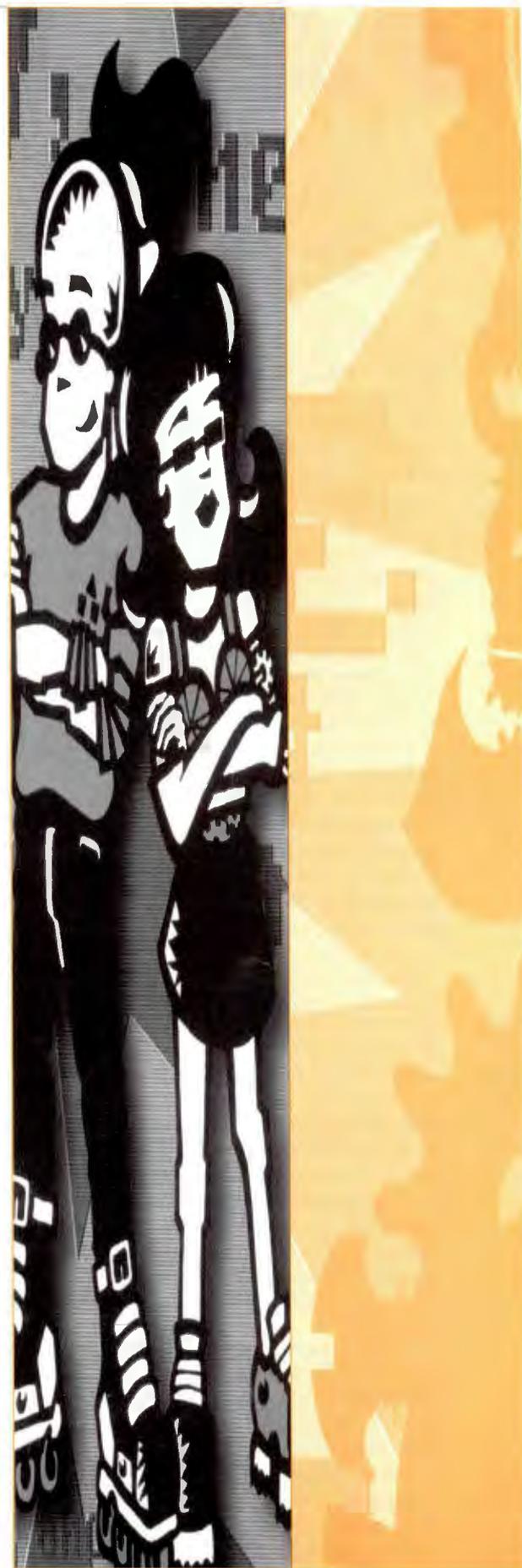
Zeal's show begins by engaging our interest in two lads aged 13 and 15 whose relatively harmless pranks include a botched warehouse break-in via a sewerage drain, trying to pinch the badge off a BMW and trying to set fire to a cat: all this in evocative mime and streetwise dialect. The boys' behaviour is intercut by scenes involving a pair of shambling cops trying to catch the miscreants. So far the play is light-hearted and at times wickedly funny. But when the main incident occurs, the tone changes markedly. You could hear a pin drop as the play goes on to portray the inevitable aftermath, including the trial and community attitudes towards the incident. Zeal don't merely present the case; without a hint of didacticism, they reveal the complex issues of juvenile justice, youth alienation, parental responsibility and police sensibilities.

This is a stunningly good piece of theatre, brilliantly conceived and superbly performed. Theatre in education is clearly not dead yet; it is certainly practised by fewer companies but I have never seen it done better than this in 25 years.

As if to underline the power of a theatre that depends on the imagination rather than technology, and on genuine emotion and real issues rather than the trendy fashions of the cyber age, *Come Out* also brought in the Riverina Theatre Company's production (from Wagga Wagga) of Tony Strachan's 1984 play *State of Shock*. This portrays, in fictionalised fashion, the events leading up to and following the murder of Deirdre Gilbert on a Queensland Aboriginal reserve in 1979 by her de facto husband Alwyn Peter and—like *The Stones*—it does so with a minimum of props and staging and an emphasis on the character-acting skills of two young Aboriginal actors (Trisha Morton-Thomas and Lee Willis) and one whitefella (Jim Holt) who play the five characters in this moving drama with a simple and unaffected truth.

So welcome back, *Come Out*; I'll be there again in 2001. Meanwhile, fans of young people's theatre can look forward to Perth's Awesome International Children's Festival in November and Brisbane's Out Of The Box Festival next June. ■

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



# FLASH IN THE PAN

## Break up laughing

*Divorcing Jack*, dir. David Caffrey. Black comedy is an elusive concept. It's all in the recipe, the delicate balance between frequently offensive reality and visual and oral humour which is part of the main theme. When it goes wrong, often it is because the horrific events dominate and the humour is crushed.

This time the humour is intermingled with a story about the lunacy which is the Troubles in Belfast.

Set in 1999, the election of the first Prime Minister of an independent Northern Ireland is just days away. David Thewlis is Starkey, a satirical columnist for the *Belfast Evening News*. He is an identity in his own right both for this and his public boozing. Distrustful of all politicians, he is no less cynical about the candidate most likely to be elected the new Prime Minister.

Kicked out of his home by his wife because of a flirtation with a young woman he has met, he spends the night with her. Returning to her flat, he finds the girl bloodily murdered and not only does he become a prime suspect but inextricably involved in kidnapping, blackmail and political intrigue.

As Starkey tries to sort out who is killing whom and why, the violence is overlaid by some good one-liners and sight gags, the best of which is our hero Starkey's prized limited-edition Clash single being cooked in a sandwich-maker by his very angry wife.

However, the laughs come slowly, simply because it is difficult to come to grips with humour in the context of violence which is realistic, bloody and repulsive.

Against this background, the comic characters are sprinkled like salt and pepper. The best of these is Rachel Griffiths as Lee the NHS nurse who moonlights as a nunogram (see right, in more sober garb in *Hilary and Jackie*).

The title of the film itself is a great joke and Thewlis' performance as Starkey gradually transforms a 'loud mouth, fond of women, drinking and shit-stirring', into someone to care about.

As a political thriller the film has disturbing impact. As 'a riotous comedy thriller' (that's how it's touted), it left me feeling uncomfortable and unsatisfied.

In the screamingly funny *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, murder and mayhem are a self-contained joke, but *Divorcing Jack* never banishes a sense of reality to make way for the humour.

I haven't read Colin Bateman's book upon which the film is based and it may be hilarious. Words often soften violence while the camera simply records it.

—Gordon Lewis

## Ironing out Humbert

*Lolita*, dir. Adrian Lyne. Now the censorship squall is over (what a misdirected effort it was), Adrian Lyne's sober cinematic raid on the capricious genius of Vladimir Nabokov may turn some film-goers into new readers of the book which started all the fuss. *Lolita* was a shock to the imagination in 1955, and the intervening 45 years have only sharpened its edge. I wonder sometimes if the US Customs had any idea what they were doing when they stamped the visa of the urbane butterfly collector from Russia. Not all anarchy comes with plastic explosives in its briefcase.

Lyne's film is a serious work, almost too scrupulous—it has a wash of commemoration over it. Howard Atherton's cinematography is exquisite, but it is the beauty of nostalgia. In the 1950s Nabokov was discovering America, not burying it. But it is hard to recreate cinematically the brash verve of a confident post-war America that has been refiguring itself in endless stereotype ever since. Lyne has great technical skill but a rehearsed imagination.

And then there is Jeremy Irons. His Humbert Humbert is a great performance, just not the right one. Nabokov's Humbert spoke in tongues, all the rich, dire experience of 20th-century Europe in his range. Irons' voice—and we hear it right from the opening scene, narrating faithfully in his lapidary fashion—has a simpler cadence of elegy which sets the mood for the entire film. Irony in aspic.

Nonetheless, there are some great sequences. Melanie Griffith as Lolita's mother, Charlotte Haze, is almost unwatchably good—so vulnerable in her venial pretensions that you want to intervene—maybe wipe the smudge from her lipstick. Dominique Swain is surprising and complex as Lolita, sustaining the role through to her last scene where, pregnant and detached, she is able—as Irons is not—

to convey both the banality and the tragedy of a life lived out of sequence and corrupted from without and within. Frank Langella, as the blithe professional paedophile, Clare Quilty, is the actor who best catches Nabokov's basilisk apprehension of evil. Quilty knows what he does and glories in it. 'Granddaughters?' he offers. The final scenes, where Humbert seeks his perverse salvation in Quilty's slaying, are a Jacobean slaughterhouse, ludicrous and terrifying—and as close as Adrian Lyne comes to the darkness of Vladimir Nabokov's conjurings, to his 'nightmare of wonder'.

—Morag Fraser

## Four X or a Guinness?

*The Craic*, dir. Ted Emery. The three greatest Irish cultural exports, as everybody knows, have been Jim Stynes, Jim Joyce and Jimeoin. Stynes and Joyce have both retired or, as Joyce might have said, got out of their boots and given them the hang-ups. That leaves Jimeoin as the sole active custodian of thousands of years of wit and wisdom. It's a mighty responsibility that he brings to his film, *The Craic*, and he handles it with all the subtlety of a man who gets a laugh out of sticking his proboscis in the foam on the top of a Guinness. Jimeoin has tried to protect his rich heritage by hiding it within a funny bit of a film. He has put serious culture hounds off the scent by distracting them with a few harmless belly laughs at the expense of a host of stock characters. But the discerning viewer will not be deceived.

Fergus (Jimeoin) and Wesley (Alan McKee) have overstayed their tourist visas in Australia and are now dodging the immigration police. This is a coded account of the Irish exodus from the famine last century. The many occasions on which Fergus and Wesley are seen stuffing their faces make clear the fact that they are dealing with a backlog of cultural angst. They are pursued by an IRA chap whom they have disobliged back home. His name is Colin. Colin has no pretty face, an obvious allusion to the terrible beauty of the Easter Uprising in 1916. Fergus goes on to a TV game show called 'The Meet Market' to find a date. This is a clumsy attempt to deal with the divorce debate and the role of Catholicism in contemporary Ireland. Fergus and Wesley get in a kombi van and go to central Australia, a thinly disguised attempt to discredit the urban preoccupations of Roddy Doyle's *The Van*. They end up watching TV in a pub. This demonstrates

the marginalisation of poets such as Seamus Heaney. And so it goes on. You see, if you look long enough at it through the bottom of a beer glass, *The Craic* is a masterpiece.

—Michael McGirr

## Ingrown and overblown

*Happiness*, dir. Todd Solondz. *Happiness* reminded me a little of the films of Peter Greenaway, but without the baroque excess. Here is dull hell, it seems to be saying. This is how grimly and obsessively and meanly evil or selfish we can be. Here is the evidence of it all laid out on the table where it can go rancid and rot while your eyes linger.

Mine didn't linger much. Maybe I missed the black comedy that so excited Cannes that they gave it the 1998 International Critics Prize. Maybe it was the visual claustrophobia of the film that made it hard to bear. *Happiness* is shot in a succession of stifling interiors: over-furnished restaurants, upholstered domestic interiors, grimy apartments, corridors, concrete streetscapes, seedy taxis. The lives of the characters also grow inward, like toenails. Solipsism rules. In this world fathers rape small boys, pathetic mad women dismember doormen, lonely men fantasise violently while they masturbate, sex is exploitation and no wind blows.

But I didn't come away convinced I'd seen caustic satire, dark comedy or even brutal realism. Frankly, I just felt manipulated. And distracted by a mash of genre. Almodóvar one moment (well, not quite—that was the trouble) and New Jersey sitcom the next. There were moments, and some performances, that in a less unrelieved context might have been memorable. But in a stew that blends guts, shin, sirloin, testicles and packet gravy, you are unlikely to remember the spiced chicken drumstick.

—Morag Fraser

## Praiseworthy

*Praise*, dir. John Curran. Gordon (played by muso Peter Fenton in his first screen role) is an apathetic, underachieving, alcohol-abusing, chain-smoking asthmatic, who's opted so far out of society, connection, the world, that he barely exists in it at all. Somehow, through absolutely no effort of his own, he drifts into a relationship with Cynthia (Sacha Horler, in an absolute ripsnorter of a performance). Cynthia is subtle as a sledgehammer, has chronic eczema and likes sex A LOT. All the time.

Morning, noon and night. Again. And again. And again ... Gordon, who freely admits to having a small dick and a libido matched only by his ambition, is in trouble right from the start, and boy does he know it (in a lot of ways Cynthia is the embodiment of a peculiarly Australian misogynist nightmare/fantasy about women in general).

Gordon and Cynthia are matched only in their capacity for self-destruction; asked why he smokes despite his asthma, Gordon says that smoking actually helps his asthma, makes him feel better. This tension between utterly self-destructive behaviour and the physical and emotional anaesthetic it offers while pulling you apart, is a current that flows through Gordon and Cynthia's relationship; for all that the relationship is a solace for them both, it's also a violence they each choose to inflict, not on each other so much as upon themselves. This is



all very bleak, but the film is also very funny, and in its own weird way, joyous and uplifting, in the way only a really good film can be; the performances are great, the soundtrack (by Australian band The Dirty Three) exactly right, and the casting is some of the best I've seen in an Australian film. John Curran's direction of Andrew McGahan's script for *Praise* (adapted from McGahan's Vogel prize-winning novel of the same name) captures the feel of the book almost more successfully than the book itself. In case you can't tell, I really like this film; go see it.

—Allan James Thomas

## Double stopping

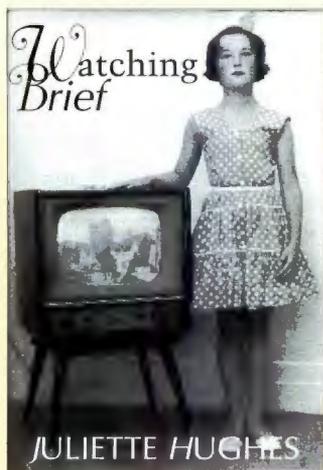
*Hilary and Jackie*, dir. Anand Tucker. Tracing the movements of a life is a complicated business. Tracing the movements of art is no pushover either. *Hilary and Jackie* attempts to do both. Examining the fraught relationship between the two precociously talented du Pré sisters, *Hilary and Jackie* attempts to strike a balance between 'genius bio-pic' and family drama.

On the whole this film is enormously moving and pitch-perfect. Rachel Griffith (left) and Emily Watson are wonderful in the title roles. Both the writing and the performances show a deep understanding of the profound and fragile relationship that so dominated their lives. Ferocious loyalty and an unnerving capacity for love mark out their relationship like an insistent metronome. The two central performances are supported by a host of handsomely realised bit parts. Charles Dance and Celia Imrie are perfect as proud but frightened parents, and David Morrissey puts in an appropriately charming performance as Hilary's husband, Kiffer.

But while beautifully scripted and performed, the film is strangely clunky in structure. Awkward and unnecessary use of titles labours otherwise subtle transitions, and the spot inclusions of famous figures such as Margot Fonteyn only highlights narrative indecision about the film's purpose. (The actor playing Fonteyn looked more like a blow-up doll than one of the most graceful women ever to walk the earth.)

But the heart and lungs, in fact all the vital organs of this film, are in fine fettle. *Hilary and Jackie* is moving in the extreme and, if it's possible, has added even more emotional fire to Jacqueline du Pré's interpretation of Elgar's cello concerto.

—Siobhan Jackson



## Lust in action

**B**ILLY CONNOLLY is a rare being who can give welcome surprises about ourselves: the utterly comic figures humans cut as brains in charge of genitals, or vice versa. How much more convenient, he said once, if, like dogs, our urges were seasonal. (Much hilarious dumbshow accompanied this, but

to try to describe it would be the written equivalent of people who tell you his anecdotes in a Finnish accent, made more opaque by their own snorts of laughter and the arguments of bystanders, who insist 'No, it was like this—'.)

Humans, poor things, perpetually on heat, lusting after shadows in the mind and on the page and on the screen. When we can laugh at ourselves it is an antidote to tragedy; the sententiousness of S&M forbids mirth. No-one dressing up in those black leather thingies can have anything approaching what the desperately-seeking columns call a GSOH.

So why am I worried about the way sex is being handled, for want of a better word, in the comedies that churn through the television? Soaps have always dealt with sex, and still do, but always in the context of some tragic dilemma. In fact most soaps take this responsibility seriously, 'dealing' with various issues as the storyline develops. In some ways it has been good—it's no longer acceptable to judge single parents, or indeed anyone's adult, consenting personal choices. Television, ever available, never sleeping, spreads a new generation's desires around fast as thought, for it must hold the attention to survive. A program that does not deliver buyers does not last long, and the programmers know that if they can just package and focus it at the right demographic, sex will pull in the punters.

Tolerance and free choice are fine by me. But sometimes the shallowness and the frippiness of American comedies get me worrying. I laugh heartily at Billy Connolly, recently on Seven, and *Absolutely Fabulous*, *Father Ted*, *The Young Ones*, *Bottom*, *Red Dwarf*, *The Vicar of Dibley*, *Good News Week*. But it's rare for American sex comedy to be at all funny (early *Nanny* and *Third Rock from the Sun* episodes were exceptions) and this deserves comment, particularly since they spend so much damn money on sex. According to Germaine Greer, in *The Whole Woman*, Americans spend \$8 billion a year on pornography in some form or other—more than on Hollywood movies. That brilliant series, *Big Girls' Blouse*, had a skit which for me summed up the whole dilemma. It was an oblique comment on the fact that Roseanne had bought the rights to *Absolutely Fabulous* and was planning to cast Elizabeth Taylor and Carrie Fisher, God preserve us, as Edina and Patsy. (Interesting that other countries rarely if ever buy the *ideas* behind American sitcoms.) The *BGB* skit had Marg Downey and Magda Szubanski being Liza Minnelli and Katherine Hepburn doing the Parrot sketch from *Monty Python*. It was all there, the 'love me, love me, I'm a legend' attitude, the total incomprehension of what the sketch was about, the dialogue slashed to inanities, all with a final ecstatic bow to rapturously block-headed studio applause. Downey and Szubanski were yet another indication that the colonial heritage of this country, however flawed, has its upside: no-one needs to translate anarchic humour for Australians. But even after

all the comedy in the White House, US television is getting filthier but not funnier.

In *Nine's Friends*, watched hugely around the country, and screened at prime time, there is a spot of envelope-pushing (Rachel and Monica's casual affairs, Phoebe's surrogate motherhood, Ross' lesbian ex-wife, et al) but an episode last year went too far for the timeslot, and tainted the show's charm. The boys, Chandler and Joey, win the girls' apartment (much nicer than theirs) on a bet, and the episode is concerned with the girls' efforts to persuade the boys to give it back. Finally, the girls offer to kiss each other in front of the boys for half a minute. Cut to the boys leaving the girls' place looking hot and bothered, and going to their own rooms and shutting the doors, presumably to masturbate. This screened at 7.30pm.

American comedies are absolutely obsessed with masturbation, but whereas the *Seinfeld* episode 'The Contest' that began the trend was actually funny, because it had something to do with the repellent nature of George, things like the *Drew Carey* effort at cybersex between the main guy and Mimi, a hated co-worker, are loathly. Most kids are still watching at its 8pm timeslot, and the world is a sad, ugly enough place without young minds being given images of losers wanking at computer terminals.

**T**HE NADIR IS *RUDE AWAKENING*. Ten screens it lateish on Thursday nights, but the expletives fly, there is contrived and deliberately sleazy nudity, and of course, a sanctimonious subtext. On one level, no prude should fear: it makes one seriously consider the advantages of celibacy. It's about an alcoholic TV actress: we get all the stuff about 12 Steps so the producers can argue the series has worthiness while the script has the actors boasting about butt plugs. Watching it, I caught myself yearning for *Gone with the Wind*, or *Anne of Green Gables* or *Romeo and Juliet*.

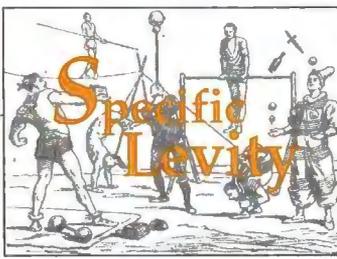
Shakespeare got it about right when dealing with sex. He showed us to ourselves as sexual beings, funny, ribald, enraptured, dangerous when crossed and more vulnerable if female. It was even more dangerous to be a woman in the 17th century, when memories of a flagrantly adulterous father who could order the deaths of her mother and stepmother—for adultery—made Elizabeth I avoid marriage like the pox which had eventually killed the incontinent Henry VIII. Shakespeare knew disgust as well as bawdry and high-toned tragedy; when we can't joke or rhapsodise about sex, we should be afraid, and are, like Lear on the heath.

Blake saw this too; fused it awesomely with beauty:

O Rose, thou art sick!	
The invisible worm	
That flies in the night,	Has found out thy bed
In the howling storm,	Of crimson joy:
	And his dark secret love
	Does thy life destroy.

Our sexual life is a mighty complex of impulse and feeling and reflection; the chase for satiety complicated infinitely by the will for intimacy and the probability of procreation. Sex is something intensely private, which we continually force out to contemplate, because of its ramifications. There, narcissism and the grey urge to dominate fuse with love and life and death. And we can still laugh. ■

Juliette Hughes is a freelance reviewer.



## Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 73, May 1999

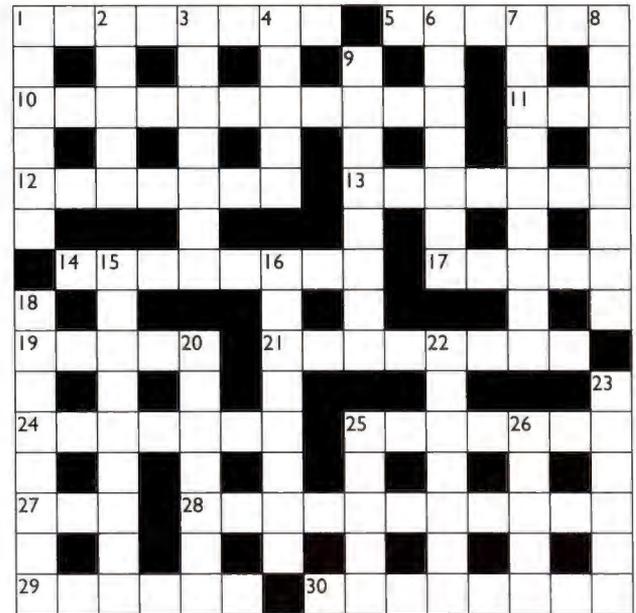
Devised by Joan Nowotny IBVM

### ACROSS

1. Enid sits about in disorder? Quite the reverse! (8)
5. Exclamation of surprise may trouble each excited runner at the start. (6)
10. I stand before the portal in singlet only? Enquire about this situation. (11)
11. I will, in short, in such circumstances feel nauseated. (3)
12. Everyone, for instance, newsman declared suspect. (7)
13. Lass with the takings is a silly fool. (7)
14. Phone is engaged? Person talking is such a meddler! (8)
17. Only pressure could affect this support structure. (5)
19. Such a drink could get you tied up with the police for being over .05. (5)
21. The answer would be clear-cut if sceptic could possibly ignore time. (8)
24. The islands in the Pacific where girl is not available. (7)
25. Commercial poetry would be contrary to our interests. (7)
27. Here thou, great Anna, whom three realms obey  
Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes ... (Pope: *The Rape of the Lock*). (3)
28. Calmly contemplate, without Ecstasy, the pure lucid elements of beauty! (11)
29. Pattern could be houndstooth or one of mine. (6)
30. To find the solution, come in here with books—it's essential. (8)

### DOWN

1. Perhaps a win at Lotto would get me a trip to the country. (6)
2. Nick would, in the end, sin. (5)
3. Bill happy to present a posy. (7)
4. I raced around and kept watch. (5)
6. Partly cover the bowl or the cat may drink too much. (7)
7. The poll takes place mid vulgar shouts for attention—such common people! (3,6)
8. Call about story going up in the telling! (8)
9. Fish and gentile (so called) the French carved in a spout at Chartres, possibly. (8)
15. Measure with curtain swirling about? It's doubtful. (9)
16. Let us, perhaps, bolt case to floor. (8)
18. In Peru, fantastic Lima ticker-tape parade depends on the weather. (8)
20. Late camera movement—showing little emotion. (7)
22. Bill is singing well. (7)
23. Be sorry salesman meets specialist medico. (6)
25. Drained of colour when layer appears. (5)
26. Get up and growl. (5)



### Solution to Crossword no. 72, April 1999



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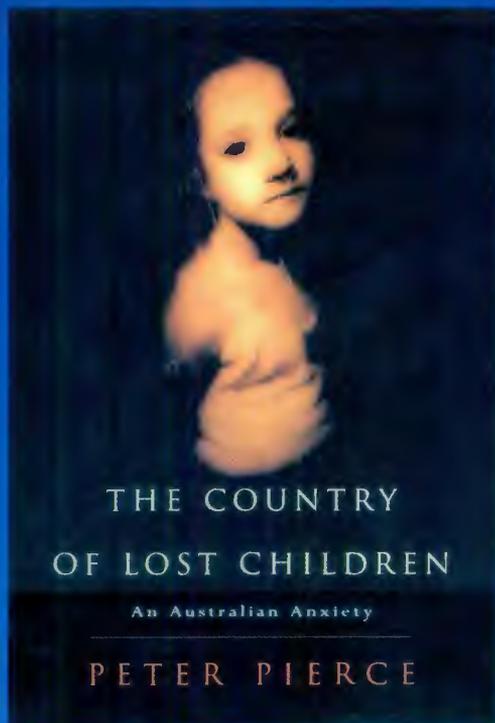
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