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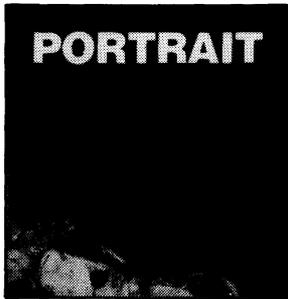
Special Issue  
LITERATURE AND LOCALITY

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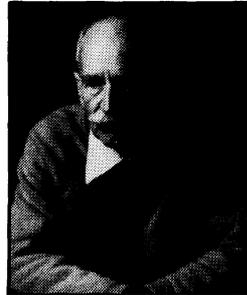
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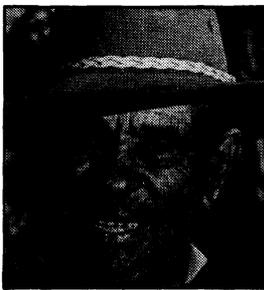
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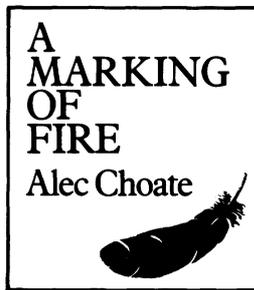
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## OBITUARY

*Westerly* notes with sadness the death of John O'Brien who edited *Westerly* from 1962 to 1965. This was the period in which the magazine first received Commonwealth Government funding and began publishing as a quarterly.

# WESTERLY

a quarterly review

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## PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The Patricia Hackett prize for outstanding contributions to *Westerly* has been awarded by the Editors as follows:

1984

Joan London for her story 'Travelling' in *Westerly*, no. 4, December 1984 (\$400).

Joan London was born in Perth and educated at the University of Western Australia. Her first published story appeared in *Decade*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, in 1982.

1985

Marion Halligan for her story 'A Whiff of Brimstone' in *Westerly* no. 4, December 1985 (\$200).

Marion Halligan, born in Newcastle, New South Wales, now teaches part-time and writes in Canberra.

John Barton for his poems 'In the Year Of', 'At the Delta's Edge' and 'The Moabite' in *Westerly* no. 1, March 1985. (\$200).

John Barton lives in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. His first book of poems, *A Poor Photographer* was published in 1981.

STEPHANIE JOHNSON

## You'll Sleep With No Other

Once there was a blank. As blanks often are, it was white. It was propped up on two wooden legs, and was very bored with itself and everything around it. Especially the five lanes that roared in front of it and gave it a headache.

One day two men and a woman parked a blue van on the grass verge. They unloaded ladders, some buckets of paste, and several large cylinders of paper. The woman leaned a ladder against the blank with a thud.

"Ouch" said the blank, but nobody heard it.

The woman began to slop paste from her bucket onto the blank with a paintbrush. The blank sighed. The day was very hot and the glue very cool, if a little sticky. After a while the woman climbed down and moved her ladder along. One of the men pushed a ladder up where her's had been. Thunk.

"Ow" said the blank. But nobody heard it.

The man unfurled a long piece of paper and pounded it very firmly so it stuck. Below him the other man pasted and pounded other bits of paper. The blank was slowly disappearing.

"Am I dying?" it thought.

Eventually all three packed away the ladders and the glue and stood back to admire their work. They'd made a picture of a beautiful young man, stretched out as if he'd just woken up.

"Pretty isn't he?" said one of the men.

Then the blue van drove away.

"Hullo" said the blank, a bit muffled.

"Hullo" said the beautiful young man, "Where am I?"

"Don't ask me" said the blank, "I've asked before myself, but nobody hears me."

"Who am I then?" asked the young man.

"You?" asked the blank, "Don't ask me. I don't even know who I am."

Then the blank was silent. The young man looked at his downy arms and dark brown nipples in his hairless chest and realised he was beautiful. He felt his legs under the sheet and knew he was strong. His penis pressed hard against the linen, making a little tent. Around him the traffic screamed, and people walked in and out of their houses on the other side of the five lanes.

Presently two girls dressed the same came and stood underneath him. They were in school uniform, but the young man wasn't to know that. He'd never been to school.

"Look at that" said one girl who had silver bars glinting on her teeth.

"Isn't he a spunk?"

"Yeah" said the other girl. She scurried round behind the blank.

"She's lighting a cigarette" said the blank, trembling slightly, "I hope she doesn't set us on fire."

The young man didn't reply. Through half closed eyes he was examining the remaining girl. She was staring up at him with a look on her face that made his penis lie down flat again. The other girl reappeared.

"I think he's fucking beautiful" breathed the girl with the metal mouth.

"Yeah" said the other girl, breathing smoke.

"He's a prince" said the first girl.

"Yeah" said the smoking girl, "Wouldn't you like to meet the real thing, but?"

They laughed and the metal mouth flashed. They walked on, smoke curling around their heads.

"The real thing?" asked the young man, "I am the real thing."

"She told you what you are, anyway" said the blank

"What was that?"

"A prince" said the blank. "I must say it's awfully hot under you."

"Prince of what?" asked the young man.

But the blank was silent.

Later, just before sundown a very old swallow flew by. She perched on top of the blank and panted.

"I'm a prince" said the young man.

"Uh huh" said the swallow, which was all she could manage.

"What am I prince of?" asked the young man.

"Everything you can see around you" replied the swallow, and flew off.

The young man swivelled his eyeballs around. For three days and three nights he watched and learned. Through the windows of the houses opposite he saw people eating and making love. He saw them sitting in front of mirrors taking black shadows off their faces, or reddening pursed lips with pink sticks. He saw children sitting at tables laden with food, screaming for an alternative.

On the third day two women stopped. One of them glanced at him.

"Turn you on?" she said.

"I think it's disgusting" said the other woman, bending to her bootlaces, "I think it's consumerist sex, inverted sexism."

"Well — at least the boys are doing it to each other" replied the first woman, "No need to graffitti this one."

"What's he advertising?" asked the bootlace woman, straightening up.

"Who cares?" said the first woman, taking Bootlace's arm, leading her off.

"Consumerist sex? Inverted sexism? Advertising? What's that?" asked the young man, baffled.

At least the young man knew now he was a Prince of Sensuality, where people walked about draped in satin sheets eating avocado with their fingers; and Prince of Vanity where there were so many mirrors people often found themselves talking to mere reflections for hours. He knew he was Prince of Plenty where everybody always wanted more; and Prince of Noise reigning supreme above the grinding cars, where people talked loudly about nothing and slowly grew deaf.

He could see for miles. He could see over the five lanes, and the pink and yellow terraced houses, and the wattle and clotheslines in the gardens. He could see over the Barracks to the golf course. He could see through the smog to the tops of the very tall buildings like tall rich ladies, ugly with flashing diamond lights and grimy pearls. And beyond them he could see the Blue Mountains, far off. The young man knew that the mountains meant the boundary of his Kingdom. He wondered if they were in fact, another prince. A prince so huge that he was distinguishable all around the edge of the city. This other prince did not seem to move much except for inching a little closer on fine days. The young man wasn't worried. He couldn't move any more than an eyeball either, and even then only very discreetly.

All day everyday he lay stretched out on the cream bed, his naked torso open to the grey-streaked rain or blistering sun. Above his sleepy mouth and just visible tongue dangled a bunch of purple grapes held at the stalk by a white hand with crimson talons. The hand puzzled the young man. He wondered who it belonged to. Occasionally, when his mouth was dry, he would demand that the grapes be lowered. But the hand remained immobile, the red nails glistening.

Below the young man's bed there was a sentence. The letters marched along, hiccuping at the many exclamation marks and hyphens, but making it to the edge of the blank all the same. The young man wondered what the sentence said.

The summer pounded on. There was a gap when everybody went away, the word "Christmas" on their lips, avarice in their eyes and pockets jingling lighter each time they walked past. This was when the young man discovered he was lonely. For a month now the blank had been quiet, as quiet as blanks should be. And loneliness was not the young man's only discomfort. He'd noticed his chest was bubbling, little blisters rising and tearing. The sheets were fraying, and although he wasn't sure, the young man felt he was lying on more of a slant than usual. He wondered if his beauty was impaired.

One evening, just before sundown the young man heard a familiar fluttering. The old swallow had returned. She sat on top of the blank, picking nits from under her wings. He waited for her to speak, to acknowledge his presence. Finally he cleared his throat.

"Don't you remember me?" he asked.

"Immm" said the swallow, her head beneath her wing.

"I'm the Prince of Everything I See Around Me" he continued.

"Immm" said the swallow, scratching her chest.

"Um" said the young man, "Would you do me a favour?"

"If it's quick" said the swallow.

"I've got a sentence under me. Do you know what it says?"

"A sentence?" said the swallow, "Once I sat outside a jail and heard them talk about their sentences. Are you in for long?"

"I don't know" answered the young man, "Do all princes live in jails?"

"Hang on a tick" said the swallow, taking flight.

The young man looked down on her beating wings as she followed his sentence along the bottom of the bed.

"It says" said the swallow on her return, getting ready for the recital, "'Once You've Slept With Prince You'll Sleep With No Other'. And underneath that it says 'Billboard Enterprises Ltd'".

"But I sleep alone!" said the young man.

"It's a kind of mattress" said the swallow, "You're an advertisement." And flew off.

After that the young man grew sadder and sadder. He hardly noticed when people returned from their holidays and once again the five lanes were clogged with cars.

One morning, around dawn, two men walked hand in hand along the road and paused beneath him. They passed a sweet smelling cigarette between them and looked up at his blistered chest and face.

"He hasn't enjoyed the summer any more than you have, love" said the man who's turn it was with the sweet cigarette.

"I bet his bum isn't as red as mine is" said the other man, uncomfortable in his tight pants.

"He's become an affront" continued the first man, "I rather fancied him when he first went up."

"Oh — you'd fancy anything up" said the one with sunburn. He reached up and peeled away a bit of the sentence.

"Once You've Slept With Prince You'll Sleep With No Other" he chanted, and laughed. They embraced, for a long time, breathing through their noses.

Just after sun up, it rained. It was the first rain since well before Christmas. With his one unblistered eye the Prince watched the people coming out of the houses opposite. They were smiling.

"Thank goodness it's rained" they said, "That ought to lower the temperature."

If his people were glad about it, then he ought to be too, reasoned the Prince. Although the rain had weakened the last remaining scrap of paper that held his right arm to his shoulder. While it had previously cushioned his handsome head on the generous pillows, it now drifted about the footpath. The young man watched it disappear under the blank, to be tangled up in the long grass and fraternize with the paper bags.

When the sun was at it's highest two women and a man pulled up in a blue van with 'Billboard Enterprises Ltd' written on it. They surveyed the Prince.

"Just as well he's got to come down" said the man, "He's coming away from the board."

With that they raised the ladders and began tearing and ripping at the young man.

He commanded them to stop.

He screamed in agony.

But nobody heard him.

After they'd gone, the blank woke up from its long summer sleep.

TERRY HARRINGTON

## Family Tree

In a winter forest my grandfather with a broadaxe  
lays a tree in the powder snow, the sap already frozen,  
its deep groan running up the grain to the highest leaf  
& down to the last clay-wet hairs of the tap-root. He sits  
on the loin-cut, dabbing a handkerchief, puffing his lips.  
My father runs in from his given perimeter, clapping his  
hands.

He likes the way fathers shake the earth, the way earth  
receives his shakings. He shakes me out of such loins

\*

later. The wind shifts around uncomfortably to the north  
&

exhales. I am sitting on a vinyl chair loose  
in my singlet & underpants sweating onto the lino.

I have been pursuing my life, intermittently, with one  
hand

scratching . . . crotch . . . crotch . . . crotch . . . the  
other hand

feeling for the plate of sandwiches & drink no longer  
there.

\*

The cat has crept in close to my feet & frames  
a question with its tail. I look at the full stops of its tits  
& realise what its womb is wondering. When I find Such-  
a-one

squashed & grinning on the road, will I again give it a  
full colon:

\*

A pee on the citrus at dusk is giving the past a shake.  
like a shell thrown up on a page from nowhere now here.

LINDY PERCIVAL

## The Dolls

Catherine sat listening for the car. She glanced around the lounge room and inspected the carpet. Everything was neat, clean. She breathed heavily and relaxed. Nothing to worry about. She was startled by a short blast of a car horn which heralded the arrival of her mother.

"Have to see you." Her mother's insistent voice. The call had woken Catherine at quarter to eight. "I didn't get you out of bed did I?" The horrified voice. Since then Catherine had been cleaning and cooking. A tray of scones was cooling in the kitchen, in front of the window.

"Hello darling." The kiss was dry. The lips hardly moved. The woman brushed past her, looking. Catherine was amazed at how quickly those eyes could move, checking, assessing. She knew there was nothing her mother could fault, not today.

"You're looking peaked, Catherine."

Catherine smiled. A weak, helpless smile.

"Cup of tea?"

"Why not?" Catherine moved past her mother, feeling herself shuffle slightly, hearing her slippers squeak on the linoleum. Aware of those eyes on her.

"So how are things my dear?"

Catherine nodded in reply. She watched as the butter melted and disappeared on the still warm scones.

"Janie?"

"Janie's good. You asked me that over the phone this morning."

The mother sighed and walked across to the window. "Garden's looking nice."

"Gregory chopped those two trees out. I thought it looked a bit bare. Janie cried, but he wouldn't stop. Her old cubby house ..."

"She'll get over it."

"I suppose so."

"Of course she will."

"Yes ... jam?"

"Pardon?"

"Jam ... on the scones?"

"Oh." The smile was sympathetic. "Why didn't you tell me? I could have brought some of mine over."

"It doesn't matter."

"Gregory would have liked it."

"Never mind."

"Silly me. I should have thought."

Catherine dipped the knife into the strawberry jam. It was thick, sticky. She held the knife up and watched the red blob fall away unwillingly.

Her mother grabbed the knife. "I'll do that."

Catherine stood watching while her mother prepared a plate full of scones. She did it so quickly, so efficiently. Catherine wondered why she did so many. She probably wouldn't want any anyway. But she didn't say anything. She just watched.

"The reason I came over — you know Mrs Porter down the road?" They were sitting at the table. Catherine shook her head and smiled absently. "Anyway, she's been seeing a chap, a psychiatrist or psychologist or something. Anyway, I was telling her about Janie and she seemed to think that this chap might be able to do something. Said he's worked wonders with her." Catherine listened hard to the sound of the teaspoon hitting against the side of her cup. But the voice would not go away. "Catherine ... somebody has to do something."

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I don't know that it's such a problem." Catherine realised how foolish the words sounded even before she had finished. Nobody could accept her claim that there was nothing wrong with Janie. "Abnormal," that's what people called it. Neighbours, mother-in-law, mother ...

"You don't think it's a problem that your seventeen year old daughter is still playing with dolls?"

Catherine pushed the plate reluctantly across the table towards her mother. "I don't know that she actually plays with them." She watched as the thin lips, coloured bright red by the cheap lipstick her mother insisted on buying, closed around a piece of scone. The woman swallowed with apparent difficulty and went on.

"How old were you when you stopped playing with dolls, my girl?"

"I don't remember."

Catherine's mother slurped noisily at the tea, washing away the remaining crumbs. She put her hand to her throat and swallowed affectedly.

"Well, I remember. You were married when you were Janie's age, with her on the way. And you'd certainly stopped playing with dolls a long time before you met Gregory."

"Yes." Catherine spoke slowly. She was staring at the fridge door, at a dirty patch she had missed. She hoped her mother wouldn't notice.

"Well I can't see Janie suddenly throwing those dolls out and taking up with a man instead."

"No. Janie's too clever for that. I won't push her into it." Catherine was surprised at the assurance in her own voice. She immediately regretted the words

and looked up, through her fringe. Her mother's nostrils flared gently. She picked at a tiny crack in the plate, on which the half-eaten scone sat, discarded, pathetic.

"What are you suggesting?"

"Nothing."

"Getting married was the best thing that ever happened to you. You were never good at anything."

"That's where Janie's different, Mother. She's so good at school; it'd be a shame to throw that away."

"Throw it away?" The head shook in disbelief. "If Janie does ever find anyone to marry her, I hope she does a better job of wife and mother than you have."

Catherine shoved another tasteless scone into her mouth. Apparently, the polished kitchen wasn't fooling anyone. If she was never good at anything, then housework had been her biggest failure. She worked on the house all day, but there was always something she neglected. Gregory would point things out to her when he got home. It was as though he went looking for her mistakes. When the house was perfect, he would complain that she looked tired and didn't bother to look nice for him anymore.

"Well I can't stay. I've got some shopping to do. Give me a ring, if you change your mind about that chap ... I'll be expecting to hear from you." Catherine shuddered as her mother rose and scraped the chair against the highly polished floor. She watched her move to the doorway and then stop, pull out a handkerchief from her cardigan sleeve and wipe the dirt from the fridge door. "Missed a bit." Catherine returned the smile and followed her mother to the front door.

"I don't think I'll be changing my mind, Mother. I'll just wait a while and see what happens."

"Well if you ask me, you've waited long enough already." The wire door slammed on the last word. Catherine watched the short, dismissive wave as the car moved out of the driveway.

Back in the kitchen, Catherine could not bare to look at the plate of uneaten, unwanted scones. She could feel a slow, methodic throbbing in her head. She was exhausted, but would not succumb to sleep. Instead, she grabbed for her tablets. They were almost gone. She scribbled on her shopping list but remembered that Gregory would check it and tore the page away.

In the loungeroom, she dusted the photos of Janie. Gregory had taken one every year, on her birthday. There were eleven. By the time Janie turned twelve, people no longer found her urchin face cute. A neighbour had once called the girl "unfortunate looking". In front of her. Gregory had refused to get the camera out on her twelfth birthday. That had been Janie's last party. Catherine remembered the following year, finding the invitations under Janie's bed. "Please come to my thirteenth birthday party." They had been torn up. Catherine had said nothing.

Catherine pushed the door of Janie's bedroom open. The room was a mess. Janie had agreed to do her own room, in exchange for pocket money. But she was not very thorough. Every now and then, Catherine was forced to attack the room which she otherwise avoided. She looked across at the twelve little creatures assembled on the top of Janie's trunk. Their smiles were welcoming. As though they had been waiting, knowing. "... someone has to do something." Those innocent smiles. Perfect white teeth ringed with pink. Deceptive. They watched her. Silent. Not just dolls anymore. Something sinister. "Abnormal." Perhaps they were right.

Catherine noted the order in which the dolls were assembled, then carried them out into the kitchen, one by one. At first, she picked them up by the hair, afraid to get too close. But then she found a certain pleasure in sliding her fingers around the tiny necks. The fingers fitted there so easily.

The collection of dolls sat on the kitchen table, watching while Catherine rummaged through the kitchen drawers. She found the texts which Janie had hardly used. Catherine smiled. The colours were perfect. The garish red and sombre black would make the creamy complexions unrecognizable.

The little tin soldier sat waiting. Janie had always been afraid of men with moustaches. Catherine remembered looking through Janie's European History book one day. The photos of Adolf Hitler had had the heads removed. Janie had said that the face frightened her. Catherine grabbed the soldier by the collar and the silver buttons of his tidy red jacket fell onto the table. She smiled as she drew the narrow black moustache above the pink, smiling lips. She was pleased at how easily the gallant soldier was transformed into a menacing figure. She began to hum gently as she stroked the new moustache.

She set the little man apart and then seized her daughter's most beloved plaything, her Raggedy-Anne doll. With her scissors, she severed the pigtailed and cut the carrotty-red hair close to the head, so that it stood up uncontrollably. She grabbed the bright red texta and changed the smiling pink lips into the seductive leer of a prostitute. Catherine set Raggedy-Anne down beside the soldier. The two dolls sat grinning across at the others.

Catherine continued. She pulled the round, staring eyes away from the faces of Janie's three teddy-bears, leaving wide wounds. Out of the ragged wounds, the white stuffing dangled and trailed against the turned-up noses. Using the black texta, she twisted the gentle smiles into sneers and the little yellow bears sat together, like a gang of thugs. She threw the discarded eyes onto the floor, and grabbed at Janie's two harlequin dolls. She smashed the procelain heads against the table, leaving the coloured faces cracked and broken.

Janie's four china dolls stood aloof, graceful. Catherine cut the elaborate costumes to pieces and marked the white bodies with red gashes. The eleven dolls stood together, like a collection of exhibits from a carnival freak show. Catherine smiled at the remaining doll. The most beautiful of all. Janie's bride

doll. They had bought it for her when she came out of hospital, after her tonsils had been removed. The doll stood, white, serene. Catherine saw the plate of scones still sitting on the kitchen table. She picked one up and smeared the bridal dress with the red jam. The scone broke into pieces, leaving the dress spoiled and dirty. She left the face still smiling, seemingly triumphant with its sticky red blotches.

Catherine grinned at each of the dolls in turn and patted their heads. She picked them up and hugged them to her, leaving her own dress smeared with jam and texta. In Janie's room, she put the dolls in their original positions on top of the trunk.

She lay down on Janie's bed and put her head on her arm. She watched the faces; the texta had smudged in places, but the effect was generally pleasing. She wondered how Janie would react. She would probably cry. "She'll get over it." That's what Mother had said.

Catherine went back into the kitchen and poured herself another cup of milky tea. She grinned. It was almost twelve. Janie would be home for lunch soon. Catherine collected crumbs on the end of her finger and then licked it clean. She sat and waited.

DIANE FAHEY

## Battery Hens

This is their provenance. This is their grave.

A cage roomy as a banquet hall, filled with row upon row  
of cages, three hens to each. Heads, black-feathered,

red-combed, poke through wire down the hangar's length:  
eye after identical, staring eye. As at a rest home,

sunblinds that can be raised for air. But not today.  
In this green dimness, mounds of grey droppings multiply

like sponge: their only history — archeology of chicken  
after chicken into hen — and their only product, except for

untold eggs and, at the end, their own numbed flesh,  
its loss their one clear memory... But it is the sound

that wedges open the mind — so few ordinary farmyard  
squawks above that low swelling surge: one corporate cry

hovering, pressing out into the day. A throatless bird  
trying to sing; a wingless bird trying to fly.

## Literature and Locality

*Westerly* has long had an interest in literature as it emerges from or relates to particular regions of Australia, considering the differences and similarities swept into that large library, "Australian literature". Australia's literatures may well prove to be as diverse as the country itself. In recent years an increasing number of readers and scholars have become interested in the literature of particular Australian environments, a fact reflected in the forthcoming publication of *The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia*, prepared by members of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature.

In the following section Mark O'Connor discusses the problems of *naming* a new locality, of applying the *English* language to Australia's tropical North, particularly to the Barrier Reef area; Patrick Morgan traces the pattern of nineteenth century writing which grew out of Victoria's Gippsland; David Headon and Tony Scanlon provide lively, humorous but well-researched accounts of early literary reactions to life in the Northern Territory; Ian Templeman details the first decade of publishing by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. Each of these articles but the last had an original, and somewhat different, form as a talk: Mark O'Connor's at the 1985 Festival of Perth, Patrick Morgan's, David Headon's and Tony Scanlon's at the 1985 conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature in Armidale.

These are not the only pieces in this issue of *Westerly* to deal with literature and locality. Pieces as diverse as Elizabeth Jolley's and Peter Cowan's comments on Fremantle Arts Centre and Niall Lucy's review focus on senses of place which stem from Western Australian environments, while Vincent O'Sullivan's discussion of Harpur considers Harpur's conflicting awarenesses of Australian landscape and English literary models.

MARK O'CONNOR

## The Poetry of the North: Finding the Words

It's one of the familiar paradoxes of Australia that this largely tropical and sub-tropical continent was invaded by people from the cold North of Europe. Many of the oddities of our culture follow from this. One is the great feeling of alienation among the first white Australians (who of course were really what we would nowadays call "New Australians"). Another was the tendency to huddle down the bottom of the continent, in the cold South. Even today the vast majority of the non-Aboriginal population lives well below the tropics.

I've sometimes fantasized about what would have happened if we'd been settled from the South of Europe — from Spain, say, or Greece. There'd certainly have been less talk about the foreignness and barrenness of Australia; because Southern Europeans, unlike the British, are quite used to an annual drought. In the years I spent in Greece I met dozens of Greek families who had returned from Australia, and I can't recall them ever complaining of its strangeness. The most common remark was that Australia was a beautiful country "and very like Greece".

If we'd been a Greek or Spanish colony, most of Southern Australia would probably be covered in olive trees (which relish the same conditions as most eucalypts). On the other hand, we'd surely have an even worse wild goat problem! Since history, unlike science, deals with unnecessary and unrepeatable incidents, it's not entirely silly to speculate about what never happened. It does at least remind us how accidental what actually happened was.

Still, it was probably inevitable that the first few generations of white Australians, from whichever country they came, would suffer the usual penalty of successful invaders: to be ill-at-ease in the new country. There were few parts of Eastern Australia cool enough and moist enough to make the expatriate English and Irish feel at home. (Though Batman did succeed in picking a "spot for a village" with weather almost as bad as London's). And the Western coast, even as far South as the latitude of Perth, was usually seen as forbidding.

The problem was not merely a lack of roots or of rapport with the new country: it was also one of language. Like white Australians to this day, our first settlers were stuck with that funny European migrant language called English. Because most of us have English as a first language, we imagine it fits

our meaning like a glove. The truth is that in many ways English is an unsatisfactory language for talking about Australia. It's only by a long struggle over the past two hundred years that it's been even partially adapted. And the history of English-language poetry in Australia has been one of constant struggle to adapt an inappropriate language and culture to an overwhelming environment.

At the level of vocabulary it might seem today that this adaptation is nearly complete — provided that by Australia one means Southern Australia, where most of the population lives. For instance, to describe our countryside we now have words like *paddock*, *creek* and *kookaburra*. These have now thoroughly replaced the inappropriate *meadow*, *brook* and *New Holland jay* of the early literary texts.

But in the tropical North, which contains many of Australia's most spectacular environments (and some fascinating social groups), the creation of an effective literary language is only beginning. Until this century the true tropics, especially the "jungles" and the mangroves, were quite daunting. (And often malarial of course. It was malaria that wiped out the colony at Port Essington in the Northern Territory). It commonly took the lure of gold to drag people first into such places. I don't want to seem superior to those who first had to adapt their ideas and their language to a strange continent. It was difficult enough, even in the South.

And to the early settlers English was full of traps. Theirs was the language of a North-Western European island, an island that liked to think of itself as temperate, but was in fact so far North that only the Gulf Stream made it reasonably habitable, at the cost of being extremely wet. But because the English nation won certain crucial naval battles, and because the discovery of the New World tilted Europe's money and power away from the old empires of the Mediterranean, English became the language of vast areas of the tropics and sub-tropics. In particular it conquered two great continents, North America and Australia. In both it found similar problems. But in North America it had at first an easier time.

When the early British colonists called North America the New World, they really meant a place like the Old World; they meant that they had found another, wilder version of Europe. And so in a sense they had. Europe and North America had been connected only a few thousand years back in geological time, by a land bridge across the top of the Bering Strait; and so the country the new settlers found on the East coast of America, was very much like Europe. There was similar terrain, similar weather, and even similar sorts of trees: oak, birch, maple, elm, chestnut, etc.; and similar animals: beaver, bison, wolf, fox, deer, and squirrel. Whereas in Australia, as in a vast outdoor laboratory, the English language was put to a harsher test.

One of my favourite quotations on the whole problem of adjusting to a strange continent is from the mid-19th century British observer F. Lancelott who, in his book *Climate and Health in Australia*, explained that in tropy, turvy Australia, "most of the quadrupeds come into this breathing world not half

made up and grow the rest in an outside pouch." It is, he says, a place where the swans are black, the eagles white, where the jay laughs like a jackass, and the magpie "breathes like an Aeolian harp."

By the jay that laughs like a jackass he meant, of course, the bird we have since agreed to call the kookaburra. And by the magpie that "breathes like an Aeolian harp" — a marvelous phrase — he meant of course a melodious black-and-white bird that was only distantly related to the raucous European magpie.

That I think exemplifies the problems of a European language newly arrived in a foreign continent. The first task is simply to get words for objects or species, to agree on names. This is far more difficult than it seems in retrospect. It took us well into the 19th century to agree that that funny laughing bird should be called a *kookaburra* and not a *New Holland Jay*. It wasn't a simple matter of "taking the Aboriginal word", because the Aborigines are in fact many peoples with many languages. Hence a particular one of those words had to become accepted and dominant among English speakers. That this happened in the case of *kookaburra* was certainly a good thing.

It not only distinguished a kookaburra from the European Jay, which is good for scientific purposes, but it let the word *kookaburra* take on its own native Australian associations. Unfortunately that didn't happen with the magpie. To this day we're stuck with a pseudo-European term for that very Australian bird. And this sort of ambiguity creates more serious problems, as English becomes a more and more international language. For instance, I know that if I send a poem in praise of magpie-song to British or American magazine-editors, it will be returned. They respond to such a poem much as we might to a poem that seemed to be praising the crow as a song-bird.

And yet our magpie is one of the world's great song-birds. I would say it is a much better song-bird than a skylark, or even a nightingale. It would certainly have been preferable if we could have borrowed a word for it from one of the Aboriginal languages. The Geelong-region word *barraworn* might have been ideal. Unfortunately, it was the affectation of our ancestors to displace the Aborigines while scarcely seeming to notice them, so that in many regions an Aboriginal place-name or two is almost the only evidence that the two races ever talked.

And the second problem in borrowing words from other languages is to get agreement. A language is an agreed code of communication among native speakers. That means you can't simply enlarge the vocabulary by executive fiat. You can't publish a list of new words in the **Government Gazette**.

I think we should be very glad that we have introduced as many words from Aboriginal languages into Australian English as we have. It was certainly an advantage to replace *native-bear* with *koala*, and that happened quite late. It would probably have been just as good if we could have replaced *native-cat*, *Tasmanian tiger*, and so on. In fact the most familiar word of all, *kangaroo*, took a great while to enter the language in its present form. The Aboriginal word it came from seems to have been *kang-u'-ru*, with stress on the second syllable; and the name took a couple of generations to get slurred and respelt as *kangaroo*. In fact some European languages still spell and pronounce the word much more in the original way — eg. Italian *cangu'ro*.

With plants the situation is worse. Our early settlers were terrible human chauvinists; they saw the bush as of value only for what they could make out of it when it was chopped down. So they named Australian trees very often after European species to which they had no relation and no similarity in appearance whatever, except that the wood could be used for similar purposes. Hence the tallest of the grevilleas, the spectacular *Grevillea robusta*, became "Silky Oak", and the magnificent *Eucalyptus grandis*, the second tallest tree in the world, was "Mountain Ash"; while other trees got names like coachwood and tallowwood, red cedar, mahogany gum, and so on.

(I should say in passing that much of the linguistic narrowness of white Australians comes from the suppression of Pidgin. Up till the 1920s various forms of Aboriginal/English Pidgin were widely spoken in rural Australia; but after the whites predominated and the Aborigines were removed to settlements, the whites tended to forget Pidgin entirely, leaving the Aborigines stuck with it. In fact many whites today misconstrue Pidgin as an inferior brand of English spoken only by Aborigines. In fact Pidgin is one of the "unnoticed" languages of Australia. In Niugini where the whites were never in such a commanding position, Pidgin became a *lingua franca* through which all races might meet on equal terms. By contrast, in Australia the suppression of Pidgin left English dominant, isolated, and arrogant).

To return to my main theme: too often, even today, we're stuck with a pseudo-English word as the common name for some uniquely Australian species or phenomenon. Paradoxically, I think this weakens English as an international language. It becomes, you might say, a very facile language — one that is quick to offer you a name for any reality, but not always an exact name. If a language is seen as a kind of tool, then English is in danger of becoming a universal adjustable spanner, not a precision spanner. Or perhaps, as A.D. Hope once put it, "the old hen is simply trying to sit on too many eggs."

And Australian writers suffer from this, because British and American readers think, when they read Australian books, that they know what's going on. They may be right, in the sense that they know the dictionary meanings of all the words on the page; but it's likely that they're missing the intonations, and the precise suggestions. Try to imagine a New Yorker reading a poem like Les Murray's *Folklore*.

*What are the sights of our town?*

*Well, there is that skeleton they hang  
some nights in the bar of the Rest  
and everyone laughing in whispers -  
the barmaid broke down one time, laughing.  
The cord goes up through the ceiling  
to the undersprings of the big  
white bed in the Honeymoon Suite  
and when those bones even jiggle  
there's cheers (and a donnybrook once)  
and when they joggle, there's whooping  
and folk stalking out in emotions  
and when they dance — hoo, when they dance!*

*he knows every tune on the honeymoon  
flute, does the hollow-hipped fellow.  
There are a few, mind, who drink on  
straight through it all. Steady drinkers.  
Up over the pub there's the sky  
full of stars, as I have reflected  
outside, while guiding the course of my  
thoughts. Some say there's a larger  
cord goes on up there, but I doubt it  
I mean  
but then I'm no dancer.*

*Besides that, there's meatworks and mines.*

What the foreign reader may miss is not so much the odd hard word like *donnybrook* as the whole movement of a culture. For instance, the way the speaker is confident and exuberant when on humorous or ironic ground, but grows tongue-tied once he strays into serious territory. Or the characteristic Australian "dying fall", the sentences that trail away into a world of meaning that is shared, but unspoken.

By contrast, we Australians tend to be bi-cultural if not tri-cultural. For instance, we do understand British regional accents, local jokes, social values, class distinctions, and other subtleties. This favour is not usually returned. We suffer the disadvantage, not of being a colonial or inferior culture, but of being regarded as one.

It's noticeable that we understand American literary and regional cultures much better than they understand ours, but not nearly as well as we do British ones. For instance most Australian readers (myself included) find it far harder to judge American poets than British ones. Sometimes we have to take it on faith that an American poet is a major figure within his or her own culture, whereas if it were a British poet we'd back our own judgement.

(Of course this trust is open to abuse, and by Australians as well as Americans. In the 70s a group of mainly mediocre Australian poets worked a con — or in many cases simply a self-deception — that was similar to the story of "the Emperor's new clothes". They exchanged reviews in which they described each other as the *only* important school of poets to have existed in Australia because they were the disciples of an all-important new school led by such "great" American contemporary poets as Cid Corman or Robert Duncan. The trick worked for a time, partly because many Australian readers had a colonial cringe and were terrified of being behind the USA or Britain, but mainly because so few Australians knew the USA well enough to say with confidence that these were really quite minor poets. It would have been much more difficult to work this trick in Australia with British exemplars).

At the level of basic grammar, it may be said that adjectives and verbs have much the same meanings in the major English-speaking countries. But nouns don't. An obvious example, as we've seen, is species-names. The foreign reader, if he or she is to rightly understand a book that describes an Australian

environment, needs to understand words like **wren, mudlark, cod, gull, magpie, bush turkey**, and so on; and needs to know that all of these familiar-seeming English words in fact refer to quite different species. Whereas other words, like **sparrow, blackbird, thrush, rabbit** and **fox** do refer to European species successfully naturalised. Not one British reader in 20 could rightly distinguish these two lists.

All these problems were vividly brought home to me in 1984 when the London literary magazine *Aquarius* asked me to edit a small selection of Australian poetry for them. Looking at Australian poems with British eyes, I discovered dozens of insidious misunderstandings.

For instance, Geoff Page had a poem about an old-age retirement village by the sea. In it, after some remarks on the vegetation, he remarks: "the weathering of gums is endless." Naturally, I had to supply the British reader with a footnote explaining that "gums" were eucalypt trees — the line was not necessarily a reference to gingivitis! A little later Page referred to a visit by the younger generation as "a two-day Southerly buster." That required a gloss from the *Macquarie Dictionary*. Later he wrote, "They say, half joking in the clubs/ We're thinning out in style." Nothing hard about the word *clubs*. Every English reader knows it. But would they have the faintest idea what sort of clubs Page means? or why the remark is so poignant? As I pointed out in my preface to the Australian section of *Aquarius*, it's this type of mis-reading, or half-reading, that time and again causes British readers to undervalue Australian poetry.

And the magazine was already in the press when I noticed that a poem by Andrew Lansdown contained a reference to "chooks". That word is unknown in Britain. Indeed the British have no generic word for the bird, and have to make do with "hens" or "chickens". I sent off a last-minute gloss, half tongue-in-cheek: "*Chooks*: Gallinaceous poultry of unspecified sex. (colloq.). Of Celtic origin, perhaps reinforced by onomatopoeia."

But a deeper issue is that of myth. Apart from the problem of finding words for specific objects, the first European Australians had the problem of creating an overall image — or myth — for the new continent. They wanted something they could take home as a vision of it to the people back in England, something parallel to the myth of "The New World" that had been accepted for North America. And they had great trouble finding such an image; so much so that some of the early writers, like Lancelott, did quite seriously try out the journalistic myth of Australia as "topsy, turvy land": the upside-down place at the other end of the world, where everything was the wrong way round.

Unfortunately this myth encouraged people to keep inappropriate English names for uniquely Australian objects. (For instance, the "native cherry" that had its stone on the outside). All this encouraged European chauvinism, so that Australian species, landscapes, and phenomena, were not valued for their unique selves, but as the inferior and paradoxical parodies of European ones. The truth is that for nearly a hundred years, to judge from the literary and historical records, our early settlers had the greatest difficulty in describing their environment.

Brian Elliott's book on landscape in earlier Australian poetry (*The Landscape of Australian Poetry*) has collected some lovely examples. Here, for instance, is Robertson, one of our first Australian poets, describing the Sydney region:

"Now mark, where o'er the populated Plain  
Blythe Labour moves, and calls her sturdy Train,  
While nurs'd by clement Skies and genial Gales,  
Abundant Harvests clothe the fruitful Vales,  
O'er the green Uplands see new Hamlets spread.  
The frugal Garden and the straw-built Shed:"

It's amazing how little there is in this description of Sydney, except perhaps "the straw built shed", that wouldn't be better as a description of an English village. It's difficult to get any precise picture. The problem is that the man's whole mind and language is centred in England. He has as yet no precise terms to describe Australia.

And this blindness is still going on. It's only a few years back that we learnt to be unselfconscious about using such previously technical terms as *rainforest*. Most people today use *rainforest* as the normal name for that kind of country. But there was a time when rainforest was normally known as *scrub*; and when it was cleared the resulting country was often known as *brushland*. (*Scrub*, like *bush*, was a conscience-saving word. It sounds better to say you've cleared 1000 acres of scrub, rather than 1000 acres of rainforest).

Other precise terms are now coming into general use, though they still feel a bit artificial or formal: terms like "heathland", "open savannah", "alpine forest", "mangrove estuary", and even "dry (or wet) sclerophyll forest" — hardly a euphonious phrase. Previously it was all just "bush". "Bush" of course means a monotonous growth of unimportant vegetation, uninteresting to look at, and of no use to anyone until it's chopped down. And there are many people who still think that way.

Let me offer you an example from a better-known literary work — Henry Lawson's short story "The Drover's Wife". This is how Lawson sets the scene:

*Bush all round — bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten, native apple-trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilization — a shanty on the main road.*

This was the way many of our ancestors saw this country. It didn't seem to occur to them that native apple-trees are actually rather attractive, or that they usually indicate good soil. Many people saw the whole country as "bush", and the "bush" as a vast, hostile backdrop that mocked human beings. In fact the Australian bush had every right to mock the early convicts and settlers who were still locked in the mental prison of a foreign language — a language that had hundreds of words to describe tiny inconspicuous flowers in an English hedgerow, but could only lump most Australian landscapes as "bush".

\* \* \*

It's a creative writer's business not to preach against bad uses of language (as I've been doing), but to create good uses. As you probably know, much of my own early poetry was inspired by the neglected — or as I would prefer to say, unspoiled — North coast of Australia, and especially its coral regions. Today I see myself as a professional poet who can find inspiration in many topics. These days I get little time to visit coral atolls; but I can't forget them.

I first went to the Barrier Reef in 1972. I'd heard a lot about it, wanted to see it, hitch-hiked North from Canberra, and was lucky enough to get a temporary job as a scuba-diver at the Research Station on One-Tree Island. One-Tree is a superb coral atoll that, luckily, is too rocky to attract tourists.

On it I found myself living among scientists whose work was at once totally unliterary and full of poetry. They were living in one of the richest environments on Earth, were fascinated with it, and were trying to penetrate its secrets. But of course they weren't using the kind of language that literary people find appealing.

In fact most of the books I could get in the Research Station library were either color-photo books, or dry scientific texts. Either you got some book with chapters like "Preliminary studies on Juvenile Mortality among *Labroides dimidiatus* and Related Species" — which doesn't exactly reach out to the human heart; or you got some popular picture-book, full of superb photos designed to satisfy the giddy lust of the eye. Usually these would have at the bottom of the page in small print one or two sentences that gave little more than the Latin name of the species.

I can remember one photo in particular, a glorious butterfly cod, with all its multi-coloured wings and spines. It was outstretched against a background of yellow and lavender compound-ascidians. The text simply gave the fish's name, and warned against touching the venomous spines. Nothing about where such an Alice-in-Wonderland creature came from, or what it was doing in that bright fairyland. If I was going to write poetry about the world of coral I would somehow have to supply that sort of explanation or understanding.

The photographers had a great advantage over me because, unlike the English language, their cameras had no traditional limitations, no cultural prejudices. Their colour-emulsion could portray the tropics as well as the temperate zone; could capture the shameless blue and crimson of a harlequin-tusk-fish every bit as well as the fine speckles of grey on a thrush or trout, in-fact much better.

By contrast, English, that fine instrument for celebrating snowdrops or daffodils or skylarks and other creatures that have familiar names with traditional literary meanings built into them, was tongue-tied when faced with some polyp or reef fish that is a dozen times more beautiful and intricate, but has only a jaw-rattling Latin name. Worse still, when you did find an English name, it tended to be a double- or triple-barrel one. Instead of *lark*, or *wren*, or *thrush*, or *pippit*, the climax-predator in that region was known as a *white-breasted sea-eagle*. And while that may not be a problem for a prose writer, I can assure you that it is a problem for a poet.

Bit by bit I learnt ways to cobble up satisfactory names, until eventually I made a poem called "The Diver" half out of them. But it was always a challenge.

For instance, those glorious creatures like miniature psychedelic feather-dusters can either be known by their Latinate name *spirobranchs*, or by its English translation: *spiral-gilled tubeworms*. Well, what's wrong with either term? Nineteenth-century Australian poets were grossly mocked by the London reviewer Oscar Wilde for using such comic words as *wallaby* and *wattle-flower*. But they stuck to their guns, quite rightly, and brazened it out until today no one is the least inhibited about using these words in verse. The same course is right today — provided always that the poet pays enough attention to patterns of sound.

In 1972 I had to solve these problems pretty much on my own. I'd read almost no contemporary Australian poets under 50. I'd never heard of Les Murray or Michael Dransfield or Bob Gray. And the southern Barrier Reef islands (unlike the Abrolhos Islands north of here) had no significant human history, either white or Aboriginal. With the Abrolhos, in a later poem, I could imagine Lucretia Jansz standing on the shoreline of *Batavia's Graveyard* to glimpse:

*hid in a wave's diffracting lid,  
the utter otherness of coral  
the polyp's rainbow house of bone*

*where timorous flowers fear the eclipsing hand.*

But on One-Tree Island it was necessary, as so often in Australia, to throw away human chauvinism, and recognize that we are only one among five million species on this planet. All I could draw on was a certain amount of biological knowledge, which I was pulling in hand-over-fist from the scientists. But I had those two essentials for poetry: time and solitude to brood on what I saw.

[Editor's Note: The remainder of Mark O'Connor's talk was given against a background of colour slides. Because we are unable to reproduce them, we have shortened this section].

One scientist I met on the Barrier Reef was the parasitologist Lester Cannon. He had received one of the government's first grants for research into controlling the crown-of-thorns starfish. I presumed he would be looking for predators on the starfish; but he rejected this approach as paradoxical. "Think of human beings in a state of nature," he said. "Of course we had predators, like sabretoothed tigers. But what really kept us in check was parasites: things like hookworm, malarial protozoans, cholera microbes, influenza viruses. Humans are a new species, and already we've got enough diseases to fill a ten-volume medical encyclopedia. Most of the species on the Reef have been around a lot longer than we have. Forget predators. It's diseases that keep the world running sweetly."

It was a stunning vision of the Reef and of ecology. But it didn't make a poem until I combined it with a reworking of the Bible's Garden-of-Eden myth. Let me close with this poem as an example of one way of getting the spade into the ground, and talking about at least a small part of our North.

# The Beginning

God himself  
having that day planted a garden  
walked through it at evening and knew  
that Eden was not nearly complex enough.  
And he said:  
"Let species swarm like solutes in a colloid.  
Let there be ten thousand species of plankton  
and to eat them a thousand zooplankton.  
Let there be ten phyla of siphoning animals, and  
one thousand finned vertebrates, from  
white-tipped reef shark to long-beaked coralfish,  
and to each his proper niche,  
and — no Raphael, I'm not quite finished yet -  
you can add seals and sea-turtles & cone-shells & penguins  
(if they care) and all the good seabirds your team can devise  
Oh yes, and I nearly forgot it, I want a special place  
for the crabs! And now for parasites to hold  
the whole system in check, let..."

"...In conclusion, I want," he said  
"ten thousand mixed chains of predation -  
none of your simple rabbit and coyote stuff!  
This ocean shall have many mouths, many palates,  
many means of ingestion. I want  
a hundred means of death, and three thousand of birth -  
all in technicolor natural. And oh yes, I nearly forgot,  
we can use Eden again for the small coral cay in the center.

"So now Raphael, if you please,  
just draw out and marshall these species,  
and we'll plant them all out in a twelve-hectare patch."

So for five and a half days God labored  
and on the seventh he donned mask and snorkel  
and a pair of bright yellow flippers.

And, later, the host all peered wistfully down  
through the high safety fence around Heaven  
and saw God with his favorites finning slowly over the coral  
in the eternal shape of a grey nurse shark,  
and they saw that it was very good indeed.

PATRICK MORGAN

## The Literature Of Gippsland

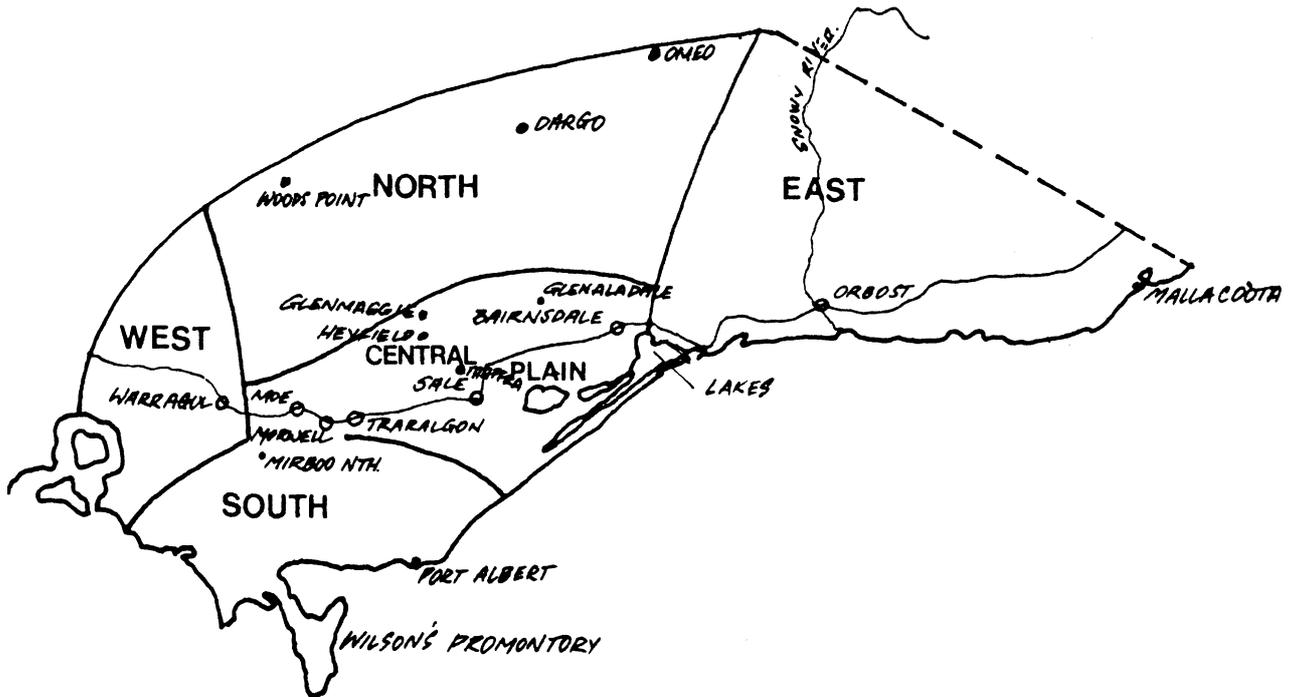
Gippsland is a naturally self-contained region, cut off from surrounding areas by barriers of mountains, sea and forests. In the early days, people couldn't get through to Melbourne along today's Princes Highway route because of swamps and forests; Gippsland operated as a world of its own. Many Australian regions, like the Riverina or the Wimmera, have a single characteristic type of countryside. But Gippsland has a number of distinctive sub-regions:

- (a) the rainy, foothill country of the small dairy-farms, largely in the south, with which the name Gippsland is usually associated,
- (b) the mountains (the Australian Alps) to the north,
- (c) the uninhabited forested slopes to the east,
- (d) the central plain, like the Riverina or the Western District of Victoria, open sheep country, lightly timbered, with a network of rivers,
- (e) the flat-land agriculture of the former Koo-wee-rup swamp in the west,
- (f) the Gippsland Lakes, and
- (g) the brown-coal urban-industrial area of the Latrobe Valley, developed this century.

So Gippsland has most types of Australian environment and each sub-region has its own literature.

For reasons of simplicity, I shall concentrate here on the relations between three types: the mountains, the small dairy farm areas and the plain. These three elements have arranged themselves differently in Gippsland literature than in Australian literature as a whole. Australians moved into the fertile crescent (the coastal and range area stretching from mid-Queensland to Adelaide) in the first half of last century, and the small-farm selection movement kept this area in focus for much of the 19th century. Harpur and Kendall in poetry, and Marcus Clarke and Boldrewood in the novel, situate their writing in the mountains and forests. But later last century, a profound change of orientation occurred with

## TOWNS and REGIONS of GIPPSLAND



the failure of the small farms: Australians thereafter took their bodies to the cities but their imaginations to the plains and outback, and the experience of the fertile crescent was by and large forgotten, or at least suppressed, in many Australian families.

Gippsland was atypical, since the small farmers survived there (after an enormous struggle) and it has, by Australian standards, a dense small-holdings population existing for over a century now. The Harpur-Kendall type of poetry continued, and a substantial, though invisible, literature exists, including many small-farm novels. Traditions lost or muted in other parts of Australia have remained in Gippsland, and its literature shows how the three components could have arranged themselves differently (with a different chronology and different emphases) in the Australian mainstream.

### Highland Scots Squatters and Aboriginals

Gippsland was settled by Gaelic-speaking highland Scots coming over the mountains from the Monaro to Omeo, and then down on to the central plain, from 1835 onwards. Two novels were written by one of the highland Scots founders. Angus McLean took up the Glenaladale station with his brother in 1846. In the preface of his novel *Harry Bloomfield, or The Adventures of an Early Australian Squatter* (1888), McLean tells us he wrote the novel during evenings in his early days in Gippsland, but published it some decades later.

Much of it appears to be a lightly fictionalised account of the 1840s, as certain passages are well-documented incidents in early Gippsland history. If so, it shows how literature can contribute to historical knowledge.

McLean's other extant novel is *Lindigo, the White Woman or The Highland Girl's Captivity Among Australian Blacks* (1866). Some snippets of conversation in this novel are in Scots Gaelic, which is rare in Australian literature. The story of a supposed lost white woman was a powerful legend in early Gippsland history. Settlers believed that women's clothing found in aboriginal camps was evidence of her existence. Expeditions were mounted to recapture her; local squatters, led by Angus McMillan, formed a 'Highland Brigade' and used the occasion to harrass the natives, to drive them from their feeding grounds and in some cases to murder them. Negotiations with the blacks failed to produce anyone.

The lost white woman of Gippsland story is one of many such legends around the Australian coast, including William Buckley of Port Phillip, Mrs. Fraser of Fraser Island and the original Bogong Jack story in *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*. These stories are cognate with the "child lost in the bush" motif in our literature, both betraying insecurity and fear of the unknown in a new country. The white woman story, as well as being a powerful myth in its own right, produced an extensive fictional literature. As well as an historical account in George Dundcrdale's *The Book of the Bush* (1898) and Angus McLean's novel, there is Henry Gyles Turner's 'The Captive of Gippsland' (1857), Russell's *The Heart*, Mary Gaunt's story 'The Lost White Women' in *The Ends of the Earth* (1915) and Fred Baxter's recent children's version *Snake for Supper* (1968).

The main aboriginal tribe of Gippsland was called the Kurnai. On the McLean's Glenaladale property, the explorer and anthropologist Dr. Alfred Howitt found a cave on the Mitchell River called The Den of Nargun, a location which appears frequently in the literature of Gippsland.

The myths of the Kurnai have been recorded by anthropologists like Howitt, Brough Smith and Massola. Mary Grant Bruce's book *The Stone Axe of Burkamukk* (1922) retells aboriginal legends, which goes against her Eurocentric reputation. Tarlton Rayment included aboriginal material in his books. In one of his poems 'The Lament of Bukkan-Munjie' an aboriginal mourns the loss of his homelands in exactly the same way exiled Celts lament the loss of their ancestral lands in 18th century Irish literature and in Sorley Maclean's 'Hallaig' or 'The Woods of Raasay':

In the Land of my Tribe there is silence -  
not songs,  
And the heart of poor Mun-jii how sadly  
it longs  
For the Emu, the Euro, its long flying leap  
Down the hill, where the brothers of Buk-kan  
now sleep.

For the sheep of the whitemen now swarm  
like bees  
O'er the land, and the graves, of our brown  
Birrahlees.  
But now, black is the forest; the gullies are  
bare,  
And the scents of the wattles are gone, who  
knows where?

Rayment here anticipates the parallel between highland Scots and aboriginal displacement which is one of the main themes of Don Watson's *Caledonia Australis* (1984).

### **Bushrangers of the High Plains**

Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859), Rolf Boldrewood's *Nevermore* (1892) and the legends of Bogong Jack all relate to misty stories of early bushmen and cattle duffers on the high plains around Omeo. We need first to look at the actual historical background to these works. Last century escaped and ex-convicts from Van Diemen's Land sailed across Bass Strait and landed on the Gippsland coast; these landings are recorded in Dunderdale's *Book of the Bush*, in *Geoffrey Hamlyn* and in Katharine Susannah Prichard's first novel *The Pioneers* (1915) set around the Port Albert area, where Prichard lived as a governess in 1904. The convicts made their way through Maffra and the gold-mining area of Dargo on to Omeo, another large gold-mining area by the 1850s and 1860s. There many became involved in horse-stealing rackets across the mountains to Beechworth, the Murray and the Riverina.

Three historical events are related to this. Firstly, Bogong Jack, an Omeo butcher named Jack Payne (or Paynter or Fainter), led such a gang, associated with Thomas Toke. Bogong Jack's hideaways were near Mt. Fainter and Limestone Creek, Toke's on the Gibbo Creek, both in the mountains north of Omeo. Secondly, a celebrated 19th century case, the Tichborne Affair, involved a Wagga Wagga butcher named Castro, who claimed to be the missing heir to the Tichborne title and estates (the heir was thought to have disappeared on the Australian goldfields). Castro turned out to be one Arthur Orton, an ex-convict from Hobart, who had worked his way up through Maffra and Omeo to the Riverina in the 1850s. Thirdly, in 1859, Cornelius Green, an Omeo gold-buyer, was murdered by bushrangers when escorting a consignment of gold. Bogong Jack and Toke were known associates of the murderers. After these incidents Toke and Bogong Jack retired to their huts in the mountain fastnesses to the north as things were getting a bit hot.

This recurring pattern of events — ex-convict gangs, bushrangers and duffing, and ex-patriate Englishmen seeking to return to their English titles — also occurs in the two novels of Kingsley and Boldrewood, the last thirds of which are set in the mountains of north-eastern Victoria in the Omeo area. (The

Australian scenes in Kingsley's *The Hillyars and the Burtons* (1865) also take place in eastern Victoria.) A large part of Kingsley's time in Australia (1853 to 1858) was spent on Western District properties. He briefly passed through the Monaro and East Gippsland on his return from Sydney to Melbourne in the last months of 1855. Evidence of his location in Gippsland can be tentatively constructed from J.S. Mellick's recent biography *The Passing Guest* (1983), from Kingsley's paintings and the internal evidence of the novels, and from later memoirs. This material all points to the Snowy River area called Combermere County last century.

The last part of *Geoffrey Hamlyn* fits in with the bushranging and cattle-duffing pattern mentioned previously. A bushranging outbreak occurs, and after a pitched battle with police, the leader of the gang, escaped convict George Hawker from Van Diemen's Land, attempts to flee into the mountains. Hawker heads for the Murray gates:

His plans were well laid. Across the mountain, north of Lake Omeo, not far from the mighty cleft in which the infant Murray spends his youth, were two huts, erected years before by some settler, and abandoned. They had been used by a gang of bushrangers, who had been attacked by the police, and dispersed. Nevertheless, they had been since inhabited by the men we know of, who landed in the boat from Van Diemen's Land, in consequence of Hawker himself having found a pass through the ranges, open for nine months in the year. So that, when the police were searching Gipp's Land for these men, they, with the exception of two or three, were snugly ensconced on the other water-shed, waiting till the storm should blow over. (Ch.XLIII)

This is the area where Toke and Bogong Jack had their huts. *Geoffrey Hamlyn* is loosely based on some local knowledge of events which Kingsley must have picked up in the district, and fits into the general pattern of historical events.

Similar events occur in Boldrewood's *Nevermore* (1892). Boldrewood, like Kingsley, had lived on a Western District squatting property. He knew Kingsley, persuaded him to take up writing seriously and admired his work to such an extent that he was said to know *Geoffrey Hamlyn* off by heart. The structure of *Nevermore* parallels *Geoffrey Hamlyn* very closely. After failing as a Western District squatter, Boldrewood may have been a magistrate on the Omeo Goldfields in the mid 1860s; he certainly became conversant with local stories. Boldrewood began writing at this period. In his later novel *Nevermore* he combined all the folk-stories of the mountains into one story: the Tichborne case, the Cornelius Green murder and the Kelly gang (the Lawless brothers and sister Kate) are all to the forefront.

The interesting thing about Kingsley and Boldrewood, with their strong affinities with the Western District, is that both turned imaginatively to the mountain country to locate their fictions in, even though they were in the area for a comparatively short time. In mid and later 19th century Australia, the

forests and mountains were the focus of interest, adventure and excitement. Their legends were romantic and their scenery picturesque. The plains country and outback couldn't compete at that stage. The film of 'The Man From Snowy River' (with Clancy upstaged) and the current high profile of the cattlemen of the high plains may signal a return to the earlier emphasis.

### **The Untouched Forests**

The untouched forests and mountains of Gippsland gave rise to poetry in the Harpur-Kendall tradition, mainly by five women poets all born in the 1860s: Grace 'Jennings' Carmichael of Orbost, Mary Fullerton of Glenmaggie, Marie Pitt of Bairnsdale, Nellie Clerk of Mirboo North and Marion Miller Knowles of Wood's Point and the Black Spur. Much of it is poetry of the understories: ferny glades, sparkling mountain streams, wood sprites and water nymphs. The following stanzas, from 'Jennings' Carmichael's 'A Bush Noontide, and Thoughts' are representative of the poetry of the tall trees, in which the poet's personality is introduced into the relationship:

Dear faithful trees, I find you steadfast still,  
In spite of time and change!  
With musing eyes I roam the rock-strewn hill,  
And look out towards the range.  
Soft sun-spel arrows pierce the forest thro'.  
In long, clear lanes of light,  
They melt and mingle in a mist of blue,  
Where shadow steals in sight.

The land is full of mellow noontide tones,  
And Summer sleep profound;  
The lizards bask upon the warm, grey stones;  
There's neither stir nor sound  
In all the great bush-garden where I stand.  
A white-winged moth floats near,  
Roused from the fern by my forgetful hand,  
And yet too wild for fear.

Each soaring eucalyptus, lifted high,  
The wandering wind receives;  
I watch the great boughs drawn against the sky,  
Laden with trembling leaves.  
A soft, harmonious music, full and rare,  
Murmurs the boughs along -  
The voice of Nature's God is solemn there,  
In that deep undersong.

The miniature world of the forest's lower level produces a wayward, fanciful semi-Celtic religion of nature; the tall, majestic trees above are heroic and enduring, like cathedrals or temples of God. These represent the Victorian age's two contrasting views of religion. In the poems there is an Arnoldian agnostic/religious meditation, mixed in with pre-Raphaelite wispiness, romantic love, evolutionary sentiments and a vague wondering about fate. The forests act as a regulator of the emotions. Sometimes nature is in harmony with the poet's joyous moods (usually the rippling water and bird calls of the lower stories), sometimes nature (the great trees) is a consolation for the melancholy of the poet, sometimes the relationship is contrary: "The bright beauty of the afternoon struck a sadness through me" wrote Mary Fullerton in *Bark House Days*. Happiness and sadness, and shadow and shine flicker through all the poetry.



*A Ferny Glade, photographed by Nicholls Caire*  
(Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Australia)

A prominent feature of both Gippsland poetry and prose is the existence of a secret, private place — a bower or fairy dell or glade — where the author ruminates during the day, where lovers meet, where rest and dreams come easily and undisturbed. This is noticeable in all the poets. In the novel *Providence Ponds* the Den of Nargun becomes "a favoured refuge when any perplexities visit" the heroine. In Mrs. Forrester's *Myrtle* (1891), the Lubra Bower, formerly an aboriginal mia-mia, becomes a trysting spot for lovers, as does a soft, shady dell hollowed out of a thicket in John Ewers' *Fire on the Wind* (1935):

The track wound among a confusion of white hazel,  
bracken and the sweet-scented musk, with clematis  
twining sinuous arms about them all and making  
them one. Soft doe-ferns grew amid the riot, their  
feathery fronds spreading to a width of ten feet  
from one side to the other . . .  
From the nook no sky was visible. On both sides  
and behind them was a tangled riot of green.  
Before, across the track, a slightly thinner  
lacework showed glimpses of the creek between the  
branches . . .  
For the moment it seemed they were in a  
sound-proof chamber, so silent it was.

We have noticed four characteristics of the poetry of the Gippsland forests: it takes the form of a vague metaphysical reverie, it is written by women, it often occurs around midday and it contains a secret place or bower. How can we put all these together and explain them? I realized a possible answer when a member of a pioneering Gippsland family told me that both his mother and grandmother would go down after lunch to the bush near the house (selections were closely surrounded by forests on most sides) to spend some time by themselves among the ferns and small streams. It was a time for relaxing and reflecting, the one break from incessant pioneering toil. This is an unusual rhythm of the day — it was largely determined by farming activities, and it is found in Gippsland literature.

Normally the day is divided into working during sunlight hours, eating in the evening, and relaxing, thinking and enjoying things at night. The Gippsland pattern was quite different. You woke in the morning and had to milk the cows — no nonsense about roseate dawns. At evening you milked again so there was no relaxation then. In these southern latitudes, the sun went down quite early, nights were dark and cold, the forests were weird and scary at night, so you went to bed early: life closed down with the day. There were no balmy nights admiring the stars or yarning around the campfire, as in the literature of the outback. Lunch was the great meal and midday and early afternoon the climax of the day, the time for talk, visitors, working things out, stillness, or taking a walk. (This rhythm continues today). Kingsley says in *Geoffrey Hamlyn*: "My brother, let us breakfast in Scotland, lunch in Australia, and dine in France, till our lives' end", and his squatters have elaborate, convivial lunches

and relaxed afternoons on the verandah drinking pale ale or claret and water. This was the high point of the day. Visiting the forest eventually led to the more elaborate recreational customs.

### **Picturesque Gippsland**

A tradition of picnics, excursions and other forms of outdoor recreation developed around the lakes. Just as Melbourne and Sydney gentry went for day trips and Sunday drives in the cool Dandenongs or Blue Mountains, and took boat trips to Queenscliffe, Sorrento, Pitt Water and the Hawkesbury, so the squatting gentry of the Gippsland plain developed rail, coach and boat trips around the lakes, as well as holidays at Metung. The beauty of the natural surroundings in Gippsland's mountains and lakes attracted six groups of artists: the resident poets and later novelists, plus visiting writers, painters, photographers and naturalists. The literary visitors included Trollope (1872), Garnet Walch (1880), 'The Vagabond' (Stanley James) (1886), 'The Gumsucker' (Nathan Spielvogel) (1913) and E.J. Brady (1918 and 1926). Painters included Von Guerard and Chevalier and artists who illustrated books, like C.H. Turner in Walch's *Victoria in 1880*. The photographer Nicholas Caire came to Gippsland. Naturalists like Baldwin Spencer, Donald MacDonald of *The Argus* and R.H. Croll walked through and wrote about the environment.

The visiting writers and artists all went to the same places — mountains, lakes, fern glades and East Gippsland — so that we can match the writers with the illustrators. Before the opening of the artificial entrance in 1889 the Gippsland Lakes were an idyllic, even exotic, location. The banks were richly clothed in vegetation, as we see in the lithograph 'The Gippsland Lakes — General View from Jemmy's Point' (1878). 'The Vagabond' wrote of the same scene:

Above us there are wooded bluffs, the scalloped outlines of the shores are beautiful in form, the rippling waters reflect dancing shadows — it is the Middle Harbour of Sydney in miniature, or a branch of Pittwater, or one of the backwaters of the Hawkesbury.

Gippsland lent itself perfectly to the picturesque mode. Writers and artists did not feel it an alien or unusual place; they immediately felt themselves at home among its hills, fern valleys and inland waters. We also get just a hint, in literature and painting, of the earlier vogue of the sublime. An interesting example comes from the poetry of Allan McLean, the nephew of the novelist Angus McLean of Glenaladale. Allan McLean became by turns a stock and station agent at Maffra, member of the Victorian parliament, Premier of Victoria in 1900, and Deputy Prime Minister of Australia in the Federal Reid-McLean government of 1904-5. In 1888 he published at Sale a book of verse called *Rural Poems*. The main poem called 'Two Glimpses of Nature', was inspired by the Gippsland mountains. It is written in Augustan couplets, and in style and sentiment it is a throw-back to a hundred years before, the late

18th century in England, mixed in with romantic reflections on time. We can quote a passage describing the end of the world:

Air ceased to palpitate, and earth to quake;  
The sea grew torpid as a stagnant lake.  
There bloom'd no living plant on vale or hill;  
The trees stood darkly calm and deadly still;  
The laws of nature lost their vital force;  
Fair streams were palsied in their onward course,  
And stretch'd as motionless o'er sterile plains,  
As frozen currents in a dead man's veins.  
There stirr'd upon the earth nor pulse nor breath;  
The world was wrapp'd in universal death.

Vivian Smith has called this style colonial neo-classicism.

### **The Central Plain and Mary Grant Bruce**

The painters, photographers, poets and novelists of the 19th century were not interested in the central plain of Gippsland. The one prominent writer from the plain was Mary Grant Bruce, born at Sale in 1878 and brought up in Traralgon. The Bruces were related to the Gippsland squatting gentry and Mary visited her Whittakers uncles on the 'Fernhill' and 'Heyfield' properties, but her father was affected by the 1890s depression, and the family was financially and socially in moderate decline.

Mary Grant Bruce is famous for her 15 Billabong books. They take place on a large Riverina-type property on open plains, where everything goes right in the end, and most characters are upright, sunny and optimistic. But Mary Grant Bruce wrote another 23 books, about 8 of which are about Gippsland. In particular *Glen Eyre* (1912), *Robin* (1926), *Anderson's Jo* (1927) and *Golden Fiddles* (1928) are about poor struggling farms in the hill country, where things keep going wrong, where deaths occur, and where lack of money, failure and frustration eat away at people. Some are more adult than the Billabong books. How can we explain these two different types of novels?

The Gippsland novels seem to be a slightly transposed description of her own family situation in Gippsland. Like Mary Grant Bruce herself, the characters find constant worry about money debilitating and they want to get out of Gippsland. In the novels, the father is always a worried, tense man who cannot express himself or lead the family. Mary Grant Bruce visited her relatives, out of whose circle her own family was slipping, at the 'Fernhill' and 'Heyfield' properties, and for holidays at Metung. She began writing on these visits. These properties presented to her what she wished for, a life where money was no worry, where things didn't go wrong, and where the father was a natural leader. The 'Heyfield' Whittakers moved to the Riverina eventually. Mary visited this area, which may account for the Riverina atmosphere of the Billabong series.

The element of wish-fulfilment comes out clearly in her novel *Golden Fiddles* (1928), which is constructed around the three alternatives of Gippsland hillfarm,

Melbourne and a plains property. The Balfour family, struggling on a Gippsland farm at Tupurra, inherit a fortune and move to Melbourne, where they are like fish out of water; they waste their money and live frivolously. The family (like the author) doesn't like the city, but they don't want to return to fern-cutting and cows, so they take the inevitable step:

But if we bought a station somewhere — in the Western District, perhaps; not too far away, for Elsa would have to come to Melbourne for her music-lessons. But that could be managed. I have been dreaming of it all. Not to be buried, as we were at Tupurra — somewhere with nice people near, and plenty of fun, but occupation for us all, too.

Mary Grant Bruce reversed the attitude of Kingsley and Boldrewood. They came from the Western District squatter group, yet their minds turned imaginatively to the mountains and forests of Gippsland. Mary Grant Bruce came from Gippsland, yet she turned away from it to the large squatting properties of the Western District and the Riverina. Over this half a century the Australian imagination had undergone a major change. Even earlier Palmer and Prichard are located in the fertile crescent (*The Pioneers, Working Bullocks, The Passage, Daybreak*) but they gradually move to the outback plains.

Mary Fullerton was raised on her father's selection block at Glenmaggie. She wrote the classic *Bark House Days* about her childhood there, as well as novels and poetry about the area. Glenmaggie is in a valley of the Macalister River, through which the ex-gold diggers poured down to the hill-farms and to the adjacent plain, so she was in a wonderful position to compare the different styles of life of these different locations.

Early Gippsland literature is noticeable for women writers who have much in common with each other. Marie Pitt, Mary Fullerton, Marion Miller Knowles, Mary Gaunt, Nellie Clerk and 'Jennings' Carmichael were born in the 1860s, and Mary Grant Bruce a decade later. They were all strong-willed, with intellectual grasp and drive, and felt society did not allow a place for their interests. Except for Marion Miller Knowles, they were incipient feminists, and supported women's emancipation and independence in the early decades of this century. Mary Grant Bruce helped found the Women's Writers' Club and the Fellowship of Gippsland Women. Marie Pitt was a radical socialist like Louis Esson. Mary Gaunt, a novelist of the mountains, was in the first group of women to sign the matriculation roll at the University of Melbourne in 1881; she became an intrepid traveller and travel-writer after her husband's death. 'Jennings' Carmichael is credited with being the first Victorian-born woman poet. Mary Fullerton joined Katharine Susannah Prichard in supporting Vida Goldstein's campaigns through the Women's Political Association, and was later a friend of Miles Franklin. Coming from educated, respectable British-Australian backgrounds, these Gippsland women writers were in temperament similar to Katharine Susannah Prichard, Miles Franklin and Henry Handel Richardson.

## Cutting Down the Forests

Two opposing themes run through the literature of cutting down the forests: firstly the grandeur of the trees and secondly the incessant toil of the pioneers in cutting them down. Both were heroic entities and they were in competition with each other, though this was realized only later. The second theme comes first in time, in works by Pitt, Fullerton and Clerk, and in *The Land of the Lyrebird* (1920). The sweet music of the axe ringing through the glades awakened the land from its slumber. As a small clearing was made, the selectors saw a larger patch of blue sky and felt less imprisoned:

You have watched our homesteads rise,  
Shining-eyed Geranium,  
Felt the falling forest's sighs,  
Blessed each widening glimpse of skies,  
Heard the first flock's bleating cries,  
And traced all growth of beauty.

This led to an effort to develop English-style gardens and paddocks, as evidence of civilization and progress.

The realization that cutting down the forests may have been a tragedy comes more slowly. In Knowles' 'Laid Low' and Sladen's 'To a Fallen Gum-Tree on Mt. Baw-Baw', trees are described as majestic monarchs. Sladen reverses the image of a land awaked from slumber; in his view the thousands of years of history which these trees have witnessed is lost with their going. The magic faery-world of the understories has gone, as Pitt laments in 'Doherty's Corner':

There's no bush to-day at Doherty's Corner,  
Only strange green hills and the glint of a far bay;  
Time has come like a thief and stolen the wonder  
And magic of Yesterday.

There are no fairies now at Doherty's Corner,  
Where dusky spider-orchids and wild white daisies grew;  
Time that stilled the heart of the singing forest  
Has stolen her fairies too.

Henderson's hill is green at Doherty's Corner,  
But no fairy trips in the dawn or the dusk thereon,  
Perhaps they died when the old black log and the bracken  
And the box bushes were gone.

The struggle to cut down the trees was an heroic battle, into which the selectors endlessly threw themselves. They put their heads down so resolutely,

that when one day thirty years later they looked up (and so did their neighbours) it was all gone. Thinking only of their own block, they thought it would always be surrounded with verges of forest on the boundaries. Now after the turn of the century, they were shocked to find practically the whole of the unique mountain ash forest of South Gippsland gone.

The selectors themselves are usually silent about all this, but one, W. Johnstone, understood after decades of back-breaking work that two heroic forces were contending here, and that the selectors' gain had a corresponding loss. He put it into a poem 'Retrospect', rare not only as an actual male selector's poem, but rare in that it sees both sides:

When I first came to Gippsland, no seer could foretell,  
That the light-tapping axe rang the forest's deathknell;  
It spread like an ocean, and rolled like a tide  
Whenever King Storm on the tree-tops did ride.

From the ridge to the gully no break could be found,  
And the keenest observer could not see the ground;  
But the axes and fire great havoc have played  
With grim forest-giant and lovely fern-glade.

Ever gone are the gumtrees that covered the hills,  
Ever gone are the tree ferns that sheltered the rills,  
And gone are the dells where I oft loved to roam  
And bring in wild flowers to garland my home.

Never more shall I see the green forest again  
Wave free in the sunshine, droop sullen in rain;  
No more shall I sway to each altering whim  
The laughing, the tearful, the wanton, the prim.

Never more shall I list to the lyre bird's song  
That boldly he trolled forth, so clear, and so strong,  
Or listen, mazed, as he mocked every bird,  
And mimicked to life every sound that he heard.

Never more shall I wander, awe-struck and subdued,  
While the shades of deep night on the forest did brood,  
And feel, when along those great aisles I have trod,  
I worshipped alone in a temple of God.

But away with these fancies. 'Tis better today  
Where the forest encumbered, the children now play  
In meadows bespangled with flowers whose hue  
Is brighter than those that the pioneers knew.

Where the forest delighted, perchance, two or three,  
The present rich meadows fill hundreds with glee.  
Our wives and our children, our homes and our farms  
Are dearer and better than Nature's wild charms.

This wonderfully clear poem has all the main themes: the sound of the axe, the dells and bowers, the forests as temples of God, its regulation of human emotions, the neat English scenery after clearing, the idyll of man replacing nature. But more important is the break and change of attitude in the last two stanzas. Although the poet ends up affirming the meadow's superiority, these lines are weaker and less convincing, and many people would agree that the real force of the poetry lies in the opening six stanzas about what is gone.

Another who sees both heroic aspects in her poetry is Nellie Clerk, a selector's daughter from Mirboo North. She is the only person who has expressed in verse the whole history of a Gippsland selection block from coming to clearance. In two poems, 'My Gippsland Home' and 'To My First Garden Flower', published in 1887 in *Songs from the Gippsland Forest*, she blends, in a more intricate way than Johnstone, the contending beauties of forest and garden:

Far to west and to north, great clearings stretch forth,  
Herds and flocks and fat pastures revealing;  
'Twixt dead trees that stand grey and gaunt o'er the land  
With bare arms to heaven appealing.

There, axes and fire have wrought my desire,  
Before them the matted scrub sweeping;  
But armies of these ghostly eucalypt trees  
For years their sad guard will be keeping.

In her poetry Clerk attempts to assuage and reconcile the clash between two great forces waging battle in the South Gippsland hills.

### **Small Farm Literature**

Gippsland was the home of the selector, usually a dairyman on a small farm. Contrary to popular opinion, there is an extensive literature about the small farmers. Whereas writing about the untouched forests and cutting down the forests is usually in verse, small farm literature consists almost exclusively of novels, and the battle is not against the tall trees, but against bracken, mud, cows and economics. These novels come later, mainly between 1910 and 1940. They are sometimes written by Gippslanders after they have left (e.g. Mary Grant Bruce, Mary Fullerton, Marion Miller Knowles), and sometimes by popular inter-war novelists like Bernard Cronin, John Ewers, John Morgan

Walsh, Leonard Mann and W.S. Walker ("Cooee"). After 1900 Australians settled down in the cities, but many writers (like Prichard, Palmer and E.J. Brady) kept up the 19th century habit of wandering around Australia, writing about places Australians had left or had never lived in. The most interesting and representative works on the Gippsland family farm are Mary Grant Bruce's *Glen Eyre* (1912), Mary Fullerton's *The People of the Timber Belt* (1925), Bernard Cronin's *Bracken* (1931), John Ewers' *Fire on the Wind* (1935) and Louis Esson's short play *Dead Timber*.

A temperamental difference separates people who select plains country from those who like hill country. Some people feel at home on flat, open country where you can unwind, relax and spread yourself out. Independence consists in not being constrained, in the freedom of endless horizons. This feeling has often been expressed in Australian literature. But there is another form of independence: you can go to ground on your farm, its hills and foliage concealing you from outside. You can look out on the world, but it can't look in at you. It's like the highland Scots in their mountain eyries looking down on advancing enemies. It is a desire to be private and enclosed, and is connected with the bower or secret place mentioned previously. The whole farm can be such a refuge from the world. Escaping back to one's haunts is another way of getting away from it all, different to the escape provided on the plains.

Slessor makes the contrast in the opening of 'South Country':

After the whey-faced anonymity  
Of river-gums and scribbly-gums and bush,  
After the rubbing and the hit of brush,  
You come to the South Country

As if the argument of trees were done,  
The doubts and quarrelling, the plots and pains,  
All ended by these clear and gliding planes  
Like an abrupt solution.

The plains are clear and open, but the bush brushes and impedes, and this rubs off on the characters in the small-farm novels who are a quarrelling, contentious lot, tense, unhappy, wound-up, compulsive in their actions, driven by passions and frustrations that they cannot put a name to. They blow hot and cold, all cooped up on the farm with no outlet. Isolation adds to the pressure.

Unlike the relaxation of the plains, the dominant notes here are struggle and tension. People are battling for survival with no improvement in sight (with no end in sight, either), but unlike Dad and Dave they don't sit back and laugh and make a joke of it — they keep at it even more earnestly, taking it out in the endless task of cutting down the bracken. The bracken in turn, by endlessly regrowing, takes it out on them.

Increasing this restrictive atmosphere is the close-knit family structure. These are all family novels, often sagas over three generations, people with cousins, clans, relatives, etc., and with fights over wills and other dynastic concerns. They are not novels about individuals. The family is physically stationary and stable, but all is volatile emotionally: the temperature is high and the atmosphere foetid. Fathers and grandfathers dominate. A pervasive Calvinist atmosphere, imbued through hard work and having the Bible read at table during meal-breaks, keeps the family under control. Domestic tragedies in these inturned families produce a depressing, downward spiral against a background of equally depressing farm conditions. It is no surprise to learn that the desire to get away from the constricting world of the small dairy farm looms large in these novels.

### **Far East Gippsland**

Far East Gippsland is a wedge of forested country between Victoria and N.S.W. which has never been inhabited except marginally along the Princes Highway and down some of the rivers. It was settled first by people moving down the south coast of N.S.W. in the wake of Ben Boyd and the Imlay brothers. Early accounts of journeys through it were recorded by 'The Vagabond' (1886), Baldwin Spencer (1890), R.H. Croll (1911) and 'The Gumsucker' (1913). Croajingalong is a separate region with a feel of its own.

The distinctive feature of its literature is vagabondage: its main figures are always on the tramp. So it has something in common with outback literature; it's not like the stationary, family-centred novels of the small farms. The heroes of Frank Fox's *Beneath an Ardent Sun*, Frederick Howard's *The Emigrant*, Eve Langley's novels and Chester Eagle's *Hail and Farewell* wander picaresquely through basically unsettled country, occasionally coming to towns. Eagle's characters are restless mountain men, throwbacks to the 19th century mateship type, drinking themselves to death and having car accidents in high style; so do the timber workers and fishermen of the area. It's still a male frontier area (Steve and Blue in *The Pea Pickers* dress as men).

East Gippsland is the place where you get away from civilization and luxuriate in the clean, healthy air and green forests, camping and swimming on the long beaches. Most of East Gippsland's literature is written by outsiders searching for an untouched paradise. E.J. Brady wrote of Mallacoota:

No coarse hand of progress will ever tear from Mallacoota and its surroundings the mystic beauty that still clings to it like an enchanted veil, showing under the soft transparency of sky and air a loveliness amongst the rarest in picturesque Australia.

A related theme is the contrast between the exceedingly beautiful countryside and the hard struggle for a livelihood of the people who inhabit it, with perhaps the feeling that human intrusion spoils it. Gippsland is a world of its own, and for Gippslanders, East Gippsland functions to their own outback — a place with an image of an endless free, roving life without restraints, remote and different enough to be larger than life.

E.J. Brady, the *Bulletin* balladist, went to Mallacoota in 1909 in pursuit of the nationalists' dream of a perfect Australia. He lived there, with some extended absences on journalistic and literary assignments, till his death in 1952. He had intended it to be a writers' colony; this didn't eventuate, but Henry Lawson, Louis Esson and Katharine Susannah Prichard were among the writers who stayed there with him, Esson in particular producing plays, short stories and poems relating to his time there.

The coastal forest poetry of the Harpur and Kendall type included views to the coast. Water can play a similar role to the forests in this kind of literature - it is a mystic, romantic, ever-changing element with the same power to enchant and to overpower. Though not as dominant as the trees, water in all its forms — lakes, sea, straits, inlets, swamps, rivers, shores, streams, ocean, estuaries, floods — recurs in Gippsland literature. Brady was a balladist of the sea. One kind of water literature depicts the difficulty of small coastal steamers and fishermen crossing the bar at inlets like Mallacoota, Bemm River, the Snowy at Marlo and Lakes Entrance. This is an heroic and dangerous business, partly like outback feats (e.g. mustering) and partly like natural disasters (e.g. floods and fire) in Australian literature. Lawson, Brady, Esson (the play *Shipwreck*), Mrs. Hilda Kerr of Orbost, Nathan Spielvogel, Marie Pitt, Mary Grant Bruce and the contemporary writer Frank Kellaway have all written works on the 'crossing the bar' theme.

A final feature of Gippsland literature is its explicitly anti-city bias. In much Australian literature this theme is there by implication, but Gippsland writers have the habit of trumpeting it quite boldly throughout their works. Mary Grant Bruce is representative in this regard. The argument is that city life is stale, slick and unnatural — men are untrue to their masculinity — but life in the green hills and bracing air of Gippsland is healthy, invigorating and refreshing, and restores a man to himself. In the poetry of the forests, the theme is present but muted: life is better here and we hope the ways of the city never intrude:

forgetting 'mid the quiet hills the city's ceaseless whirl

But in the small-farm novels (hard work, fresh air and sound sleep) and in the far east picaresque mode (camping and swimming in the sanctuary of nature) the contrasting and inferior state of the cities is a constant refrain.

DAVID HEADON

# Eccentrics, Explorers & Evangelists: A Camel Ride Through the Literature of the Northern Territory

## I Eccentrics & Explorers

In chapter XVII of his lengthy travel memoir *Following the Equator*, Mark Twain suggested that:

Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer, and so it pushes the other novelties into second and third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies. And all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of purposes, and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened.<sup>1</sup>

Now, Twain on Australia is a bit like D.H. Lawrence on America and its literature: two parts insight, two parts absolute rubbish. In the same chapter XVII, for example, he refers to miserable old Melbourne — I was there a few days ago, rain, gloom, the usual — Twain refers to the southern metropolis as "a majestic city." Verily, to misquote one of his hair-clad American contemporaries: "you can't get everything right all of the time". But in his comments on Australian history, just mentioned, Twain hits the mark with telling accuracy. Our past *is* full of surprise, adventure, incongruity and contradiction.

My colleague, Dr. A.St.J. Scanlon and I will testify that Twain's comments have particular relevance when applied to the eccentrics, explorers and

evangelists of the Northern Territory of Australia in its early pioneering decades. Perhaps appropriately, I'll deal, in the first part of the paper, with the eccentrics, and throw in an odd explorer. Tony, as a result of his otherworldly bent, will concentrate on several of the equally bent evangelists.

\* \* \* \* \*

Evaluations of the Northern Territory over the years have usually had one thing in common: an inclination towards the pithy, all-encompassing tag. The list of colourful labels utilized by commentators on the North in the decades up to the outbreak of the Second World War is a long, and apparently contradictory one. Those with a vested interest in Territory growth favoured phrases such as "Land of Perpetual Summers," "Land of Smiles and Wealth," "Land of Opportunity," "Land Poets Sing About," "Australia's Front Door," or, simply, Australia's "wonderland." Sceptics used expressions such as "the White Elephant of South Australia," "the unwanted door," "the land of heat, rain, mosquitoes and sandflies," "a place fit for aliens and savages," "a Land Half Made," or, the "colour-mad hole." After his visit to the North in 1898, Banjo Paterson irreverently declared the Territory's show-piece, Darwin, "a city of booze, blow and blasphemy."<sup>2</sup> There were more ambiguous labels, of course, those suggestive of a sedate tropical lifestyle, such as "Land of Later On," "Land of Lots of Time," and "Land of Wait a While," but the great majority of commentators were either adamantly for or against. Few writers with political, economic or creative aspirations discussed the Territory content to sit on the fence.

Shortly before his death late last year, Xavier Herbert, undisputed heavyweight of Territory literature as the result of his two fictional works, *Capricornia* (1938) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975), made his unbending attitude totally clear. Misquoting Paterson, he declared the place "a Land of Ratbags."<sup>3</sup> A perusal of the available literature broadly reinforces Herbert's interpretation, yet the issue is a controversial one. Jeannie Gunn, in *We of the Never-Never* (1908) proposes a diametrically opposed model. Her Territorian is no wild eccentric, given to drink — he is courageous, courteous, morally upright, and usually a teetotaler. Gunn's exploring men — and, as I'll show, women — who opened Australia's last frontier, could serve as role models for the *Boys' and Girls' Own Annual*. Quality citizens. So, who gets it right?

Before answering, some brief background on the Territory credentials of Gunn and Herbert. Mrs Gunn accompanied her husband Aeneas down the track to the Elsey River Station, just south of Katherine, in 1902, after he had been appointed manager. Tragically, Aeneas Gunn died of malarial dysentery barely a year after taking up the post, and Jeannie returned to Melbourne. There, she produced two works depicting her Elsey experiences; both instantly caught the imagination of the Australian, and English, book-buying public. The books were *The Little Black Princess* (1905, dedicated to "our maluka," her husband Aeneas; and *We of the Never-Never* (1908), dedicated to the Never-Never's hardy band of "Bush-folk." Xavier Herbert's long association with the Territory has been well-documented. From the late 1920's, a variety of jobs — railway

fettler, drover, pearler; then, in the mid 1930's, acting superintendent of the Kahlin Aboriginal Compound in Darwin. When *Capricornia* won the Sesquicentenary Literary Competition in 1938, an elated Herbert reputedly celebrated in true local style, by getting mightily drunk with, in his own words, "bums & bagmen & Greeks & Chows & Yeller fellers...."<sup>4</sup> The death, in 1979, of his constant companion Sadie Norden, prompted Herbert to leave his Queensland home at Redlynch and return to his spirit country, there to write a second autobiographical volume and begin another novel. Set in fictional Capricornia, and tentatively entitled *Billygoat Hill*, the novel was never started.

The Territory experiences of Gunn and Herbert are noticeably different. We expect discrepancies, but what we get on occasion are radical differences of perception and emphasis. Whose Territorian comes nearest the mark? Gunn's doughty, honest pioneer, or Herbert's inhabitant gone troppo and, sometimes, wilful murderer?

The first clear point made by the literature is that the early white inhabitants had ample justification for going troppo. Mrs Gunn's nights on the Elsey might have been "beautiful . . . shimmering with warm tropical moonlight," but they were pretty crook elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> I'm not talking about the weather, which in the Dry Season at least is impeccable, but other factors. Pestilence alone made day-to-day life a testing experience for the amateur pioneer. Mrs Gunn does have one of her characters, Dan, a bushie of the old type, mention in passing the odd problem with "white ants, and blue mould, and mildew, and wrastling lubras."<sup>6</sup> More of "wrastling lubras" later. For the moment, let's concentrate on white ants et al. Mrs Gunn's contemporaries certainly did.

Alfred Searcy, the Sub-collector of Customs in the Northern Territory from 1882 to 1896, expounds at length on the problems he experienced with the dreaded cockroaches and rats, in his two volumes detailing his Top End experiences, *In Northern Seas* (1905) and *In Australian Tropics* (1909). Both volumes, which we are assured in the Prefaces deal only with strict fact — not a hint of romancing — discuss some of the torments of the tropical daily routine. In the *Northern Seas* volume, Searcy cautions:

You are aware, no doubt, that the tropical cockroaches grow to a great size, and are full of business. An immense fellow sailed in to my room at our quarters one night, and on examining it I found a great number of tick fastened upon the stomach portion of its body. You may have heard that these insects have a great predilection for finger and toe nails. When in the [seaboat *Flying Cloud*] asleep, I had my toenails nibbled right down to the quick. The rats on board were beastly familiar . . . I woke up one night, and found a great brute seated on my face.<sup>7</sup>

Banjo Paterson welcomed any opportunity to elaborate on his tropical preoccupation: the mosquitoes. In his article, "Buffalo Shooting in Australia", published in the *Sydney Mail* in January, 1899, Paterson gives a sort of Aussie Mossie form guide, alluding to the impressive credentials of the Port Hacking, Hawkesbury, Hexham (of the famous greys), Castlereagh, Gippsland,

Diamantina and Dawson River mossies. However, in Banjo's words, "all these places put together could not furnish enough mosquitoes to act as trumpeters for the vast mosquito army that every night spreads itself over the whole face of nature in the buffalo country."<sup>8</sup> In a later "Wireless Talk" Paterson challenges his listeners:

What's that? I don't care where you've been, or what you've seen, I say you have never seen mosquitoes till you have been in the Territory. You've got to have a cheesecloth mosquito net because the ordinary net is no good up there. Why isn't it any good? Because when they settle on it, it tears with their weight and once they get inside the net, there's nothing but a skeleton left in the bed by the time your friends get to you.<sup>9</sup>

(Is it worth mentioning that as I was writing parts of this paper some months ago, in my barely weather-proof downstairs Darwin study, I decided Paterson was exaggerating, but only just).

Individually, the mossies, cockies, rats and white ants must have made the lives of the early pioneers extremely uncomfortable. When acting as a combined force, a nightmare. In this regard, the tale of greatest misery undoubtedly belongs to Jessie Litchfield, author, journalist and, for a time, editor of the *Northern Territory Times*. Known as the "Grand Old Lady of the Territory," Litchfield published a novel in 1930 entitled *Far-North Memories*. It is largely non-fiction, dealing with her ten-years experience on the diamond-drills down the track. In it she relates the story of an English couple, recently arrived in the Territory from "Home," who take up a selection on the Daly River. The wife, called by Litchfield "Mrs. English-Woman," had perhaps read *We of the Never-Never*, confident in her ability to establish high quality pioneer surroundings. Subsequently, she shipped all her furniture to the Daly: piano, silver-cake baskets, brocade-covered chairs, mirrors, aluminium cooking-utensils, egg-shell china, silver cutlery, the lot! On arrival in the Territory, every local she met advised her to take only the plain and simple of her varied trappings to the Daly, but she remained unmoved. Litchfield takes up the melancholy tale:

All her elaborate furniture was sent up to the Daly by lugger, much to its skipper's disgust; for the bulkier articles had to be stowed on deck, where they were soon stained with sea-spray and eaten by cockroaches. When they arrived at the Daly, all the furniture had to be temporarily stowed under tarpaulins; for Mrs English-woman discovered that the "commodious Colonial mansion" she had imagined, was simply a bark humpy, some ten feet by twelve, with an ant-bed floor. Borers ate her elaborate furniture; white-ants destroyed her sideboards; ginger-ants built in her piano, and cockroaches lived in her brocaded chairs. Frogs, centipedes, and

spiders made uninvited calls upon her; open fires blackened her aluminium cooking-utensils, soon bumped out of shape by the clumsy fingers of the blacks who stole all her silver cutlery.

When the wet set in, lace curtains, embroidered bedspreads, and toilet covers became mildewed in a single night; her crocodile dressing-case grew hoary whiskers, and the glued portions became unstuck; her elaborate house-gowns, tea-gowns, and rest-gowns became discoloured with wet bark, blackened with mildew, and eaten into holes by cockroaches and crickets. Her husband's evening dress suits made a meal for the white-ants with the camphor-wood chest that housed them.

So a very unhappy English couple abandoned their selection in disgust, and returned to their London flat, leaving the bush-women still unconverted.<sup>10</sup>

In the Northern Territory of the early decades, pestilence could not be avoided. First round to Herbert. *Capricornia* grimly incorporates pestilence, the environment, into his scheme of things. The first pages of the novel prophetically refer to "the violence of the climate" in these words:

. . . as the first settlers saw it, the whole vast territory seemed never to be any thing for long but either a swamp during Wet Season or a hard-baked desert during the Dry.<sup>11</sup>

*Capricornia* reads like an elongated last act of a Shakespearean tragedy. Herbert's characters succumb, one by one, either to an alien land or the predatory nature of the pestilence. They die in a variety of macabre ways, beginning with the Ned Krater/Yurracumbunga holocaust in chapter one, and concluding with Tocky's poignant and pitiful death in the broken water tank in the final chapter. The host of miscellaneous deaths in between bears testimony to what Vincent Buckley has termed "the disorder" of Herbert's universe.<sup>12</sup> The brute strength and inevitability of the environment and its inhabitants have a dark role to play in the tragedy. When a train mutilates Joe Ballest (his "Eyes — nothing but eyes — eyes — bulging and horrified!"<sup>13</sup>) a host of meat ants swarm instantly. Likewise Frank McLash. His death prompts the meat ants to surge over him, making him appear to be woolly with red hair. The birds had pecked out his eyes, torn off his ears, stripped his nose.<sup>14</sup>

When Jock Driver is killed, the white inhabitants determine to bury their friend with appropriate decorum. At the mortuary, the ants, at least, are beaten by smearing doctored vaseline over the table legs, but the climate intervenes in the form of a monsoonal downpour to turn the proceedings into a farce. With Joe waiting to be buried, blowflies shoot out of holes in the coffin lid,

and the miserable gathering of mourners desperately bail against the tide, trying to get the water, as Herbert puts it, "reduced below the level of the eye, lest the burial should look indecently like a drowning."<sup>15</sup> Joe is finally laid to rest amidst the hiss and gurgle of bubbles.

Herbert's characters are rightly buffeted by a hostile environment, one where the sheer breadth of the pestilence alone threatened to psychologically intimidate or overwhelm. Despite this, white settlers did manage to maintain a tentative but constant foothold in the North, though the Territory could scarcely be termed a model early colony. The sombre facts relating to the first century of white inhabitation — of privations, sadness, death and numerous abandoned settlements — reinforce the Herbert interpretation of the environment: cruel and unrelenting.

Under such conditions, eccentricity thrives. Yet, despite this, Mrs Gunn's salt-of-the-earth Elsey inhabitants bask in continual triumph. They enjoy the "simple things that [make] life in the Never-Never all it is"; they have a "love of the ridiculous," which binds them tightly together (I'm sure Herbert would endorse that particular characteristic); they are, in Gunn's phrase, "one great brotherhood."<sup>16</sup> Surprisingly, in a book virtually devoid of polemic, on this point Mrs Gunn goes on the offensive. She has one of her characters, Dan, castigate the contemporary stereotype of his own kind, the bushman. He suggests that it has been manufactured by ignorant urban writers: "I've never *done* wishing some of them town chaps that write bush yarns 'ud come along and learn a thing or two . . . . Most of 'em seem to think that when we're not on the drink we're whipping the cat or committing suicide."<sup>17</sup> Herbert's Territorians might whip the odd cat, but Mrs Gunn's definitely do not.

The bushmen that surround her are good and true, chivalrous (very), noble and caring. With the few white women in their midst dependent on them for love, companionship and protection, they rise to the task in manly fashion. They aim their speeches, Gunn suggests, straight at a woman's heart, and they respond to anyone or anything needing protection, be it lame dog, man down on his luck, drunk, little woman or woman in need. They are, all of them, "men loving their neighbours as themselves."<sup>18</sup> Some, like Mac, the Sanguine Scot, even know their Shakespeare; others, like the mailman, Fizzer, are the loner-types, "hard, sinewy, dauntless, and enduring." These are the men that countries tend to ignore, and yet they are the very "foundation-stones of great cities."<sup>19</sup> Above all, Mrs Gunn's real bushie resists drink. He is a *real* fizzer — subject to the most barbarous of temptations, but strong. A man who finds drinking tea sufficient to ward off life's threat. In his finest expression, he is Aeneas E. Gunn, the maluka — cheery, bright, a fine leader of men and always optimistic. Consistent with Mrs Gunn's ideal, the maluka's wants are few. As he puts it:

A bite and a sup and a faithful dog, and a guidwife by a glowing  
hearth, and what more is needed to make a home?<sup>20</sup>

Mrs Gunn's women, subject throughout to less scrutiny, are of a similar breed to the men, providing they are of the right sort. And she takes pains to indicate

who are the right sort. The wise maluka himself categorizes women in the first chapter, just so the reader has his outback bearings. The first type, the wrong type, is the "Snorter," who goes looking for insults and usually finds them (Jeremy Delacy's first wife, Rhoda, in *Poor Fellow My Country*, might be an example); then there's the "fool", screeching and smirking (Fay McFee, in *Poor Fellow My Country*, might be an example); and finally, "the right sort," the one whom the maluka suggests is "A' all through the piece."<sup>21</sup> The right sort certainly is not a goddess on a pedestal; she is plucky, has a sense of humour and is not a "Freezer".<sup>22</sup> She is — you guessed it — the Little Missus herself (presumably, a hot house). A real bushman's mate, despite her Melbourne upbringing and education.

Herbert, and indeed Banjo Paterson, paint a less glowing picture of the northern citizenry. Their men and women, of Darwin and down the track, are deeply flawed. They do drink, fight, vomit, swear, copulate with black women, and, on occasion, physically abuse or ignore their white women. Paterson's bush-folk, on the whole a better breed than Herbert's but woefully inferior to Gunn's, idle away their lives, especially his Top Enders. Paterson's Darwin, as I mentioned earlier, is a "city of booze, blow and blasphemy." "The man who tries to hustle Darwin," he warns, "would get a knife in him quick and lively."<sup>23</sup> According to Paterson, when Darwin wears its worst face it is barbaric and violent, a vulgar meeting-spot for the riff-raff of the Eastern races; displaying its most endearing visage, it is the pre-eminent city of "the land of Later On."<sup>24</sup> Herbert's Darwin is not, as one of his contemporaries labelled it, "the fag-end of creation,"<sup>25</sup> but it's no tropical paradise either. Historian Alan Powell credits Herbert with the remark that Darwin's only exports through the years have been "empty bottles and full public servants."<sup>26</sup> In the early chapters of *Capricornia*, particularly chapter two, "Psychological Effect of a Solar Topee", the town emerges as ludicrously class-conscious and insular. Herbert's white inhabitants are at best passive eccentrics, at worst, violent, oppressive intruders.

Who depicts the *real* Territorian, then, Gunn or Herbert? The supporting literature suggests a bit of both. The north had its men who displayed concern and sympathy for their mates (for some, even their black mates), and it had some men undoubtedly skimmed from the worst dregs of humanity. Saints and desperate sinners — and in between a significant number of eccentrics, like Paterson's wonderfully sketched Port Faraway resident in his novel, *Outback Marriage* (1906), Sampson, the "great soaker" and "prize lunatic."<sup>27</sup> The men might have signed the pledge at the Elsey, when Mrs Gunn was in the vicinity, but not in too many other regions of the Territory. A concerned Mrs Harriet Daly, daughter of one of the first Government Residents, remembers that in the early 1870's:

The grog shanties were always full, I am sorry to say, and, in spite of the depression that reigned on every side, they drove a stirring and paying trade. This is a sample of what was sold to the poor fellows so lately recovering from fever — gin and kerosene mixed with Worcester sauce, and flavoured with ginger and sugar.<sup>28</sup>

"This deadly concoction," Daly continues, "simply maddened those who partook of it, and to this cause as well as the climate must be attributed the severity of the cases that came under treatment." And that was in the so-called civilised Darwin vicinity. Alfred Searcy, moving further out in the Territory in the 1880's and '90's, made a number of pertinent observations. The shanty-keeper, he notes, had to be able "to shoot, fight and ride well." Men frequenting the shanties and the dreaded floating grogshops or, in the parlance, "bum-boats," did so at their own risk. They often drank themselves into a fit of delirium tremens, Searcy writes, from which "some recover, but many don't." Race-meetings were especially popular spots:

It would be drink, drink, for days, perhaps weeks, until every drop of intoxicating liquor was consumed. The after effects would be *terrible*. Recourse could then be had to *every imaginable drink*, such as Worcester Sauce, Friar's Balsam, Pain Killer, until that supply was exhausted . . . . Men in their saner moments would tie themselves up to a tree at night, others would *hopple themselves*, fearing that they would wander in their mad moments into the bush and be lost.<sup>29</sup>

In the Territory of old, not the lost child theme it seems, but the lost adult.



*Northern Territory Commercial hotel, Mitchel Feb. 1874 Foelsche Collection.  
(Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Australia)*

The modesty and courtesy of the bushmen observed by both Jeannie Gunn and Mrs Harriet Daly had little relevance in the remoter regions where white women were practically unknown and men had names such as Gutter Snipe, Queensland Orphan, Dummy and Blind Solomon, and referred sentimentally to their dead as "worm banquets."<sup>30</sup> On the way to the Roper River, one of Searcy's friends came across a fellow, demented by the hardship, who had actually dug a grave for himself, and was continually walking around it. The friend, apparently unaware of any great brotherhood of men, rode on, leaving the man to keep his appointment with eternity.<sup>31</sup>

There was at least one white female survivor of the back-blocks: one Mrs Tommy, "a tall, handsome, well-made woman, and a splendid equestrienne." The story goes that Mrs Tommy, always forthright, felt like a change of lovers and so, being of Christian inclination, she went to the Justice-of-the-Peace requesting a divorce. When the Justice informed her that he did not have the requisite qualifications, Mrs Tommy instantly exclaimed: "If you don't grant it, so help me G—— I'll shoot him." In a few moments the Justice heard "bang, bang!" and went outside to find Mrs Tommy blazing away at Tommy "who was jumping and dodging about, crying, 'Don't dear, don't dear.'"<sup>32</sup>

All just good clean Territory fun, of course, but the same could not be said for the activities of arguably the most infamous policeman to patrol the outback North, by horse or camel: mounted constable first class W.H. Willshire, officer in charge of the native police in the Victoria River region in the 1880's and '90's. Willshire has distinct claims to being one of the most sadistic and paranoid men ever to live in the Territory, much less to actually work for the cause of law and order. Given competition of the calibre I have outlined, no mean feat. In the context of Willshire's deeds, those of Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* police, Troopers McMerder, O'Theef, O'Crimnell, McCrook and Robbry, seem positively tame by comparison. Willshire's major work — entitled *The Land of the Dawning — Being Facts Gleaned from Cannibals in the Australian Stone Age* (1896) — was written in answer to the "rude barbarians" in the south who had been attacking his integrity as an officer of the law. In his dedication, Willshire declares that he wants all White Australians to "thoroughly understand the scheming designs of aborigines who plot and contrive to take the heart's blood from white men." He sets about "educating" the public.<sup>33</sup>

*Land of Dawning* is crammed full of "nigger-hunts," though Willshire carefully discriminates between his dealings with male and female Aborigines. The last words of his dedication suggest that "the women are good, but the men are bad."<sup>34</sup> Out tracking on one occasion in the Victoria River district, in June, 1894, Willshire and his men came across a large mob of natives. As the author informs us, the Aborigines:

scattered in all directions setting fire to the grass on each side of us, throwing occasional spears, and yelling at us. It's no use *mincing matters* — the Martini-Henry carbines at this critical moment were *talking English* in the silent majesty of those great eternal rocks. The mountain was swathed in a regal robe of fiery grandeur, and its ominous roar was close upon us. Out from between the rocks came

a strapping young girl, with the agility of a mountain creature . . . .  
the prettiest black girl I ever saw.<sup>35</sup>

Per capita, the developing North had more than its fair share of distinctive characters; unfortunately, as the grim and sadistic exploits of mounted constable first class W.H. Willshire indicate, the line between eccentricity and madness was perilously thin. Dr Scanlon will elaborate.



*Northern Territory Native Camp, Palmerston, April 1874.  
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14. Ch.28, "Snakes in Arcady," *Capricornia*, p.508.
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17. *Ibid.*, p.214.
18. *Ibid.*, pp.4, 41, 247, 171.
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20. *Ibid.*, p.65.
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30. *Ibid.*, pp.37-8, 170.
31. *Ibid.*, pp.170-1.
32. *Ibid.*, pp.176-7.
33. W.H. Willshire, *The Land of the Dawning — Being Facts Gleaned from Cannibals in the Australian Stone Age*, Adelaide: W.K. Thomas & Co., 1896, p.5.
34. *Ibid.*, p.6.
35. *Ibid.*, p.41.

TONY SCANLON

## II Evangelists: The Aborigines in Missionary Literature

Since it is generally agreed that I am of a more spiritual nature than my esteemed colleague, it has been agreed that my paper should cover the early missionary response to the blacks, as reflected in the literature.

The early missionary literature provides some startling insights into the darker recesses of the European psyche. The more one reads, the more is it apparent that Herbert's ecclesiastical grotesques- Brother Bleater, or the Reverends Hollower, Prayer and Ranter — may well have had their real-life equivalents amongst the earliest clergy on the last frontier.

It has been difficult to select the material to cover in this limited time, for the literature is extensive, stretching back to the early records of the Hermannsburg Mission Society, which commenced operations in the Centre in the mid-1860's. It is a colourful literature, certainly as absorbing as even the most exciting secular literature of those times, since the first missionaries found themselves in a difficult climate, surrounded by violent people — both black and white — far from the resources and comforts of the southern parishes.

Moreover, the early mission pamphlets and books which were written for the consumption of late Victorian readers tend to concentrate upon the spectacular, the odd, and the humorous — often at the expense of the strict truth. This is especially true of the observations which the missionaries made of Aboriginal tribal custom, if only because so few of the missionary workers were able to speak the tribal language. They did not, therefore, fully understand the significance of tribal rituals, and provided incorrect (often unjust) European interpretations of Aboriginal practice. This was exacerbated in works purporting to deal with tribal magic, since the "witch-doctors" of the Aboriginal tribes were perceived as the greatest single obstacle to the development of Christianity in the north, and it was clearly in the missionary interest to degrade the ritual functions of the tribal elders to the status of "black magic" and "devil worship".

I shall concentrate here on the response of the missionaries to the tribes which they had come to convert, although other areas of the literature are fascinating. An entire paper could be devoted to the titles which the missionaries bestowed upon themselves and their colleagues : "Webb of Milingimbi", "Francis of

Central Australia", the "Sky-Pilot of Arnhem Land", or the "Strenuous Saint" (not to be confused with the "Bishop with 150 Wives"). Alternatively, one could explore the illustrations chosen to accompany the early books and pamphlets on the N.T. missions: both the photographs of nubile Aboriginal girls in coy poses, with captions such as "Nymphs of the Roper"; or those of the tribal elders, "comically" garbed in discarded toppers and tattered evening dress.

The first missionaries had great difficulty in coming to terms with the black people they had come to convert. On the one hand, the missionaries were eager to protect their new flocks against the allegations of many writers that the Aboriginal was somehow less than human. On the other, they could find little in Aboriginal culture or society which was in any way admirable: on the contrary, the early missionaries characterised Aboriginal religion as "Devil-worship", the corroboree as "lewd" and Aboriginal customary law as "barbaric". The earliest missionaries were essentially militant in all the cultures within which they worked, but in Australia, their attitudes were hardened by their low opinion of the natives: even as late as 1934 a missionary could depict the Aboriginal mind as "full of superstition and cunning"<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, one of the first Hermansburg missionaries had concluded that the Aboriginals were so depraved that the contact with them represented "the first time that a race had been found for whom there could be no salvation on earth or in heaven"<sup>2</sup>.

To be fair, the missionaries were echoing the sentiments generally expressed by nineteenth-century Europeans. As D.J. Mulvaney notes, even leading anthropologists like Lubbock lapsed from scientific objectivity of language, describing the northern Aboriginals as "miserable", "disgusting", "filthy" or "degraded"<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly, the young Norwegian naturalist, Knut Dahl wrote of the Aboriginals:

Free, unfettered, like herds of apes they roam the gigantic forests of Arnhem Land . . . several characteristics are faintly reminiscent of monkeys . . .<sup>4</sup>

The government attitude to the Aborigines may well be summed up by the report of J.L. Parsons, the S.A. Government Resident from 1884 to 1890, who cited a local J.P. Alfred Giles, a man "of experience and universally acknowledged humaneness" as an authority on the natives:

It is about time that the people in the southern colonies . . . (especially the philanthropist)... who have probably never seen a wild tribe of natives, should be made aware that the blackfellow is not the 'noble savage' he is depicted, that if he lacks one thing more than another it is virtue. Moral laws they have none; their festive dances and corroborees are of the most lewd and disgusting character; their songs, rites and ceremonies utterly revolting and fiendish.<sup>5</sup>

The Aborigines were widely abused, treated with the utmost callousness, and despised as near-animals. As G.J. O'Kelly has observed:

Perhaps the statement of Litchfield, innocuous in itself, best embodies the callousness of mind towards a people the whites seemed loath to admit as fellow human beings: "We usually bought any dead bodies from the niggers, paying them a bag of flour for the 'dear departed'. We used to bury the corpse in an anthill, and when all the flesh had been eaten from the bones, we sent the skeleton to museums, and received up to ten pounds each for them".<sup>6</sup>

There is little doubt that many of the early missionaries shared the general prejudice against the blacks, unconsciously or not. Consider, for example, E.G. Dawson's confused defence of his charges. Anxious to repudiate the claim that:

The blacks . . . are, without exception, the lowest type of humanity on the face of the earth. They are almost on a level with the brute creation . . .<sup>7</sup>

Dawson launches into a spirited defence which is sadly weakened by the final comment that the Aborigines had had "less chance (than other races) of rising above the level of the beasts".<sup>8</sup>

Many writers lamented the pernicious influence upon the northern tribes of the secular whites who inhabited the last frontier. Nor is there much doubt that in their depiction of predatory, ruthless whites the missionaries were seldom exaggerating. The north and its denizens have long been the despair of the Church. As late as 1938, the evangelist and former jockey Alf Reid was to lament of the city of Darwin and its benighted inhabitants:

Then let us turn aside and weep for all the lost and  
erring sheep  
That practise wicked habits  
And go their unrepentant way just living madly for the  
day,  
As heedlessly as rabbits  
Where Darwin's tropic waters roll . . . Ah, me it seems the  
flowing bowl  
Has well fulfilled its mission,  
And as with Babylon and Rome, so Darwin must beneath  
the foam  
Go sinking to perdition.<sup>9</sup>

It is probably fair to point out, in defence of the maligned city, that Reid's poem sprang from his disappointment that not one person turned up to his revival meeting. Reid blamed this misfortune on the fact that the pubs stayed open until ten.

Darwin was still afloat at the time of writing.

One of the areas of black culture which gave the missionaries the greatest concern was the status of the black woman in her own society. The fact that European women were inferiors in their society did not prevent the missionaries from lamenting the superiority of males in the local tribes. Gilbert White wrote:

They certainly have a bad time of it when when they are young. Their adolescence is celebrated by ceremonies too horrible to be described, and their husbands treat them with much harshness.<sup>10</sup>

The sexual customs of the aboriginals and what one missionary called the "horrible native matrimonial system" [(PH Ritchie, *North of the Never-Never*, Sydney 1934, p35)] were the source of great outrage. H.M. Arrowsmith sums up the missionary response in describing a young woman who refused to marry according to tribal law:

She had no say in the matter, and when the news came to her she went to the missionary and said, "I do not want to marry this old bush man." She had learnt many things at the mission — to keep her body clean — and something of the value which Christ placed upon womanhood — and she naturally did not want to lead the sort of life this marriage would have involved.<sup>11</sup>

No doubt native "promiscuity" and the need for young girls to keep their bodies "clean" was the primary motivation for the extraordinary actions of the "Bishop with 150 wives", F.X. Gsell. In his book on the Bathurst Island mission, Gsell reveals the Roman Catholic response not only to paganism, but to other modes of the Christian faith. In a chapter with the rather Freudian title of "*Christian Penetration*" he precludes a tirade against Black "devil worship" with the comment that "sincere paganism is better than false Christianity" (p 61). His analysis of the state of black women is uncompromising:

White people living in settled and secure communities must find it difficult to imagine the poor conditions under which native women live in uncivilized countries: their degradation both morally and physically. The men, their husbands, consider them as inferior beings, little more than beasts of burden who, according to a man's whim, may be cajoled, thrashed, killed or even taken to market to be traded infamously.<sup>12</sup>

It was for this reason that Gsell commenced a scheme whereby the mission purchased young girls from their designated husbands — the natives apparently believing that Gsell was buying wives for "normal" reasons — despite his own observation that black women were "taken to market to be traded infamously" — hence the title of the work. Gsell admits that this was a "novel form of black slave traffic", but defends it vigorously. His determination to acquire girls for

the Mission flock led to virtual kidnappings, as agents of the mission went out amongst the tribes to reclaim the girls who had returned — not always unwillingly — to their homes. The energy and patience with which these girls were sought may be judged from the conclusion to one episode, where Gsell describes an operation lasting two years. He concludes his description of the recovery of the lapsed convert with the lines:

It had not been easy to recapture Elizabeth; it had demanded much determination and persistence before an opportunity could be found to carry her off.<sup>13</sup>

In this particular case, the tribe reacted with great hostility, and Gsell feared an attack on the mission. But all can be justified by having noble ends:

As it turned out, nothing whatever happened. But yes, the enraged tribe, even while I prayed, were bearing down on the Mission determined to win back little Elizabeth; but on the eve of the day of decision, Martina's son-in-law — it is difficult to give him another name — a young and vigorous man, died suddenly. Elizabeth was saved.

Was this chance or Providential intervention? A missionary has strange experiences of this kind too often to permit him to regard them as anything less than something larger than life. God sustains His servants and, knowing this, they are strengthened in well-doing.<sup>14</sup>

Native religion was viewed by the missionaries as "devil-worship", and few missionaries could grasp the complexities of the Aboriginal spiritual beliefs. Gsell admits the power of native practices but derides them in the following eminently confused passage:

I have seen myself a great improvement brought about in the condition of a patient by the absurd palpitations and lively ranting of a witch-doctor.<sup>15</sup>

Others lamented the "debil-debils", in whom the blacks set such store, and by extension, all the rituals of Aboriginal life. R.D. Joynt described one of the Roper River Mission blacks, Minimere as:

. . . a prince, and one who...is a leader. (He) loved all sorts of corroborees. Now ... he has expressed his willingness to give up the dances that are impure, and that include devil worship.<sup>16</sup>



*Bishop F.X. Gsell, Bathurst Island, Northern Territory.  
(Reproduced with permission of the National Library of Australia)*

Generally speaking, the missionaries refused to accept that Aboriginal animism was genuine spirituality. This is as much a consequence of the inadequacy of the missionary knowledge of native language, and the secrecy with which ritual is shrouded as it is of a fundamental intolerance. Gsell wrote:

Everything is material and concrete for the aboriginal. Even their belief in spirits is so loosely expressed that one wonders how precise is their actual thinking about them.<sup>17</sup>

He was not alone in his contempt for Aboriginal ritual, which is widely mocked and reviled. Dawson believed that:

The aboriginal has no faith in a Supreme God, or possibly anything with the name of God, and he makes no idols; but he firmly believes in demons and ghosts.<sup>18</sup>

And one can detect the faint odour of paternalism in the following description of a conversion:

As the months went on her very face began to glow with that inward light which comes to those who know the Lord Jesus Christ. What a contrast they found to these native legends — interesting though they were — as they heard the story of Creation, and the story of redemption as revealed in Holy Scripture.<sup>19</sup>

Even though few of the missionaries ever doubted the success of the conversions they described, there are serious doubts about the genuineness of some. One missionary described a visit to another congregation, taught by a priest who knew only English. He heard them singing in the Mara tongue:

Jesus loves my hairy chest  
The Bible tells me so.<sup>20</sup>

and he described the service he first witnessed at Roper Mission:

A hymn was sung, then followed the slightly shortened service of Morning Prayer and ten-minute address, all in English. A few of the natives appeared to be bright and interested but many of them were unable to grasp the meaning of the English service. Several children dozed off and had to be thumped on the back by those sitting near in order that they might take a nominal interest.<sup>21</sup>

It is probably fair to point out that this depiction of mission activity is written from thinly-disguised hostility to the mission in question. There seems to have been a number of feuds between various missionaries and sects.

At the outset of this paper, I suggested some areas in which work could be done, based upon literature written by the early Territory missionaries. Let me close with two final pieces of evidence for the rich veins of material yet to be worked.

One tantalising fragment has led me to speculate that the Territory was in fact settled by negroes from Alabama, not across some hypothetical land-bridge. Langford-Smith tells of a tragic episode when a lubra lost her child:

On my return, I heard the mother crooning the old darkie song the coloured folk are so fond of, and stopped at the door to listen.

### THE DARKIE SONG

Sleep, ma baby, why you lie so col', so col'  
Loo-la, loo-la, don' you gib me any sass.  
Youah mammy's ol', and want you to de berry las'.  
So baby, honey, let dose mean ol' angels pass.

Sleep, ma baby, close youah lil' fingahs heah,  
Loo-la, loo-la, tight about my fingas heah;  
De dawk come close, but baby don' you nebber feah,  
Youah mammy'll hol' you, hol' you, till de mawn  
appeah.<sup>22</sup>

One can almost hear the banjos strumming, and the hoot of de Robert E. Lee down on de levee.

Finally, this literature may well provide the clue to the disappearance of Ludwig Leichardt, or at least to the reason for it. Father Salvado, in his memoirs, cited the evidence left by a number of explorers to justify his claims that the blacks had been severely handled by European commentators. Amongst these comments is a rather strange hymn of praise to the beauty of the black (male) body. Leichardt wrote:

It is fancy? but I am far more pleased in seeing the naked body of the black-fellow than that of the white man. It is the white colour, or I do not know what, which is less agreeable to the eye. When I was in Paris, I was often in the public baths in the Seine, and how few well-made men did I see! There is little fat on the blackfellow, but his muscles are equally developed and their play appears on every part of his body, particularly on the back, when you are walking behind him and he is carrying something on his head.<sup>23</sup>

Did Leichardt attempt something with one of his bearers? Or rather, did he abandon forever the society of ill-made Europeans, for an idyllic life amongst the well-made men of the Aranda? The answer to these, and other riddles, will be provided in my forth-coming monograph, *A History of Australian Sodomy*.

#### NOTES

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3. "The Australian Aborigines 1606-1929: Part 2, 1859-1929", in Eastwood & Smith (eds) *Historical Studies: Selected Articles* (Melbourne, 1964), p.36.
4. *In Savage Australia*, (London, 1926) P.12.
5. South Australian Parliament Papers, 1887, paper 53, p.7.
6. "Jesuit Missions in the Northern Territory 1882-99", unpub. thesis, Monash University, 1967, p.9.
7. *Missionary Heroines in Many Lands* (London 1912) p.144.
8. Loc cit.
9. Alf Reid, *Adventures Around Australia* (Sydney 1948) pp 38-9.
10. *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia*, (Sydney 1918) p.167.
11. *These Australians*, (Sydney n.d. ? 1948) p.81.
12. *The Bishop with 150 Wives*, p.63.
13. *Ibid*, p.89.
14. Op. Cit., p.89.
15. Op. Cit., p.67.
16. *Ten Years Work at the Roper River Mission*, (Sydney 1918), p.21. A later missionary, K. Langford Smith, was assaulted with an axe by the "princely" Minimere. *Sky Pilot in Arnhem Land*, p.56 (Sydney 1933).
17. Op. Cit., p.67.
18. Op. Cit., p.145.
19. *These Australians*, Op. Cit., p.81.
20. K. Langford-Smith, *Sky Pilot's Last Flight*, (Sydney 1936) p.155.
21. *Sky Pilot in Arnhem Land*, op. cit. p.146.
22. *Ibid*, p.57.
23. Cited by Fr. Salvado in *The Salvado Memoirs*, Perth, 1977, p.115.



*Government cutter "Flying Cloud", March 1874. (Foelsche Collection).  
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VINCENT O'SULLIVAN

## Charles Harpur: Cultivation of the Wild\*

There can be few things more grim in Australian literary history than the long-bearded, austere features that faced the camera for that photograph Elizabeth Perkins uses as the frontispiece for *The Poetical Works of Charles Harpur*. It is a portrait which seems to catch so precisely that tormented personality, see-sawing between the certainty that he was his country's first poet, the chosen voice "to quench the burning sting of wrong"<sup>1</sup> in his new world, and the equal certainty that his merits were as maliciously denied by his contemporaries as they were challenged by the circumstances of his life. There are probably few lives that ended with such lucid disappointment as Harpur set down when he was fifty-four by way of epitaph for himself and his recently killed son, as he "came to the conclusion, that he was living in a sham age, under a sham Government, and amongst sham friends, and that any world whatever must therefore be a better world than theirs." And having come to this conclusion, he 'did his dying' and now lies here with one of his sons, in the hope of their meeting in some place better fitted to make them happy, and to keep them so, than this from which they have departed. And even if all that now remains of them is what remains below, — it is still well: inasmuch as in that case, they are safe from all malignity, whether proceeding from God or Devil, that would any further afflict them."<sup>2</sup>

In this edition of over one thousand pages we can now for the first time see Harpur as so vastly the figure of an age: sincere, puzzled, religious, democratic, temperamental, generous, vain, Australian. It is an edition that clears open spaces where before it there was a mass of confusion. For Harpur has been available only through meagre enough "Selections from", half a dozen anthology pieces, a very bad posthumous edition of 1883, and for those who bothered to winkle them out in research libraries, the few thin volumes or pamphlets that were published in his lifetime.

To produce *The Poetical Works* Elizabeth Perkins has worked through the thousands of manuscript pages in the Mitchell Library, and a mountain of newspapers to which Harpur first sent much of his verse. The poet in fact set

\* This discussion of *The Poetical Works of Charles Harpur*, edited by Elizabeth Perkins, Angus and Robertson, 1984, draws largely on a lecture given to the Australian Studies Seminar at Melbourne University in October 1985.

his editor a massive task with his constant revisions, alternative versions, and idiosyncratic groupings of his work. To have settled the text is in itself a fine editorial achievement. But the reader's constant regret is that the edition is such a chronological *mélange*, and that what dating there is appears so scrappy. As an example from the first ninety pages, where the editor has followed Harpur's own grouping of "Poems of Early Life", one finds that an early version of "Memory's Genesis" appeared first in the *Australian* in 1835, and a considerably altered version in the *Sydney Chronicle* in 1837; "The Brook" was published in the *Maitland Mercury* in 1845; "A Blighted Promise" was written in 1853, after Deniehy's speech against the proposed House of Lords in the new Constitution. None of this information is provided. To regard all three as early poems is simply wrong. We are encouraged to misread the poet. For an edition on this scale cries out for some indication of approximate dating. One doesn't ask for the details of publication after every poem, but simply the date, where possible, at the foot of each work. If the final undatable text differs from the earlier printed version as it appeared in a newspaper, square brackets would offer a conventional enough device to inform the reader that Harpur first worked on the poem at that time. There are hundreds of poems for which such initial dates are available. As the volume stands they are provided in only those comparatively few instances where the printed newspaper text is the one used in the edition. For the rest, one often has no idea even of what decade a poem was begun.

The other disappointment is the absence of notes. The realities of publishing mean that no one reasonably could expect a book of this size to carry extensive annotation. But there is room for sensible compromise. The fact is that there are many poems which are not comprehensible without a minimum of information. "To Twank" for example is meaningless unless one knows that it was a nickname of Dan Deniehy, after its appearance in his satire "How I became Attorney-General of New Barataria" in 1859; "John Heke" takes its force from the political temper in Sydney that surrounded the Maori Land Wars; "The Hunter's Indian Dove" was earlier "My Sable Fair", set in Australia and not America, and instead of the vague romantic trifle it became, had embodied Harpur's own courageous support for a young man who loved an Aboriginal woman. Surely a mere dozen to twenty pages might have carried a mass of brief but essential information? Harpur is both a tougher and more immediately engaged poet than one might ever think without the aid of such facts.

These large reservations are the more difficult to press because Elizabeth Perkins, in her several articles on Harpur, is so vastly knowledgeable on the kind of detail one misses. Her introduction is excellent. Whatever views one comes to on Harpur, one does with a sense of indebtedness for the texts she has put in our hands.

\* \* \*

One of the chapters in Manning Clarke that deals with Sydney in the 1840s is called "But Colonials do not make their own History".<sup>3</sup> Put in the form of a question, one could ask the same thing of colonial poetry. Our discomfort

with almost any writer in any of the colonies in the nineteenth century is one of origins. Who is saying what, and for whose benefit?

It is not altogether beside the point to begin this discussion of poetry by referring to a painting. It is called "A View of the Artist's House and Garden, Mill's Plain, Van Dieman's Land", and was painted by the Englishman John Glover in 1834-35<sup>4</sup>. The foreground and left-hand side show a two-storied Georgian stone house, with in front of it and to the side a carefully set out English garden, a dozen different English plants and shrubs in bloom together. To the right and upper portion of the canvas, just beyond the willow trees, there begins native scrub, and the flat land rises to hill covered with low, massed gum-trees. One is not sure, looking at this Glover painting, whether it is meant to be Australia tamed, being subjected to a softer, more accessible horticulture, or whether it is a dislocation of that sense of ease, repose, control, that English gardens are meant to suggest. It is a painting that a structuralist might read with delight. What comprises this depiction of what might well be called *The Cultivation of the Wild* are the metonymies of stock and rosebush as against gum and scrub, level ground (England) against looming hill (the unknown antipodes), broad daylight and obscurity, cottage and forest, stiffly angular English space and crooked, flowing Australian lines. One suspects the force of the painting is the deferral of decision. The viewer for the moment may opt for garden or wilderness, the old or the new, but probably not both at the same time. This painting might just as well be called *The Roughing Up of the Cultivated*. That ambivalence, that possibility of quite contrary titles, is pretty much what you'd expect. As an Englishman who did not come to Australia until almost middle-age, Glover would observe the enormous visual contest of turning Tasmania into England — or vice-versa. How much more extreme was the problem for a boy who had been born in New South Wales in 1813, who could not have read anything but English literature, and so could not easily imagine writing of anything much beyond the cultivated flowers down there on the plain, beside a cottage which implies a stream, and safety, and exquisite certainties, but had nevertheless to see it from up there on the hill, which implies a creek, and danger, and rough surprises? He is perfectly at home where he is, yet what he really wants to do is to go down there to talk with the people in the English house, in the way they've always talked to each other. So he will constantly make raids on the already articulated — which means he will look for books to help him say things that in some cases books have not yet had any need to say. Or he will tend to forget about what he knows and where he lives, and want to sound like the people who lend him the books. To live so often in that discomfort between the over-there literature and the here-in-front-of-you experience is the mark of a colonial writer anywhere. It is the problem Stephen Dedalus was so attuned to, when he heard an Englishman pronounce the word "ale".

When Harpur writes then about a white man's grave in this alien country, he quite reasonably assumes a perspective that the dead migrant might have had, and speaks of "the nameless flower of a nameless scene". That is no more than Patrick White does so much more extensively in *A Fringe of Leaves*, where native trees and birds cannot be named if the sense of estrangement is to be consistent. But the reason why Harpur so often is imprecise about what he looks

at, or why he refuses to name as accurately as he is able to, has nothing to do with White's kind of sophisticated motive. The greatest loss to Harpur as a poet was not that he never had the chance to read Walt Whitman, but that he did read so attentively Edmund Burke. Although he detested his politics, Harpur liked to paraphrase his criticism:

. . . the Poet, in picturing Nature, should never pin himself to the particular, or to the locally present. The Proseman may do this at all times, and insist upon the merit of his parochial closeness: but the Poet must not . . . But he should paint her primarily through his imagination . . . the striking pictures and colors of many scenes . . . idealised in the process . . .<sup>5</sup>

It is as though a nature poet is after a verbal equivalent to the paintings of Salvatore Rosa or Theodore Géricault. What Harpur believes we should admire is the kind of thing he frequently supplies, as he does in these lines from "The Glen of the Whiteman's Grave":

Huddled together, and high up-piled,  
All was there that's rudely wild  
In alpine form and lineament  
All mingled, and yet all unblent:  
Nature's most enormous freaks  
.....  
Ruggeder than e'er were dreamed.

This *literary* perspective immediately throws Harpur into a network of intertextuality, if one cares to trace it out. The "anxiety of influence" is not a phrase that makes much sense when we speak of Harpur. He positively hankered after it. For how better to establish one's credentials as a poet in the 1840s, than by displaying one's kinship with the poets of England? As criticism currently stands, the fact that "A Mid-Summer Noon in the Australian Forest" seems to intermesh with Marvell's "The Garden", Clare's "Noon", perhaps pieces of Coleridge, is a strong reason for attending to it. Even the sober father of Australian verse, whose intention was merely to snatch the lyre from "the charm-muttering Savage's rude-beating hand",<sup>6</sup> cannot escape the fluidity of his own texts. Harpur inscribing an insect which readers can still not agree on, and which has spawned a surprising amount of discussion — what in its simple way could be more "writerly" than that? What could more confound that old chestnut of "origins" than who precisely is *not* seeing what, and through whose eyes?<sup>7</sup>

This question of the discrepancy between what a man sees and the voice he uses to declare it is central to any colonial literature. It is there at its most obvious in the difference between the poem "The Kangaroo Hunt" and lengthy prose annotations the poet gives it. Harpur quite saw the possibilities such a fresh subject put his way. It simply had never been done. He even considered "an unconfined many-metred structure of verse as might be varied and paragraphically moulded (after the manner of musical movement) to the

peculiar demands of every occasion, and appear therefore to result spontaneously from the very nature of the thing depicted".<sup>8</sup> To take the verse paragraph as the shaping pressure on metre was an original notion, although it did not much affect the conventional lines he did write. But he had found a better subject than most to present the Currency Lads who stood out from the other men on the hunt:

Clear beaming as their native skies,  
Taller and straighter than the rest,  
With lanker loins and looser thighs . . .

This proleptic portrait of Chips Rafferty does not, unfortunately, extend to any purchase on the language he might have used. Most of the lines could have been written by an English poet about any kind of hunt. Although the native names for a few birds and animals are included, the poem is content with a generalised description of the country, according to Burkean precepts. The annotations on the other hand are crammed with meticulous detail that only a man utterly at home with the bush could provide. The poem's best lines are those that catch the movement of the running dogs:

Red Lightning shoots along . . .  
His figure seems to *flow*!  
Now lost — then for a moment found,  
A *streak* — no more — along the ground!  
Next, deep in grass, with head kept low,  
And back hooped, like a globe of snow,  
White Whip pours out his strength . . .  
Slim Lady, and her yellow brace  
Of filial pupils, reaping space,  
Shoot brightly past . . .

It was precisely this capacity for accurate quick observation that Harpur seemed hardly to value. It was a long way from the Sublime, a paltry enough gift if one had moral elevation in one's sights. Partly in order to impress the Sydney intelligentsia, Harpur almost always felt compelled to show his credentials. This usually meant a kind of high seriousness which drove a wedge between what he could do well, and what he believed he *ought* to do. The formal education of men like the despised W.C. Wentworth, or the urbane Henry Halloran, seems to have provoked the need for the self-tutored Harpur to flash his intellectual cards. In fact he did read widely. His verse essays on the English poets still stand as excellent criticism. One quite sees why A.D. Hope preferred this succinct, Augustan Harpur to the more florid Romantic one.<sup>9</sup> Here, for example, are lines from "Dryden":

A Satirist — but in satire chiefly great,  
Because the slave of jealousy and hate.

Well-versed in selfish natures, he could hit  
The lurking purpose with the beam of wit;  
And through himself, with skill unerring, sketch  
Some fellow sycophant — some venal wretch  
Whose very nature, spiced with phrases terse,  
Lies, like a mummy, coffin'd in his verse.

One of the volume's disappointments that I've already touched on is that so much of Harpur's own satire appears obscure, or is even quite lost, where concise editorial notes could have sharpened it to something like its original point. It would be useful to know as well that perhaps the main reason for those tiresome claims to be his country's first bard, was the pounding Harpur so often took from the Sydney critics. But it is essential in reading his satires to be aware that on three occasions, over several years, he was ridiculed in public lectures and humiliated in the press. Rather like Pope in his "Epilogue to the Satires", Harpur's intention was "to pour the lightning of indignation upon everything that is mean and cowardly in the people, or tyrannical and corrupt in their rulers."<sup>10</sup> At times he will simply lash out, as he does at the precocious James Martin who in 1838 placed Harpur among the "Pseudo-Poets" in his *Australian Sketch Book*: "'Homer,' he was accustomed to say, had genius and fire, and Hesiod had harmony and ease, but all these qualities are blended in me — I have the majesty of one combined with the beauty of the other".<sup>11</sup> Harpur retaliated in "The Nevers of Poetry":

Never with Martin think that words alone  
Will stand for truths, or for their lack atone  
    . . . .  
And were he dead tomorrow, this is what  
Would emblem best his intellectual lot;  
A specious Fame blowing a brazen clarion  
O'er a huge box choke-full of human carrion —

Eight years later he still has not let go. In "The Temple of Infamy" Martin appears again:

Just loos'd from school, and learned enough to string  
A Theme together, he dished up a Thing  
Y-clept a Book by custom, as the one  
Wide term of dog takes in each bitch's son.

Harpur is at his most colloquial when he answers most directly personal attacks. The Miltonic hangover clears when he wants to trade punches with a contemporary, especially if his adversary happens to be English or Scottish born. John Rae was a versifier and close friend of another Scot, R.K. Ewing, whose lecture on modern poetry at the School of Arts in 1846 both praised Rae and castigated Harpur.

Of Scottish Scribbleshire a native he,  
A province betwixt Prose and Poetry

. . . .  
The ballroom Erceldoune of Botany Bay,  
And Corporation Laueat — piddling R-e!

But ere installed thus in the "pride of place,"  
'Twas his to figure 'mid the scribbling race  
That fly-blow in Australia's sunny clime —  
Man-midwife-general of rascal Rhyme!

The specific references, the shared public occasion, the certainty of his audience with this kind of verse, held Harpur closer to a language that did not depend so heavily on other books. When he felt called on to reprimand in a more elevated way, as he did at the death of the Duke of Wellington, his moral intensity could trim diction to the clear purposes of dislike:

Great captain if you will! great Duke! great Slave!  
Great minion of the Crown! — but a great man  
He *was* not!

. . . .  
One who, apart from the despotic wills  
Of crowned oppressors, knew no right, no wrong,  
No faith, no country, and no brotherhood!

It is this eagerness to serve as a conscience for his countrymen that so firmly places one part of Harpur as heir to the Augustans, his concern with those Roman qualities that define a man in relation to God, to State, and to fellow men. What many of his poems are meant to offer us is a code by which we recognize the good man anywhere, and the good Australian particularly. For Harpur believed history was at that point where, in Herman Melville's phrases, "the Old World's hereditary wrongs" were giving way to "a political advance along nearly the whole line".<sup>12</sup> In his Miltonic robes, Harpur will sing of "world-wide" Justice, of her "epiphany" at which

true men — the bravely wise  
Shall seek her there with fearless feet and free,  
Where the prophet peaks arise  
Out of the shattering mist — the phantom sea  
Of old iniquity! . . .  
Breathing with lion lungs the rigid mountain air  
Of a supreme, upclimbing, God-great Liberty!  
("A Rhyme")

When it came down to everyday politics, this meant that Harpur was a democrat, a republican, a supporter of the Aboriginals, a hater of squatters

and the Wentworth policy of franchise tied to property, and dismissive of the claims of any church to speak with authority. It meant he was belligerently nationalistic. He commends a politician for being "clear headed and progressive in a sufficiently anti-European sense, " and believes "it is not in the nature of things that men brimful of Englandism can ever do us any real national good."<sup>13</sup> Harpur also possessed a keen mind for cutting through both private and political cant. While Sydney was in a flurry of patriotism collecting money for the Crimean War, what Tennyson celebrated as a re-run of Thermopylae Harpur more accurately viewed as a typical British snafu:

What's the Crimean War to thee,  
Its craft and folly, blame and blunder?  
Its aims and dodges plain to see,  
Its victories shams with all their thunder.

. . . .  
For these, if pondered, can but hurt  
The straightness of thy moral view,  
And foul as with the Old World's dirt  
The virgin nature of the New.

("To Myself, June 1855")

This ameliorative dimension to Harpur's moral sense is constant. You see it clearly in his response to Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, a work published in 1844. There was no question of Harpur's belief in God being rattled by scientific theory, as that of many Englishmen already was shaken even fifteen years before Darwin. In a long poem called "The World and the Soul", he contemplates, as he likes to do, the cataclysmic in nature. He celebrates the "mystical energy" that carries through "the awful laws of change from good to better". All tends towards that point where the individual mind attains something of God's "Internal excellence and central peace." It's a poem one could gloss with references to Shelley and Holderlin and anticipations of de Chardin. It should be read as one of Australia's important religious poems.

When Harpur is thinking as he believes a just man should, his final touchstone is a divine order that steadies any amount of individual doubt or emotional wobble. Yet his habit of finding life generally unsatisfactory leads one to pick up a sustained stress in his poetry. As he wrote in "Impromptu" in 1844:

Life is a fearful thing — to be,  
With little gleam of knowledge why,  
Hung in this world's immensity,  
With doubt and change in all we see  
Under the starry sky —  
And burthened thus with mystery,  
How terrible to die.

Yet almost always he will bring himself back into line with the consolation that because things here are so bad, *therefore* the argument for some divine plan is all the stronger — "Then sure BEYOND some guerdon lies."

The mere statement of worry or doubt is not at all the same thing as finding a poetic equivalent for it. To pursue that leads us to Harpur's best known poems, to those long narratives of violence and cataclysm that usually are praised for their descriptive accuracy. On the way towards them it is worth looking at such verses as the early "Theodic Optimism", where in spite of "that certain Godward end" he speaks of "terrors unconfessed"; or in the later "Trust in God", "haggard mystery" declares itself through "the dread Unknown". Another begins with the warning

Lo, there are truths so terrible, that they seem  
To breathe a moral danger.  
(*"Terrible Truth"*)

However much such poems turn on themselves and find their way back to the comforts of Deism, these apprehensions make a sufficient breach for us to suspect that the mind so seemingly aware through nature of divine ordinances is far more troubled than Harpur willingly concedes. There is a moment in the sonnet "A Look O'er the Sea" where Harpur's musing on the "fateful embryo" lying out there towards the horizon puts one in mind of Keats's "Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds". For there too from a cliff top Keats "looked too far into the sea", and saw the eternal destruction at the core of nature. In yet another cliff poem, Harpur views the calm expanse of the sea:

Yet, O God,  
What a blind fate-like mightiness lies coiled  
In slumber, under that wide shining face.  
(*"A Coastal View"*)

To follow that line takes one inevitably to "The Tower of the Dream", a long poem published separately as a pamphlet in 1865. The stage effects of a beautiful guiding lady, a mysterious lake, a tower with cells and dungeons, as well as its visionary exploration of sleep and dream, makes it a work that gathers — or tangles — the threads of several stock romantic motifs. It is a poem that impressed Judith Wright, who read it as "the division of conscious life from the unconscious powers that can so vividly image and enact in our dreams".<sup>14</sup>

There is no point in poring over the Gothic furniture of the poem. But Harpur's excursion into "the timeless vistas of dream" provide grounds enough to read it, if we cared to, as the old contest of ego, superego, id; as the Jungian psyche threatened by the Shadow; or more simply, as the breaking of the unconscious into daily life.

We remember that one of the marks of much Romantic poetry is the *balance* of the individual reunited with external nature after an initial separation. How often the Fall was interpreted in terms of the mind's discomfort with itself, and

the new Eden as what Jung would call Individuation. Wordsworth put it like this in his *Prospectus*:

Of the individual mind that keeps its own  
Inviolat retirement, and consists  
With being limitless, the one great life  
I sing.

In *Religious Musings* Coleridge called it "the whole One Self! Self, that no alien knows". Harpur is from that other side of Romanticism, the poet of the separated self, conscious life unsettled by un-namable seethings. In the laborious but fascinating "The Tower and Dream", the mind at one point is depicted as a room in a tower, an uneasy space above "a vague abysm infinitely deep". The threat of course is not something different to man, but

a tremendous Form  
. . . that shapeless seemed,  
And yet, in its so monstrous bulk, to Man  
A hideous likeness bore.

Undermining the more public Harpur, the Australian ameliorist with his colours nailed to the mast of liberty and progress, is that pressure from within that "menaces the world". It too, rather like Frankenstein's home-made hunk of botched romanticism, moves "towards/Some destined task". It is all the more threatening "For that no evidence of conscious will" guided "its shapeless bulk."

So with that grisly fist beating at the gate of democratic paradise, how does one read "The Creek of the Four Graves"? As Adrian Mitchell claims, it is a poem "based on a premise of strangeness".<sup>15</sup> More recently Michael Ackland is persuasive in filling out A D Hope's conviction that the true Harpur is an eighteenth century man, and "like most eighteenth-century descriptive poets" offers "a disclosure of indwelling Divinity."<sup>16</sup> I would prefer to begin by noting how Egremont and his party face at the start of their journey what they think of as "these new Apennines"; and how at the end the stars, which in Harpur are always primary evidence for order, put him in mind of girls "intertwirling all/ In glad Arcadian dances on the green". Between those two attempts to make strangeness manageable by imposing European definitions, Australia of course has broken in and done its worst. It has let loose "some dread Intelligence opposed to good". Those same stars that had stood so certainly "in their bright clusters", and that by the end are back with the European imagination in their proper place, had actually been quite inverted at the moment Egremont faced death at the hands of the natives. He had jumped to the creek

In which the imaged stars seemed all at once  
To burst like rockets with one wild blaze  
Of intertwining light.

The stars had been dislodged, one might say, just as the black men, like "Hell's worst friends", had "burst up into the death-doomed world". The natural order as a Deist would conceive it, the controlling European codes, have at least been suspended by the indigenous. It is tempting with this group of poems to feel that the apocalyptic in a sense is Protestantism's day off: the carnival of riot where natural forces subvert our sense of order. There is the excitement of chaos that in "The Bush Fire" Egremont in fact dreams of, "till a Fire/Huge in Imagination as the world" is matched by reality when he wakes. In that poem too Harpur looks to his stars — "not even *they*," he says in italics, "were such a live/and aggregated glory" as the fire. For the fire itself was a fallen version of the "starry blazonries", "Like some imaginary waste of hell, Painted in blood". And then, in an extraordinary and perhaps inevitable metaphor, the European mind appropriates the scene through guilt. The huge burning gums at the end of the poem appear as

the immemorial Woods'  
First hoary Fathers wrapped in burning shrouds,  
Come from the past, within the Whiteman's pale,  
To typify their doom.

How ambiguously the grammar reads there — *whose* doom? This is the conclusion to what Harpur calls the "Primeval Forest's . . . monster carnival". We're almost jostled off the page by Hawthorne and Freud clamouring for at least a word of comparison. "A Storm in the Mountains" is a poem which seems apparently more controlled because of its rhyming couplets. It again addresses that "rude peculiar [Australian] world" which before Harpur had hardly appeared in English poetry. By now we more or less expect it to take shape "As in a dream's wild prospect — strangely near". It is a landscape that conveys, perhaps rather too easily, the mind's "muttered troubles". And when the dingoes raise their howling, a human but distinctly un-European past again breaks in,

As if the dread stir had aroused from sleep  
Weird Spirits . . . .

It is a poem that instructs us why, unlike Wordsworth in Book V of *The Prelude*, we would *not* want to experience Nature as enduring types and symbols. The "Terrific Vision" as Harpur calls it, with its "instinctive dread", is at the antipodes from those "working of one mind, The features of the same face, Blossoms upon one tree," as Wordsworth watched the falls in the Simplon Pass. Instead of the unity that Wordsworth apprehended when his own mind and nature worked together, the balance that he delighted in, Harpur sees in the climax of the storm-wracked landscape "Huge fragments" — a phrase he repeats — "huge shapeless fragments". Except when he is making a case for Providence as the basis for moral and democratic certainties, it is not unity that excites Harpur, but *process*

Strange darings seize me, witnessing this strife  
Of Nature . . . . And does some destined charm  
Hold me secure . . . .  
That in the mighty riot I may find  
How through all being works the light of Mind?<sup>17</sup>  
Yea, through the strikingly external see  
My novel Soul's divulging energy!

"A Storm in the Mountains" winds down to an Aristotelian return to normality after excitement, to peace after extremity, now that some "pestilence" has been purged away. Yet one might propose through a more deconstructionist reading that the poem which claims to follow that classical line from quiet, through disturbance, and back to a richer calm, in fact subverts the possibility of that very thing. By running mind and external nature together as it does, the text has conceded linear development to the levels of height and depth; it has undermined realism with diagram. By establishing the mind's tendency to disturbance, Harpur is offering calm only as a possibility, not as a necessary nor permanent state. For the final image of peace returning like a bird has literally been sizzled twice over by the insistent description of the eagle destroyed by lightning. Any attempt to "moralise the agony", as he calls it, is an adjunct. It is another story, rather than the inevitable conclusion to the one we have just heard. Those "weird spirits" conjured by the dingoes, whether aboriginal and historical, or as metaphors for the unconscious, now re-emerge in the fashionable war-paint of *aporia*. They will not allow us to go back nor to go on. What they do invite is further exposure, or at the very least, fresh reasons for concealment.

This new edition of Harpur means that at last we can begin to read him with most of the evidence to hand. His voice is now clear, even if it is also very often aggressive, self-pitying, derivative to the point that we think of Oscar Wilde on one of his contemporaries — "this poet will be remembered when Milton is forgotten, but not until". But there is another Harpur. He gives us an enormous length, but for the first time, the portrait of an Australian attempting to cope with the inheritance of Europe. He tackles, with confusion and monotony, but nevertheless head-on, aspects of the mind that still interest us. And what I would put first is not, as Judith Wright says, the fact that Harpur is a *thinking* poet before anything else, but that at his rare best he is a poet of activity: when he describes the quick touchings of feeling and event; natural phenomena on the move; the evolutionary thrust of history; the vivid details of local wrangling; and his own mind casting about for images of itself.

#### NOTES

1. *The Carouse*, "A Lyrical Love Story", *The Poetical Works*, p.41.
2. J.Normington-Rawling, *Charles Harpur, An Australian*, 1962, p.297.
3. C.M.H. Clarke, *A History of Australia*, Vol.III, 1973, Chapter 8.
4. The painting is in the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.
5. Preface to "The Kangaroo Hunt", *The Poetical Works*, p.456.
6. "To the Lyre of Australia" was written in Harpur's teens, and twelve years later he added his note that "neither then nor since did my country *deign* to award one smile of encouragement to the endeavours of her Poet. *Her* best and only gifts to him have been hunger and rags". *The Poetical Works*, p.723.
7. Elizabeth Perkins' Bibliography lists several articles which discuss this poem. The best account of trying to identify that spectacular but elusive insect is in Elizabeth Marsh's "Two Notes on Charles Harpur's 'A Mid-Summer Noon in the Australian Forest'", *Southerly*, XXXIX, No 1, 1979.
8. Preface to "The Kangaroo Hunt", *The Poetical Works*, p.457.
9. See A.D.Hope's essay "Three Early Australian Poets", *Native Companions*, 1974.
10. From Harpur's "General Preface" to a series of forty of his poems published in the *Maitland Mercury* in 1846-47, quoted in Normington-Rawling, p.114.
11. Quoted in Normington-Rawling, p.69.
12. Herman Melville, Preface to *Billy Budd*, 1924.
13. Quoted in Normington-Rawling, p.200.
14. Judith Wright, *Charles Harpur*, Australian Writers and their Work, 1963, p.23.
15. Adrian Mitchell, *Charles Harpur*, 1973, p.xxiii.
16. Michael Ackland, "Charles Harpur's 'The Bush Fire' and 'A Storm in the Mountains': Sublimity, Cognition and Faith", *Southerly*, No 4, 1983, p.468.
17. Judith Wright, *Charles Harpur*, p.17, quotes an alternative and less obviously Wordsworthian version of this line - "How wide the externality of Mind?"



IAN TEMPLEMAN

"A Two Book Wonder"  
A Decade of Publishing — Fremantle Arts  
Centre Press — 1976-1986

The comment 'a two book wonder' was the reaction of a former colleague of mine at the University of Western Australia when I showed him the first publication by the Fremantle Arts Centre Press, a collection of Western Australian poetry, *Soundings*, edited by Veronica Brady. He had picked up a copy of the publication and rather forcefully opened it to demonstrate that the binding was weak and that it would soon fall apart. In demonstrating the weak binding he was perfectly correct and that first publication was returned to the printers for staples to be forced through the cover and spine to hold it together. However his prediction that the Fremantle Arts Centre Press would be 'a two book wonder' has proved incorrect as this year the Press celebrates a decade of publishing, with over one hundred titles on its lists.

The first publication *Soundings* was launched in March 1976 and was followed that year by a collection of prose fiction edited by Bruce Bennett under the title *New Country*. Two further publications followed in 1976 — a poetry collection *In the Sun's Eye* by Alan Alexander and the first published collection of Elizabeth Jolley's short stories entitled *Five Acre Virgin*. It was a modest beginning.

The Fremantle Arts Centre Press was established in 1975 as part of the programme of the Fremantle Arts Centre. It grew from the literature and poetry workshops conducted by the Centre as part of its community programme and the publication of *Patterns*, a magazine of poetry which was distributed in a limited way through retail outlets, mainly in Western Australia. From the beginning the aim of the Press was to publish West Australian writers, many of whom at that time were finding difficulty in being published by the major national publishers situated on the east coast. The only publisher at this time in the state was the University of Western Australia Press, whose prime interest was in academic material rather than poetry and creative fiction.

The Fremantle Arts Centre, which had been established in 1972, had endeavoured to exhibit the work of Western Australian painters, sculptors and crafts people and a publication programme was recognised as a technique to similarly exhibit the work of West Australian writers. As the Arts Centre

endeavoured to mesh together a number of art disciplines, any publications programme was to include the work of visual artists, particularly painters and photographers. The first publication *Soundings* exemplified this with a woodcut design by Guy Grey-Smith on the cover and internal photographs of the poets by Simon Cowling.

Although the Fremantle Arts Centre was organised as the host body and Art Centre staff would contribute their talents to the management of the Press, it was decided to ensure that such a regional publisher had a financial and managerial independence as far as possible. The initial committee of management had representation from the literary community of Western Australia, the Fremantle City Council and people with publishing and business expertise. Following a feasibility study conducted by Terry Owen, the Press Constitution, with aims and objectives, was put together and submitted to the Department of Corporate Affairs for approval as a non-profit distributing organisation. This structure has proved to be ideal for the programme the Press has carried out over the past ten years.

Since its foundation the Press has received financial support from the Western Australian Government, initially through the Western Australian Literary Fund and later from the state funding agency, The Western Australian Arts Council. Support is received too from the Literature Board of the Australia Council in the form of publication subsidies for selected titles. A number of individual titles have been assisted by support from the private sector when that book in some way has been of interest to a sponsor. The limited focus on only Western Australian writers and publications of literary interest with small print runs and the need to nurture authors and their work over some years, has determined that the State Government support has been essential for the Press' growth and development and the continuing publications programme.

The present team working for the Fremantle Arts Centre Press and those staff members of the Centre contributing to the programme, have been together since 1979. In many ways the lack of experience in publishing has proved beneficial in that the team has been able to work together very closely on each of the publications in terms of design, editing, marketing strategies and balancing the precarious financial position the Press has always faced since its inception. As there was no capital base on which to operate, income from sales of its titles early in the year had to finance publications later the same year.

There has been a deliberate policy to keep the Press a reasonably small organisation to enable maximum attention to be given to each title and author and to allow wide and extensive consultation between the staff as production proceeds. In 1986 the publication list of new titles will total eleven, with four reprints. A more ambitious list would have meant increasing the staff and risking a breakdown in the homogeneous manner in which the Press and Arts Centre staff work together.

The criteria for the selection of a manuscript for publication is quality of writing, that it falls within the broad guidelines of being written by a Western Australian writer and that it is a work of prose fiction, poetry, social history, biography, autobiography or concerned with the work of West Australian visual arts. The Press still relies on the unsolicited manuscript and eighty percent of the titles published still come from that source, many of them are from writers

who will simply produce one book; others from authors at the beginning of their careers. Each year the Press receives over two hundred unsolicited manuscripts which are either read in-house or sent to readers to prepare reports on publication potential.

Books like *A Fortunate Life*, *Reading The Country* and the autobiographical trilogy by T. A. G. Hungerford have involved considerable work by the Press staff in close collaboration with the author over a long period to produce the best result possible. In many cases a staff member works closely with a writer over several years with the hope that the final result will be a published manuscript. This is a high risk way to operate as in some cases publication has not resulted from such consultative process.

Many West Australian writers first published by the Fremantle Arts Centre Press have since gained national and international attention. Press titles have won a number of national awards, including the National Book Council Award and the New South Wales Premier's Prize — for non fiction — to A. B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life* and more recently, to Elizabeth Jolley's *Milk and Honey* for a work of fiction. The West Australian poet, Philip Salom's first book of verse *The Silent Piano* won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Other titles such as T. A. G. Hungerford's *Stories From Suburban Road* and the innovative *Reading The Country* have been shortlisted in the national competitions.

In the early years there was great local interest in each of the titles produced, although book shops were timid in ordering stock in any quantity and interstate reviewers were curious rather than enthusiastic. However, by 1981, the Fremantle Arts Centre Press had proved that it produced paperbacks of high quality which encouraged Tom Shapcott to write in the *Australian Book Review* in 1981 "...The phenomenon of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press in Western Australia is one of the instructive publishing success stories of the last decade..." and David Brooks to write in the *Canberra Times* in January of the same year "... the range and quality of the work being done is impressive. The book (*Quarry*) throws out a challenge to other states that I, for one, would be glad to see them take up . . .". This interest by the national reviewers and the media in general has been enormously important in announcing to an audience beyond Western Australia the programme of the Press and the works by its writers. The result has been that the balance between sales interstate against those of local sales, has reversed, and now eighty percent of all sales are outside of Western Australia. The opposite was true in the 1970's.

This recognition has been assisted in recent years by the reciprocal distribution arrangements the Press has with the Sydney publisher Hale & Remonger and enabled, for the first time, a strong national distribution pattern to operate. Press titles are also distributed in the United States of America through Flatiron Distributors where, although returns are modest, they have returned the investment made in setting up the arrangement.

It is fascinating now to look over the full range of titles produced by the Press since 1976 and see the development in the design of the books. The black and white formats of early publications have now been replaced by more striking cover designs created either by photographers or painters. The design layout, shape and binding too have been vastly improved as part of the Press philosophy

that each book should be an art object and reflect in some way the value and excellence of the writer's work inside the covers.

In the decade since 1976, the Press has not been satisfied with simply book production to cover its charter in encouraging and promoting Western Australian writers. It has played host to a number of important weekend seminars which have covered issues such as Regional Publishing, The Writer and the Audience and The Writer's Voice which have attracted interstate writers and critics. The Press has also organised a number of poetry and prose readings within the Centre, national tours by Western Australian writers and in 1986 has put together an exhibition under the title *Photographic Portraits* which represents the work of four Western Australian photographers and the images they have captured of forty-eight Western Australian writers. Small exhibitions have been mounted of the work of the Press at the various Adelaide Writers Weeks, at Western Australia House in London and at a seminar on Australian literature in Italy.

In pausing to examine the track record of the Press over the past ten years one reflects on the successes. Clearly, the publication of A. B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life* gave the Press national recognition. The success brought with it problems, and I recall Pat Healy — who was project officer with the Literature Board at the time the Press was established — advising that the success of a title for a small publisher can create difficulties. At the time of launching *A Fortunate Life* the Press staff numbered only three fulltime workers and no national distribution pattern was established. As the book gained recognition and orders flowed in, staff had to be rostered simply to wrap and despatch orders. The leasing of the paperback rights and subsequently the hardback rights of this book to Penguin Australia for a limited period solved the immediate problem. The selling of the television rights on *A Fortunate Life* has meant that the small share of royalties flowing to the Press has enabled the purchase of a much needed warehouse space. This has also meant a capital asset against which the Press has been able to negotiate overdrafts with their bankers from time to time.

The popular success enjoyed by the first of the Hungerford trilogy, *Stories From Suburban Road*, reaction in national views to the imaginative and innovative *Reading The Country* and *Gularabulu* as well as the emergence of writers like Elizabeth Jolley, Nicholas Hasluck, Philip Salom and more recently Marion Campbell underline the function and achievement of objectives for which Fremantle Arts Centre Press was established.

There have been disappointments too. Several of the books the Press has published have not met with the critical attention which clearly we believed they deserve and the authors therefore still may only claim a limited national audience. Inexperience in several cases has led to the publication of books of a sophisticated nature where the Press was simply not sufficiently resourced to handle them. The abandonment of the simple format *Shoreline Poetry* series which endeavoured to bring new poets to a wider audience, because of increasing print costs, was a disappointment to all concerned — both the Press and the new writers. Financially the Press too has had to achieve a delicate balance between publishing those titles which they believed needed to be produced, against perhaps scheduling a reprint of a title which had sold out.

Since 1976 there has been constant pressure because of the lack of financial resources and promising projects have either been delayed or rejected altogether.

In many ways 1985 was the turning point for the Press. A difficult 1984 had determined that a very tight timetable for publication would need to be adhered to and an increase in sales achieved if the Press was going to have a long-term viability. Extra care in production supervision and financial monitoring resulted in a record sales year for 1985. This result, together with an increase of funds for 1986 from the Western Australian Arts Council, enabled the employment of another editor to ease the extraordinary workload of the present staff; for the first time, a future can be contemplated with a little more confidence.

The Fremantle Arts Centre Press staff still numbers five fulltime people: managing editor, assistant editor, designer, secretary and salesperson. The Press shares, with the Arts Centre, the services of people in the areas of finance and promotion, and Fremantle Arts Centre staff also provide other support service from time to time.

The last ten years have been very successful for Fremantle Arts Centre Press and, I believe, for Western Australian writing. The portability of books has given a valuable opportunity, not only to the writers, but to the visual artists of Western Australia who have contributed to the cover designs or interior illustrations of most of the Press titles since 1976. Most importantly the decade has substantiated the belief and faith of Fremantle Arts Centre Press in the talent and ability of a group of writers living and working on the west coast of this continent who, I believe, have much to contribute to our lives as Australians.

# The Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Regional Publishing — Personal Views

ELIZABETH JOLLEY

In almost my first class at the Fremantle Arts Centre there was an elderly man who remembered coming there with his mother when he was six years old. In those days, he said, it was a hospital for old women. I asked him to tell me what he remembered. He thought and said that he kept as near as he could to his mother's skirts as she went from one bed to the next talking to the old women. The beds were very high, he said, and not much room between them but what he remembered most, he said, was the smell. It was awful and you could smell this smell out in the road-way.

I do not need to describe the Arts Centre as it is today but I would like to say something about the excitement of going in to the building, perhaps especially at night. After ten years of giving classes there I still feel the same elation as I did at the beginning. The air there always seems lighter in quality and fresher, I suppose because it is coming from the sea. There is a tree in the courtyard on the right of the path and the leaf and branch shadows make a fantastic and tremulous pattern on the walls. For a long time an owl sat in this tree. This elation I mention comes from something more than the physical building and its position. I am not able to explain it entirely. Perhaps it comes in part from the reasons why people want to be there, perhaps because of the ways in which they can express themselves through the various crafts which inhabit the rooms. If people are going towards something they want to do very much a secret intangible excitement is generated and perhaps it is this which is a part of the magic.

Long journeys into the wheat sprang from a desk in the Arts Centre and if one of my characters pushes a dead body down a well on a dog-leg of land, or if another character gets lost in the cold dampness below the Wave Rock, or another spills scalding hot tea into her lap in a remote road-house — and yet another loses his sense of direction on the lonely tracks across unending paddocks it is because of the opportunities I had, for a time, to go out under the Arts Access Scheme to conduct workshops in the far away places which would otherwise have simply remained, for me, unseen and forever out of reach.

On one occasion I was one of fourteen tutors in the old Shepherds Hotel in Geraldton. Another time I was driving to a workshop and taking Meg

Padgham, the painter, with me. We stopped on the shoulder of the road to gaze upon the tremendous landscape spread out on all sides of us and she explained to me about clouds, where their light was and where their shadow.

Another special thing for me about the Arts Centre are the Writers' Weekends and the incredible chances to widen interests and knowledge simply because of the gathering together of people and the opportunities to meet and to listen to writers and editors and critics invited from other parts of Australia and the world.

It is more than ten years since Ian Templeman asked me if I would like to give a class on the art of the short story at the Arts Centre. I often walk over the small piece of pavement in Broadway Nedlands and remember with gratitude that that was the place where he spoke to me and offered me my first class.

All this is part of a background to writing and publishing and it is from this atmosphere of adventure that the Fremantle Arts Centre Press was established. Publishing is a private matter between author, editor, designer and printer but it can only flourish when supported by a society. This is not the place to attempt to list all the publications since 1976; it is more useful to record the spirit of vitality which is evident with the "quality" production of every new book and which sustains the press. I am pleased and proud and grateful to be part of the beginning of the literary activities at the Arts Centre and to be a small part of the earliest history of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

## PETER COWAN

Since the Fremantle Arts Centre Press began publishing in 1976 it has produced a collection of books that in variety of subject, treatment, style and design, is its own justification for the establishing of such a venture. These books show how much there was to draw on in a local area of publishing, here in Western Australia, and raise the issue of how much of this would in fact have been published had there been no Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

While it is obvious that in such a list as the Press can show over this period some books now seem more valuable than others, some more successful in treatment and design, the list itself is rich and varied and of value to Australian publishing and writing as a whole. Some titles were distinctively local, and that is of value — there are, and should be, local studies in every State of what we like to call a Commonwealth. But the value of the books produced by the Fremantle Arts Centre Press goes clearly beyond the local. The Press has never been narrow in its view, and its work has to be seen at least in an Australian context. It has a proven record of excellence in its publishing, and has always had standards of quality. It might be said that during the period of the existence of the Press, and particularly in the early period, there has been a view in Australia that asserted with some vehemence that anything was of value as long as someone wrote it. Perhaps that is on the wane, and there is no evidence the Fremantle Arts Centre Press ever subscribed to it. Or was intimidated by it. On the contrary, it showed some courage in resisting this kind of doctrine.

From the beginning the Press had standards of value in the fields of publishing — novel, poetry, short stories, general works. It may not have been easy, in a local community, to maintain these standards in the face of pressures that are evident in any local community. Within these standards it has managed to produce books widely read and some amazingly popular — it does, after all, have to its credit one of the most popular of present day Australian books. From the beginning the Press' Director, Ian Templeman, has brought a vision, and a positive and courageous approach to the direction of the Press.

Besides the tangible and proven results of the Press, there are other aspects as valuable, if less easy to demonstrate. A major part of the success, and the establishment of standards, lies with the editors of any publishing concern. The

Centre Press has been well served in this respect by Terry Owen, in the first place, and the present editors, Wendy Jenkins and Ray Coffey. A very large publishing concern may be free of the pressures that beset editors in a smaller locally based concern. To their everlasting credit director and editors have looked for variety, promise, and a standard of excellence, and have been willing to defend these things.

West Australian writers have always been aware of the problem of distance in their dealing with editors in other States. It has not been easy to discuss projects, to exchange views and opinions, by correspondence, often with people who may be known only through correspondence. It is not suggested that this cannot happen, or has not happened, but it is fair to say that in discussing a manuscript or project, discussing matters of style and approach, particular aspects of a manuscript, it is not at all easy, and may not be satisfactory, to have to do this by letter. As a personal example, in one of the early publications of the Press I had frequent discussions with Terry Owen about practically every aspect of a book that in form and design was not standard or conventional. In the case of a novel recently published by the Press I gained greatly from discussions with Ray Coffey and from his help. I do not think this kind of discussion could have proceeded only by correspondence. And no doubt there are many writers with the same experience.

These are real advantages. There is another, again intangible, and this lies in the thinking and planning of a work in its earliest stages. A writer might think and plan a novel, story, poetry, in terms of a West Australian background, a local origin. And then be inhibited by the fear that if the work is to be published it might be better to deny its local origins and cast it in some way more likely to please publishers elsewhere. This is no longer necessary, and seems to me a central point. It is as important a writer now feel free to conceive work in terms of a local environment as it once was to feel able to conceive it in terms of an Australian environment. The day of orientation to English or American publishers has not gone, but it has been lessened, and if it is passing for West Australians it is because of the existence of The Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

## BOOKS

*Reading The Country: Introduction to Nomadology* by Krim Benterak, Stephen Muecke, and Paddy Roe [with Ray Keogh, Butcher Joe, and E.M. Lohe], Fremantle Arts Centre Press (\$29.95)

We begin this book by looking down on the country — or at least on a version of the country, in the form of one of Krim Benterak's paintings: 'Roebuck Plains'. But where does the definite article come from? How *can* we begin in this way?

Having begun to not begin (i.e. we begin after the end, but only spatially) we read this book's beginning as a set of deferrals, a plurality of beginnings: from the dust-cover of 'Roebuck Plains' to Stephen Muecke's introduction/*initiation*, 'Reading This Book'. Entry into "this book", then, is dilatory; what in another discourse might be called *all over the place*. Even so it requires at least an ontological leap to think of a book-text as a place-text, something which can be entered from and travelled over a variety of spatio-temporal axes — but this is what *Reading The Country* invites us to do. Certainly it asks us to re-think our idea of 'book' as a *source* of meaning, and replace it with a notion of book-as-vehicle. As Muecke puts it: "[a book] can pick you up in one thinking spot and take you to another one. It's like a ute."

Ambivalent as it is, this metaphor can lead to a transformation of reader into passenger — one who is 'taken' for a ride. Such ambivalence is inscribed in Muecke's theory of reading:

Reading is not a perfectly natural activity which once mastered becomes automatic. A friend, Ian Hunter, once said that reading was somewhere between *breathing* and *judging*. Breathing is an automatic and natural activity most of the time, and *judging*, as

in courts or beauty contests, is a highly social activity; it is so charged with social or cultural meaning that there is nothing natural about it. In spite of the years of training taken to achieve fluency in the skill of reading, it is largely taken for granted as an activity which enables one to see the meanings behind words straight away.

Reading, then, is a kind of deception, a being-taken-for-a-ride. As a largely unconscious or "taken for granted" activity, it seems to be an easily acquired skill over which we have complete control; so much control, in fact, that it loses its status as a skill, a social acquisition, and becomes akin to breathing or putting on weight.

But so what if reading is a social activity? Even if we allow that reading is a kind of deception, it does not have to mean that we are deceived by what we read. Can't we think of reading as natural when it is actually cultural, but still come away with the right meaning from a text?

Such an argument, of course, presupposes that meaning is unproblematically situated within acts of communication, and that to read is simply to extract/receive a meaning waiting to be taken away. It elides over the possibility that reading is what *generates* meaning; so that if reading is a culturally-specific activity, meaning must be culturally-specific too. What the place that we call Roebuck Plains in the North-West of WA meant to William Dampier, an Englishman, in the 17th century, then, cannot be the same as it means to white Australians in 1986, which in turn is different from its meaning for an Aboriginal like Paddy Roe. Yet all these (and other) meanings, generated by culturally-specific readings, constitute a language of Roebuck Plains that determines its difference from other places in North-West

Australia. Hence this book's preoccupation with the idea and "a theory of place":

... place introduces specificity and difference — new areas to be investigated within a larger whole. In Australia, the most commonly uttered place-names refer to large unities: "Australia", "Melbourne", "The Northern Territory" and even "The Kimberleys". These unities are so large they become abstract and general, they evoke stereotyped and familiar responses which feed off ideologies like nationalism, "stateism" or the urban/rural division. The study of specific, local places puts things more on the scale of everyday living.

Because "everyday living" is as large and artificial a unity as Australia or The Kimberleys, however, then the localization of place is not a strategy for making ideologies disappear. Rather, as Muecke says, it's a way of making them more visible, of teasing them out from the crevices of abstract generalities, so that "one can see them working in what people say and so, in the tactics they employ."

Studied from up close, as it were, places can thus be seen as sites for contending discourses, subject to social and historical formations which compete for the prize of a dominant reading that will hold all other readings at bay. When such a reading emerges, the meaning it generates is taken for granted and assumes the status of common sense. Consent is subsequently won for the dominant ideology (according to this Gramscian model) without any overt struggle taking place, because the dominant reading/meaning wards off its contenders and their informing ideologies, thereby keeping its own ideology invisible. In the 17th century, for instance, the dominant reading of Roebuck

Plains was an imperialistic one, based on what the Plains could do for the English economy:

As Dampier directed his gaze over this country certain things became visible to him, things he had been trained to look for, or things he had seen in other countries. Dampier left the clues in his journal which would later insert him in history as the first Englishman to make a landing in Australia, but the discourse of his journal is not one of history, it is that of the explorer.

Such a discourse reads the country for edible plants, a permanent water supply, a suitable anchorage. It does not read exploration as an act of invasion, nor does it read the country as the *Nyigina*, its Aboriginal inhabitants, read it: as a place of *Bugarrigarra* ("the dreaming"), walked over by *Balangan* ("the spirits of dead people").

In the struggle for ideological possession of the Plains, it's hardly surprising that it is Dampier's and not the *Nyigina's* reading which has proved the more powerful and resilient — weight of numbers combined with a sense of racial superiority are crucial factors in the quest for colonial hegemony. In the almost three centuries since Dampier gave the Plains its original European meaning (as a repository of potentially useful resources), that is, successive readings of the Plains by white Australians have continued to take his ideology of exploitation for granted. Thus the Plains have been read as so much pastoral acreage since 1885; and more recently the waters around Roebuck Bay, which lap the Plains, have given rise to the Broome pearling industry. Pearls before *Nyigina*, one might say.

Consistent with this theorization of place, *Reading The Country* also destabilizes the

notion of 'author', crediting on the title-page, for instance, six authors in two groups of three. Has Muecke simply delegated his author-ity", as he once puts it, to a poststructuralist orthodoxy? An ending gives a clue:

I am hesitant about taking on the label of "author," and not just because of the trendy "death of the author" slogan. I have been trying throughout to defer my authority by showing where my words come from, and where more of the same might be found. This disperses my authority throughout a community, a community of poststructuralist scholars and critics who form a movement in this country.

This "community"/colony's inspiration is taken from such European intellectuals as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. It is from them that Muecke's words "come", and to them he points us for "more of the same". But is the Frenchness and academicness of their discourse any less foreign in the contemporary context of North-West Australia than was Dampier's discourse of "the explorer" in the 17th century? Must we ponder this irony, only to conclude that we are all the products of a language and its meaning-producing controls? That meaning, in a sense, precedes reading, because it is embedded in signifying practices beyond our determination?

Although everyone might have their own private, mental response to a place, the reading only emerges as they attempt to "express" this feeling: they must talk, sing, write, paint, take photographs and so on. These ways of representing things carry with them determined sets of meanings . . . .

Are these "determined sets of meanings" negotiable in any way? Are you free to read my reading of *Reading The Country* in whatever way you please? Are we both free to read one of Paddy Roe's stories in whatever way we please?

So I seen this black thing  
coming up —  
first — — —  
oh I said might be shark  
oor might be seaweed  
something —  
I didn't take much notice  
—  
so I looked around —  
see if I can see some fish,  
lotta fish was, passing too  
—  
I throw spear but I  
couldn't get anything —  
too fast — —

If, as Muecke says, "Not even the wildest European imagination could produce Paddy Roe's reading of the country: the words are just not there" — if we can never entirely escape the determinations of signifying practices, or "ways of representing things" — then must we therefore retreat into silence, afraid to speak in case we are spoken through? I'll give an example: On Australia Day in Sydney this year, I passed a stall in Hyde Park which was set up to poll the holiday crowd on the issue of whether Australians wanted a new flag. But it was really a poll about patriotism. "SAVE OUR FLAG," it asked, "OR CHANGE IT?" Anyone choosing to participate in the poll was forced, by the way in which the debate was represented, to support the patriotic option ("OUR FLAG", it stands for all of 'us', needs your support) or to take the radical, 'unAustralian' alternative of voting to replace the traditional symbol of 'our' nation. Framed in this way, the alternative reads like a threat.

It's worth noting, of course, that the poll's producer/s need not be accused of intentional bias, any more than Dampier should be accused of deliberately excluding an Aboriginal reading of Roebuck Plains from his discourse of the explorer. The insidious power of signifying practices, indeed, is that they carry their "determined sets of meanings" with them, regardless of a producer's intention. Whatever might be the intended effect of Paddy Roe's narratives (and it is Muecke who punctuates and paragraphs them), in short, they are nevertheless subject to a white reader's bias for good-English-grammar, which has a higher discursive status than Aboriginal English. The ideological consequence of this prejudice is for the white reader to devalue the knowledge/intelligence of the Aboriginal speaker, whose knowledge of the bush is presumed to be less 'sophisticated' than institutional European knowledges of history, geography, and science.

In a virtual celebration of Aboriginal English, however, *Reading The Country* disregards the rules of good-English-grammar (a metonym of European "ways of representing things") in favour of a narrative practice which is "sensitive to Aboriginal understandings of the country." Muecke's term for this is "nomadology", to which the book is an introduction:

. . . nomadology is not a general theory, a summary of observations. It is rather a way of looking which is specific (to a place like Roebuck Plains), a way of representing things (in discontinuous fragments, stopping and starting) . . . . It aims to describe practices, ways of living, while avoiding the pretence of describing a *whole* people. In this sense this book is not *about* Aborigines . . . .

But while it is not "about" Aborigines in the institutional sense of being an ethnocentric

study, *Reading The Country* is surely about Aboriginal ways of representing things according to "the Aboriginal ideology of the dreaming". As Muecke explains it, the dreaming is not a representational practice which belongs/refers to an Aboriginal past, a set of hand-me-down creation myths; rather it's "a way of talking . . . which disrupts the uniformity of everyday language." As a particular kind of speech ("a bit like the talk which we call poetry"), the dreaming is kept alive in the present by "people living in the country, travelling through it and naming it, constantly making new stories and songs." And new paintings.

At least one absence in this review is the failure to have addressed the paintings by Krim Benterrak, which are as visually disruptive of European landscape conventions as the book itself "disrupts the uniformity" of traditional narrative practices. But it is not the only absence. I haven't given much evidence for my claim that the book departs from European ways of representing things, for instance, except to say that this is so. Nor have I really addressed the issue of what form this departure takes, although you can probably guess that it's based on postmodern antecedents of discontinuity and 'dis-closure', even if this contradicts the claim for the book's anti-Europeanness. What I have tried to do instead is simply to offer (however tentatively and contradictorily) a point of entry into what I consider some of the book's major thinking sites to be.

Like any review, of course, this one is no substitute for your own reading of *Reading The Country*, although it's possible that my use at times of a structuralist lexicon might even dissuade some readers from ever reading the book. Be assured that Muecke is more considerate in his use of specialist terms than I and has provided a glossary for their explanation, together with words and phrases of Aboriginal English. In any case, the real problem is not one of terminology but of what to do when you've read this book. Do you leave it on a coffee table to impress friends

(it won't look out of place alongside *Vogue*)? Shelve it alphabetically (under 'M')? Or ponder on some of "the thinking spot[s]" to which it's taken you? After all, while the book is specifically about Roebuck Plains, it is not exclusively so:

In a more general sense this is an attempt to construct a theory of place, to find a method of charting the meanings of those specific places in which people must find a way to live in one manner or another: suburbs, office blocks, factories and farms. It just so happens that the place we are looking at is a little plain in North-West Australia.

It's less of an accident than Muecke pretends that the book "just so happens" to be about Roebuck Plains, but still "a theory of place" is potentially applicable to anywhere that people live or work or visit. Nor is such a theory without political relevance, because *Reading The Country* proves that we can intervene in the construction of the meanings of specific places by using the discourse and narratology of the dreaming, after the fashion of Muecke, Benterrak, and Roe's intervention in the meaning of "a little plain in North-West Australia." And how appropriate that a book suggesting such a politics should be reviewed in a journal called *Westerly*.

Niall Lucy

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Elizabeth Jolley, *Foxybaby*, University of Queensland Press, 1985.

Elizabeth Jolley's work is deservedly popular, locally and internationally, within and well beyond the community of professional literary critics. Her most recent novel, *Foxybaby*, has attracted particularly high praise abroad. *Foxybaby* is unpretentious,

yet inventive and funny. It is inventive because it mingles a number of forms — the letter, the quotation, internal narration and explicit commentary on that narration — with characters who are at best puzzled and equivocal and at worst actively deceptive. Consequently much of the action is at cross-purposes and ironies of misunderstanding and self-betrayal are commonplace. However *Foxybaby* is not merely light entertainment, or, at the other end of the spectrum, a blackly comic meditation on the impossibility of true communication. Certain values are recommended. Although the main character suggests (after Ibsen) that writers raise questions rather than offer solutions (thus rightly denying platitudes or overly naive contrivances a place in literature) *Foxybaby* depicts the exploiter and the exploited (often within the same character), the vulnerable and the silly, and seems to offer hope through the contiguous representation of generosity, tenacity and tolerance. And as far as art and curiosity are concerned, *Foxybaby* is so effortlessly self-inquisitive, so clearly concerned with problems of intention, invention and comprehension, that it fulfills its own definition of (good) writing as that which raises questions.

*Foxybaby* is a whimsical, farcical and bizarre fantasy, enclosing an inner narrative which is anything but whimsical. Within the inner narrative is a half-articulated secret, a tragedy of Sophoclean proportions. So the novel has a variation of that Russian doll structure which is not uncommon in contemporary literature.

In the outer story we meet Miss Alma Porch, spinster, writer, teacher and conductor of a residential holiday course called CREATIVE MUSIC AND DRAMA WITH AMAZING OPPORTUNITIES AND RESULTS. She is the threshold of the entire narrative, for (as we discover, conclusively), she is responsible for the outer and inner stories. The tale begins with a series of letters which establish the conditions of her employment — on a metaphoric, as well as a practical

level, for the letters, which are rife with quotation and qualification, reveal the kind of misreadings and conflicting motives which typify later, closer exchanges between characters. Trinity College, the venue for Miss Porch's course, is a combination health and culture farm where unfortunate clients lose weight on a lemon juice and lettuce diet and gain cultural substance through courses in chicken-wire weaving, junk sculpture and creative music and drama.

This is the context in which Miss Porch exposes herself creatively: offering her unfinished novel as a basis for filmed dramatisation and discussion. Unfortunately the novel is presented to people who are encumbered with more than the normal quota of distractions, so that it seems to Miss Porch that she is "offering a partly-written work to a group of people who were concerned chiefly with losing weight". This estimation of her efforts is too simple, but it is perhaps not, in some cases, too pessimistic. The situation lends itself to satiric depictions of banal responses to fiction, and some very funny mock-critical dialogue occurs. One student admits to confusion "about first-person interior monologue. Is it the same as rivers of conscience?" Miss Porch is asked to "bring up stream of consciousness" as though it involves literary regurgitation. Another viewer objects to the word "pregnant", suggesting "out of town" as a decorous substitute. Readers of Elizabeth Jolley's book are unlikely to be occupied with the same questions, or objections, but along with the humour is a quality of self-definition: invalid critical responses to the entire work (such as the assumption that the fiction is largely autobiographical) are avoided by giving them demonstrably ridiculous form within the work itself. (Miss Porch's story, superficially, concerns the complications in the relationship between a narcotic addict and her father, yet Miss Porch is asked "Did all this really happen to you?") Miss Porch, evaluating responses to her novel, speculates on the nature of fiction in a way which carries some

authority. So she functions as a wise guide from within the fiction.

Miss Porch's speculations, responses and defences reveal preoccupations with issues such as narrative originality, authorial distance and the creative function of the reader. Here she defines her limitations:

. . . a novelist is expected to do something remarkable every time with fresh landscape and with unexpected characters in the drama of unusual situations. You realise of course, that an individual has only a limited number of ideas, a limited number of phrases and images and has to work, like a musician, within the range of notes at his disposal.

The musical analogy manages to suggest rich potentialities rather than constraint. A later response to the accusation that she is detrimentally "moved by her own writing" emphasises the need for authorial discipline and restraint: "in fiction, a writer should be objective and should not reveal personal emotional involvement in the writing". In a similarly reasonable vein, she suggests that "Imagination . . . must not be overlooked as endless pictures can fill the reader's mind from what the writer offers. A great deal . . . of understanding comes from the reader". Her judgement is not, however, infallibly correct — an early remark that her course "is entirely literary, concerned only with the drama of human conflict and the resolution of conflict and it has no commercial or political overtones" has an ironically literal degree of truth (her course *is* entirely literary) but other claims are later disproved. As well as providing a certain amount of explicit and internal criticism, Miss Porch represents the creative imagination at work. This is not limited to the inner story but finds expression in delightful speculatively imaginative tangents. The following is stimulated by

suspicions about the nationality of Xerxes, a self-proclaimed Greek:

"Can you imagine a Frenchman calling his son Wellington?" She paused again but did not wait for Miss Porch to take a quick look through the door of a hastily imagined nursery, heavily decorated in blue, where an argument, in French of course, was going on about suitable names for newly born French triplets, boys, the family being in the dilemma of not having any more names, nine sons having caused a serious shortage. The irate little father stamping first one foot and then the other, the mother, too soon out of childbed, sobbing helplessly as she tries to share two breasts between three hungry little mouths ... "I tell you zere are no more appellations. Zey 'ave to be Wellingtons! Wellingtons!"

This comic fantasy plays with notions of the exhaustibility of language and it also demonstrates the receptiveness of the imagination to random suggestion. The entire novel concludes with a surprise which illustrates this receptiveness, but it would be unfair to say more about the ending except to note its implication of the unconscious in literary fabrication.

The literary aspirations of the participants in Miss Porch's course also form part of the novel's internal inquiry into the nature of fiction, for the variety of writings to which Miss Porch is exposed, or with which she is threatened, suggest an unexpectedly widespread yearning for confession, self-promotion or avowedly literary expression. When characters describe their writings, they unwittingly provide information about themselves, and this ironic self-betrayal is

often very funny. For example, Miss Peycroft, Miss Porch's employer, seems to have stepped directly from a *Girls Own Annual*. She refuses a cup of tea with the explanation: "I can't stop. I've heaps to do before bedders". Verbal and other affectations co-exist with a comic ruthlessness which excuses the behaviour of her employee, Miles, whom she describes as "a sort of vocational robber" — then loftily vindicates: "there are not enough people these days with any sense of vocation. And, I do feel it is desirable to recognize and respect true Art in all its forms." There is something Wildean about this inversion of anticipated attitudes. No wonder another character describes Miss Peycroft as "too awful to be true". (This remark has an amusingly literal dimension, given Peycroft's status as a character in a work of fiction.) Miss Peycroft describes her autobiography, which she expects Miss Porch to glance over in her idle moments, as "about seventy thousand words so far and I'm only up to the age of twelve". She is, indeed, in many ways, fixated at the age of twelve. Much of the artistic output of the characters in *Foxybaby* is, or seems likely to be, comically banal: Jonquil Castle, an infuriating but pathetic character, remarks: "I wrote a fragment, a poetic fragment which includes the phrase, 'filled with beauty in the eye of the beholder.' I penned it on impulse". So many of her impulses are conventional, to the point of banality. Miss Harrow, on the other hand, is the victim of a brutal critical response to her published autobiography. We are told enough about her life to assume that her writing would be excessively — and perhaps not calculatedly — melodramatic and cliché. (She remarks, unoriginally, to Miss Porch who longs for rest, that "creative people never sleep".) This revealing art is not all bad. Mrs Viggars, a receptive and generous character, offers a good poem which illustrates her own virtues through the use of the image of an open rose. A quality of detached indirection, comparable to the authorial objectivity which Miss Porch

recommends, is responsible for the success of this poem. So Miss Porch's unfinished novel is placed within a field of creative activity of varying qualities. However it also co-exists with the informal fictions, the delusions and fabrications, which permeate the lives of many characters. When the central character in Miss Porch's narrative acknowledges that a game he plays with his small daughter is wrong, he does so in the following terms: "Every time Steadman knew it must end. He told himself, 'it must end.'" Since the game occurs on successive occasions, he is clearly not entirely convinced by the ending which he tells himself he must enact — as if telling himself a story which he wishes to believe. More comically, Miss Porch recalls an incident from her childhood, when a sexually adventurous playmate, displaying initiative in more than one direction, misrepresents Miss Porch's involvement in their encounter: "Alma ith teathing me where ickle babith

come from", Joan Dodds, in a suddenly cultivated lisp, said" (to her mother). Miss Porch's own mother exonerates her by making up an implausible, yet kind and knowing story to explain why her child's knickers arrive, through the post, a few days later. In *Foxybaby*, fabrications and delusions combine with more orthodox kinds of storytelling to insist on the importance of fiction and the extent to which it permeates life.

*Foxybaby*, then, is a satisfying and stimulating investigation of literary form, authorial motive, the effects of storytelling and dissembling, and the significance of certain moral values. The fact that it is amusing, challenging and a pleasure to read testifies to Elizabeth Jolley's position as one of the most important of contemporary Australian writers.

Brenda Walker

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

PETER COWAN — one of Western Australia's best known writers, his most recent publications are *The Color of the Sky* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press) and *The Window in Mrs X's Place* (Penguin).

DIANE FAHEY — has completed her first book of poetry, *Journeys* and her poetry has appeared in Australian journals under her previous name, Diane Dodwell.

TERRY HARRINGTON — lives in Victoria, his work has been published in Australian newspapers and magazines.

DAVID HEADON — lectures at the University of New South Wales (Defence Academy), and has himself been something of an eccentric explorer into Australian literature.

ELIZABETH JOLLEY — is one of Australia's most highly regarded writers, and first published with Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

STEPHANIE JOHNSON — is a New Zealander living in Sydney. She won the 1985 Bruce Mason Playwright's Award, and has published short stories and poetry in various New Zealand magazines.

NIALL LUCY — has taught literature courses and semiotics at the University of W.A. and Murdoch University. He is currently researching his doctorate at the University of Sydney.

PATRICK MORGAN — is Senior Lecturer at Gippsland College of Advanced Education: and has written on Gippsland for the forthcoming *Oxford Literary Guide to Australia*.

MARK O'CONNOR — his *Selected Poems* and *Poetry in Pictures: the Great Barrier Reef* (with colour photos by Neville Coleman) were published by Hale & Iremonger in March 1986.

VINCENT O'SULLIVAN — one of New Zealand's best known writers, editor of the Katherine Mansfield letters and currently Research Fellow on a project covering South East Asian and Australasian poetry.

LINDY PERCIVAL — lives in Victoria. She has a BA from Victoria College and is now working as a journalist.

TONY SCANLON — teaches at Darwin Institute of Technology.

IAN TEMPLEMAN — founding director of the Fremantle Arts Centre, and chief executive of Fremantle Arts Centre Press, is also a poet and, currently, a member of the Australia Council.

BRENDA WALKER — teaches at the University of Western Australia. She is currently editing, with David Brooks, a collection of essays on Australian Women's Poetry and Poetics.

## WRITING WEST

Several recent events have highlighted the buoyant state of Western Australian writing.

First, Fremantle Arts Centre Press has celebrated the 10th anniversary of its founding, an historically significant event which we mark in these pages. Among Fremantle's publications which received critical acclaim in 1985 were *Reading the Country* by Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe and Marion Campbell's novel *Lines of Flight*. These books indicate something of the range of Fremantle's publishing ventures. *Reading the Country* provides an explanation of the meaning of place in North-West Australia through traditional and contemporary Aboriginal songs and narrative, and through paintings and photographs. *Lines of Flight* is an experimental novel about a young Australian artist living and working in France. Fremantle celebrated the commencement of 1986 with a new novel by Peter Cowan, *The Color of the Sky*. Another publication early in 1986 was *Portrait: A West Coast Collection*, edited by B.R. Coffey and Wendy Jenkins, which contains new or recent work by twenty four writers and shows the vitality and depth of this talent.

Writers Week in Adelaide in March 1986 saw the launching of new works by Tim Winton and Archie Weller. Tim Winton's novel, *That Eye, the Sky*, is published by McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, and Archie Weller's stories, *Going Home*, is published by Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

Another major event early in 1986 was the publication by Penguin Books of Peter Cowan's *A Window in Mrs Xs Place*, a selection of Cowan's stories ranging from the early 1940s to the late 1970s. In many respects, Cowan leads the way in showing younger writers the value of change and experiment in fictional technique, a point made by ABC Books and Writing director Robert Dessaix when he called Cowan's novel the work of a young man.

Although the writing and performance of local play-texts is active, publication of playscripts remains in some respects the poor cousin to fiction and poetry in Western Australia. Nevertheless recent collaborative developments in theatre and drama studies between the University of Western Australia and Murdoch University, and drama workshops at the Playhouse theatre and elsewhere may improve this situation. Events such as the biennial York Theatre Festival (to be held at York from 30 May — 2 June 1986) led by Artistic Director Bill Dunstone, reflect current activities in writing and performance. A recent event of significance outside Western Australia was Jack Davis's play for children, *Honeyspot*, which opened at the Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney, in April 1986.

Bruce Bennett

## CONFERENCES

### Acsanz '86

The Search for New Futures: Issues and Debates in Science and Technology, Cultural Studies, Social and Economic Policy.

The 1986 conference of the Association for Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand will be held at the School of Humanities, Griffith University, Brisbane on May 14 — 16.

Further details from: Malcolm Alexander or Gillian Whitlock, School of Humanities, Griffith University, Nathan, Qld 4111.

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### Black Literatures

First conference in Australia on the literatures of Australian Aborigines, South Pacific peoples, African peoples, peoples of the Caribbean, and United States Blacks: July 3 — 6 at the University of Queensland, Brisbane.

Details from: Emmanuel Nelson or Cliff Watego, Department of English, University of Queensland, St Lucia 4067.

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### Asal '86

The 1986 conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature will be held at James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville on July 7 — 11.

Further details: Robert Dixon or Stephen Torre, Department of English, James Cook University, Townsville, Qld 4810.

**Mark O'Connor**  
**Finding Words for the North**

**Patrick Morgan discusses**  
**the literature of Gippsland**

**Vincent O'Sullivan on Charles Harpur**

**Eccentrics, Explorers and Evangelists**  
**in the Northern Territory**

**Ian Templeman**  
**considers a decade of**  
**Fremantle Arts Centre Press**