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Cumquats

When I first came here the ground outside was dry and cold. They would send me out early in the morning — usually about seven I think — to pick cumquats. We need more fruit for the jam, they would say, and hurry up about it will you? because we haven't much time. Much time for what? I would think as I stepped out into the morning, but they never told me. I guess there’s never much time for anything, or if there is, you don’t find out until it's nearly all gone.

So I would go out across the courtyard to where the cumquats were and start picking. I always took a bucket of hot water with me to put the stink-bugs in — Mr McGoo gave me 2 cents for every stink-bug I caught. They were very easy to catch as there were always so many of them, it was just the smell that made the job hard. Thick and acrid like some exotic chemical that hung around in the thin early air for ages. The bucket of hot water was also good to warm my feet up with. I would stand it on the ground between my legs and wrap the insides of my feet around it while I craned and stretched to pick the fruit.

I got to know the trees pretty well over the years and I never had trouble finding the ripest fruit. You only had to stand there and cup the cumquats gently in your palms and they would fall off and come to you. Somehow I could never really take the cumquats seriously as an edible fruit, them being so small and fiddly, more like ornaments that you put on the shelf next to a Chinese statue than food. But I grew rather fond of them anyway. Probably because they were one of the only things that justified my existence, and I theirs after a time.

I felt guilty if I picked them carelessly and impatiently — their thin skins ripped so easily. But it was hard not to sometimes. The ground would get so cold and sharp under my feet, I would abandon my bucket when the water grew tepid and dance around while I picked, and then the cumquats would rip. So I would have to stand still again and feel the white heat of ice creep over my feet. Then I would stomp up to Mrs McGoo’s kitchen with my buckets of cumquats.

And she hated it if the skins were ripped. She would say, How many times must I tell you Rex (that’s my name), that it’s your job to pick them and mine to peel them. Mr McGoo would usually hear because her voice was big and
red like her arms, and he would come into the kitchen and look at me and
shake his head and say, Dear, dear.

I think they were just funny like that towards me because they didn't really
know what to make of me. When they first found me and gave me a sandwich
in the kitchen, one of the kids came in and stared at me for ages then said,
Are you a boy or a girl? I laughed a bit; what else could I do? Then I said,
I'm both. I just meant to have a bit of a joke but I think everyone took it too
seriously.

They gave me a room at the bottom of the house and said, You can stay
here till you get your bearings back. It was a nice room. It was peaceful and
looked out over the cumquat trees. It was just like living outside really — the
room changed with the weather just as a tent would. I've never been in a tent
before but I imagine it would be the same as this room.

It was built down low on the ground and had a floor paved with the same
stones as the ones in the courtyard. The sun streamed in through the window
at the first light of dawn to wake me up. I would go to the corner of the room
and wash in the old sink there then eat my breakfast. Breakfast was Mrs
McGoo's cumquat jam or marmalade or preserve on Mrs McGoo's homemade
bread. This wasn't as nice as it sounds because the bread was often the stale
bits that weren't eaten upstairs. Also, I got a bit sick of the cumquats, having
to eat them all day every day, but I didn't complain because I was very lucky
to be there.

If I didn't feel hungry I would leave out bits of my breakfast for a mouse
that used to hang around the room now and then. It was white and delicate,
not like the sleek, mean bush rats that lived in the drain outside my door. We
grew accustomed to one another and I left food out for it whenever I could.
I think it came through one of the holes that were cut crudely in the bottom
of the walls. I'm not sure because I can't remember everything that well but
it probably did come through one of these holes. I would have blocked them
up otherwise — the wind came through all the time in the colder months, but
I got used to it like I got used to the icy stones I had to stand on to pick cumquats.

Summer was the best time in this room. On hot, dark nights the cicadas would
drone and hum so loud it seemed the sound drilled my walls down to rubble.
Then the intoxicating smell of cumquat blossom and deadly nightshade would
pour into my room and melt everything, including me. And I, lying on my bed
of cool stones, would float out under the stars and the branches of the cumquat
trees.

There were bad things about Summer too. Like the bugs and spiders and
mosquitoes that decided to take up residence with me for a few months. I woke
up with a snake down my shirt a couple of times and couldn't do anything but
lie still for a couple of hours till it decided to move on. One Summer Mr McGoo
built a compost heap right under my window. After a few weeks I couldn't take
the smell anymore and offered to build him another one on the other side of
the garden. But he said, You leave the running of this garden to me thanks
Rex. I know a lot more about it than you do, you're getting a bit too big for
your boots aren't you? You'd better remember who and where you are.

I suppose Mr McGoo said this because I'd asked him to give me money for
a new pair of boots a couple of days before I spoke to him about the compost
heap. Mine had run out long ago and I needed a new pair for Winter. But I didn’t get them, and as I said before, I didn’t complain because I was very lucky to be there. Mr McGoo always made sure I never forgot this.

Once I tried to leave, I tried walking right back into the bush where I’d come from but I didn’t get far. I bumped into one of the kids who was playing Hide-and-Seek with some friends and he went back and told his dad. Mr McGoo came running down the track after me and persuaded me to go back. Come on Rex, he said, You don’t need to feel so bad about staying with us. He held my arm with his thin, tight fingers and said, You have the right to be with us you know, we took you in because you were lost and hungry. We’re God-fearing church-going people so we don’t mind you staying with us if you have nowhere else to go.

So I went back with him. I felt a bit guilty actually, having caused the McGoos so much trouble. They were kind to put me up in the bottom room and give me food and a place to wash. And Mr McGoo liked me to help with the cumquats. He even said to me after I’d been there a couple of years, We couldn’t do without you Rex. Besides, I shouldn’t have just walked off and left the mouse all alone with no-one to feed it, it would have pined away and died.

So I stayed on at the McGoos. I lost count of the Winters I picked cumquats and the Summers I shovelled compost and smelt blossom. My beard grew long, I grew thin. My hands grew yellow from the fruit. I forgot how I got there and what I had done before. I only remembered who I was and where I was: Rex at the McGoos, picking cumquats. My mouse died and was replaced by another, then another. The kids grew up and left home; it was just me and Mr and Mrs McGoo and the cumquat trees, which grew and multiplied over the years.

Then one Autumn a strange thing happened. Mr and Mrs McGoo had been helping me pick cumquats because there were so many this year, but they still didn’t let me peel them. I don’t know why — it was obvious Mrs McGoo was suffering from strain as she had begun to get thin. Her skin hung about her in useless sheaths, not knowing what to do now it had no fat to cover. Her face folded and it’s red hue faded into a yellow one, the dregs of a sunset. Mr McGoo seemed to be drying up and looked like a stick of cinnamon, only yellower.

They didn’t mind if I ripped the cumquats these days, in fact I don’t even think they noticed most of the time. Unpeeled cumquats lay strewn about the kitchen and rotted under the table. I wanted to help them but I couldn’t, not being allowed to hang around the kitchen much except to give them the buckets of cumquats. They didn’t have the strength to peel all the cumquats and make all the jam and marmalade; and some of the trees outside began to die, unrelieved of their ripe fruit.

I got up one morning and went outside to pick cumquats as usual. I had two buckets full and Mr and Mrs McGoo still hadn’t come out to pick, but this didn’t worry me much as they were pretty unpredictable these days. When I talked to them they usually snapped back because they were so tired and irritable. So I took the buckets up to the kitchen and said, Here I am with the cumquats Mrs McGoo. No answer. I went inside (after knocking of course) and there they both were. They sat side-by-side on the floor jaundice-yellow
and dead, unfinished cumquat pie sitting in their laps. I had a taste of Mrs McGoo's piece then put it back thinking how rude it must have looked.

I stayed on a couple more days at the McGoo's just to make sure they weren't playing a trick on me or something; Mr McGoo had a funny sense of humour in his livelier days. And then I left. I walked off into the bush with a bag of cumquats to last me until I reached another place.

I walked and walked and walked. I don't know how long I walked or how far but it felt like years. After a while I saw an opening in the bush and I headed for it, and when I came into the clearing I realised it was in fact the cumquat orchard.

And here I sit now, in my old room at the bottom of the house. I sit here day and night, gazing out the window into the blackness. I don't go out and pick cumquats in the mornings anymore because the trees are all dead. I can see their greeny-grey skeletons faintly outlined, row upon row, smudged here and there by the rain which hasn't stopped falling since I got back.
D.C. McLAUGHLIN

Liquorice

When I was a boy I loved fishing. Yet in my youth I gave it up. I could no longer wrench a fish from its hook. But today I sit and bait a hook again. I bait my hook with liquorice. A fly hinders me. I flick it away. How does a fly fly so far out to sea?

If I could fly I would look down and see myself as a speck in a speck of a boat, and I would see many boats like mine criss-crossing on a silent sea. My boat drifts now with the bob and weave of the waves. I’ve stopped the engine.

Earlier today:

“You should see the engine,” he says. “She’s got a beautiful engine. But a man doesn’t need a boat so grand to go fishing alone. If you could wait another day I could rent you a boat that won’t cost you an arm and a leg.”

“Money’s not important,” I tell him.

Yesterdays:

“There’s nothing more important than money,” I tell her. “If I stop bringing it in you’ll soon know that.”

“But we never see you.”

“Jesus, woman, you see me as much as a woman ever sees a man. I get up in the morning and you see me. I go to work and, yes, you don’t see me. But I come home at night and, guess what? You see me, no? I’m here most weekends and you see me, yes? So what more do you want? Do you want to be in my pocket all the time? Because if that’s what you want, that’s impossible.”

“But when you come home, what time do you come home? And you’ve always got that bloody briefcase with you, and it’s full of work.”

“You gave me the bloody briefcase. Do you want the briefcase back?”

“All I’m saying is: ‘We need you and want to see more of you.’”

“Well, I can tell you I see plenty of you and the children. And can I tell you what I see most of you? I see your hands. You’ve always got your hands out to me: your open hands. And they’re saying: ‘Gimme, gimme, gimme.’”
Forty years ago:

Their hands, their hands. They push me, punch me — tear at my clothes. Just because I like liquorice. "‘Liquorice’ licks his arse," they chant at me. "‘Liquorice’ licks his arse." But I show them. I get Tommy Jones alone behind the shed and I smash his head against the fence and the blood runs all over his shirt and his father who also has red hair comes to our door and my father who towers over him tells him to get off the premises or he will break his head for his snot picked on me first and I also get John Scanlon when he comes from the corner shop with a shopping bag with groceries for his mother and I break his tooth and the eggs break on the ground and I show them and I show them I shall be I shall be ....

Earlier today (continued):

"All right then, if that’s the way it’s got to be," he says. "If you have to go out today it will have to be this boat. Everything else is rented. Would you write your name and address on the back of the cheque? She’s all fuelled and ready to go. Just follow the fish with the sonar."

A few months back:

It’s a mistake but the car just follows its nose to the pub: the old haunt where they always go.

"Well, look who’s here. What are you drinking? It’s my turn in the chair," he says. He shakes my hand. He smirks a grin. I recognise one other face.

"Most of the old faces are gone now," the other face says. Our talk of old times runs down in a few sentences. He joins the mainstream talk again. They tell each other salesmen’s stories. I drink beers, smoke cigarettes. I leave them laughing behind the door.

Many times in recent years:

I’m thinking: "God, how did I sink to this?" I knock on the door. It is a working class door: plain wood; no bell. The best time to call is after the television news when mum and dad can be briefly distracted. It is best if mum opens the door. If mum opens the door you have more chance of wheedling your way into the house. If you can get into the house you’ve got the chance of being able to ingratiate youself with mum and dad. If you can make mum and dad like you there is a good chance you will make a sale. I hear footsteps behind the door. I smile. A man opens the door. I go into my act: "Good evening. I represent the ...."

Once upon a time:

"I represent the company with every ounce of energy I can give. I am the company’s number one salesman. Colleagues praise me. They smile when I enter a room. I become National Sales Director. I feel good when people ask me:
"What do you do for a living?" and I tell them: "I am National Sales Director for ..." I know it is foolish pride, but it is an important position. People come to me for all sorts of favours.

Once in 'Once Upon a Time':

"I'm glad you came to me," I tell him. "I like your initiative. I'll speak to the appropriate people. We'll get you out of the office and onto the sales team. Mind you, you'll be just a cadet and I'll be watching your progress. It'll probably be a couple of weeks before I can get you transferred, but you can start your education now. I'll give you a book to read. It's by Dale Carnegie: How to Win Friends and Influence People. Carnegie's long dead, but you wouldn't think so. How his words go on. And, quite simply, the lesson I advise you to learn is this: 'If you sincerely want to succeed, you will have to sell yourself first.' And do you know the first essential for selling yourself? It's a good smile. Learn how to smile. Practise a sincere smile."

The young man wags his backside into the chair that faces my desk. He nods his head. He smirks a grin.

The end of 'Once Upon a Time':

Well, he sits there and faces me across his big desk with his fingers pointing a steeple and he says he will come right to the point and I cannot stand his accent and the company has never been the same from the day they took over for that was the end of any heart or thanks for loyal employees and after all those years he says they will have to let me go though there will be severance pay and ....

Recently:

"It's best to sever it now," she says. "The years can only drag on if we stay together. There's no purpose now that the children are gone."

I want to tell her: "Go, you unfaithful bitch. Go, after all the years I've been true to you. I had a mistress for six years. She was a wonderful woman. I wanted to leave you and be with her. But you needed me, and the children needed me. And what about our wonderful children? Who ever hears from them?"

Here and now:

Who ever heard of someone baiting a hook with liquorice? Well, let them laugh and think it's easy. It isn't easy. A liquorice stick is hard, but it softens in warm hands if you knead it. See how you've covered the hook by threading it through the liquorice? And now you must cut off the excess. "Nothing to excess. That's the secret of living," they tell you. So what's the secret of dying? But then, you've always liked liquorice. Lick the liquorice on the hook. Ah, yes. It tastes good. And now you must do it. Do it, do, it, do, do, do it. Swallow your medicine, dive right in, gulp it down, take the plunge, gulp-it-gulp-it-gulp-the-hook-and-over-the-side-the-water-is-fine.
The water is fine, fine. I am a bubble in a glass of champagne. All is ordered here. Fish swim in tiers. Big fish, little fish — all in tiers — intricate formations. Big fish eat little fish. When they are eaten their companions do not look back.

I look back and all around me. I sight along the line that stretches from me to the boat. There is still time. I could pull myself up, up along the line and board the boat and start again. I do not want to. There is peace and design in this wet warm I never knew up there. I smile at the fish. The sweet melts from the hook with the salted sea in my craw.
Night Crossing the Brisbane River

The Southern Cross rises and tilts over
Moreton Bay and along the coast the Pacific
stumbles and crashes against the continent.

Salt drifts inland. The moon drags its sullen
double up the reaches of the Brisbane River,
it lurches among the mud and the swaying mangroves.

Stirring, the river lifts its brown shoulders
lifting the clinkered hull of the ferry,
the cabin lights flicker and fall fooling moths.

Mosquitos drift along the street-light
and find the drunk fallen in leaf-litter.
In dreams, disguised, they enter the high-rise.

The ferryman indolently uncoils his arm
slipping the hawser from its cleat he leans
out and pushes the jetty gently into the dark.
Magpies

When night settles down in the dark paddock
the magpies swoop into the ragged macrocarpa
uttering their sharp defiance to the departing world.

When the paddock is fitted with the khaki of summer
in the black and white of movie gangsters the magpies
strut extorting their living from the city of worms.

In lambing time they walk among the sheep
with sensibilities as fine as an eastern potentate
they gobble the tender eyes still warm with birth slime.

In winter grey skies coming north from the Pole
stir the pines and the magpies are still
alert to the soughing circles of the talons overhead.

In any morning they are the most beautiful singers.
Silly feathered receivers tuned to the departing spheres
they sit on the fence and voice immaculate harmonies.
Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia*:
In Praise of the Swagman Spirit

Herbert, in an attempt to disarm his critics, sometimes spoke slightly of *Capricornia*. "It has so many faults," he once wrote, "that long ago I repudiated it as 'my bastard son'". On other occasions his growing interest in psychology led him to interpret the book as "a story of which the deep motive was the father-son relationship". Neither view, "botch" nor "study in family relationship", seems appropriate. He comes closer to the truth in the following.

It would seem that what *Capricornia* deals with is something that persists in our Australian way of life. Non-native among us are not so impressed but such is the attitude of the average born Australian that I can always start an argument by decrying it myself. Every mature Australian I come into contact with seems to have read it.

That "something that persists in our Australian life" is the "Australian ethos" Herbert spent a lifetime trying to express in his novels. *Capricornia* was his first major attempt, *Seven Emus* a rough sketch and *Poor Fellow My Country* the final, superb achievement. The details of the picture change little over the three books; it is the perspective that changes. In *Capricornia* the great potential of Australia fills his eye. Thirty years later, in *Poor Fellow My Country*, Australia’s failures dominate the view.

Herbert’s mood when he wrote *Capricornia* was not hard and cynical. He recounts how, after a piece of unforgiveable selfishness towards Sadie Norden,

Something happened to me...The hardness I’d prided myself on was softened. I began to talk to Sadie about the loveliness of the land I’d left, not simply about the violences, the harshness, the cruelty of it — and how the people were really comical, not so bad as mad as aren’t we all.
He wrote the book in London after failing to find a publisher for 'Black Velvet', the novel he had brought with him from Australia and his mood at the time predisposed him to think well of his homeland. He disliked living abroad. He hated the cold: in later life he couldn't even face the weather in Sydney let alone the cold, wet, dreariness of London. Add to that the disappointment of his hopes for 'Black Velvet', his rejection by British publishing, — and no wonder he began to think longingly of the country he had left behind.

And so it was that a country of my own came into being which I called Capricornia and it became realler than reality, and life now became joy, because I had this world of my own creation to live in, with all its sunlight and naturalness and comedy, against the awful background of (London). Capricornia shows Australia's weaknesses along with its strengths — its lack of clear purpose, its failures with the Aborigine — but it is the strengths the novel stresses, strengths which Herbert felt made it, potentially, the best society in the world.

He found a powerful symbol for these strengths in Banjo Paterson's poem, 'Waltzing Matilda', which the book develops into a defining myth of Australia. The poem is quoted in full in Chapter 24, the didactic centre of the novel, where McRandy, patently a spokesman for the novelist, teaches Norman the truth about Australia. After Joe Mooch has sung the song, Andy invites him to tell Norman what some "English musical coot" once said about it. The speech that follows is quite untypical of Mooch, both in tone and content: Herbert's desire to stress the poem's significance has, for a time, overcome his novelist's ear. In his interpretation he stresses the defining nature of its myth and he widens it by adding a fourth figure, the Aborigine, to the original triumvirate of Squatter, Trooper and Swagman.

(The English musical coot) reckons it's a genuine folksong. That's a song peculiar to a tribe of people y'know, one's expresses their feelin's. He says that this here Spirit of the Land that Andy mentioned is in it, both in the music and the words... (born Australians) look on stray things knockin' around, such as sheep drinkin' at a billabong, or anybody else's chooks, and things like that, as public property, or rather property of the tribe, same's the Binghis do things that's knockin' round the bush. So the Jolly Swagman's the typical Australian, doin' just what he thinks is right, like a Binghi spearin' a kangaroo or somebody's bullock. And the Squatter and the Troopers are the outsiders, the imported people, the foreigners, what have a strong sense of property and a different way of looking at things. (p. 330)

In this defining myth, the Swagman represents those white Australians who have accepted the potential of their adopted land, a potential already actualised in the Aboriginal way of life with its stress (according to McRandy anyway) on freedom and brotherhood. To these qualities the Swagman adds a third — a larrkin vitality missing in Aboriginal culture. The Squatter and the Trooper represent those Australians who have not accepted their new country, who still give allegiance to European values, who prefer oppression to freedom, selfish
acquisitiveness to brotherhood. The similarity between Swagman and Aboriginal is significant in that it shows the Swagman is truly Australian. The alien, colonial mentality of Squatter and Trooper is shown by its difference from the Aboriginal, the Australian, way. Throughout the novel, Herbert contrasts the two ways of life: the Australian way of the Swagman and the colonial way of the Squatter and Trooper. By demonstrating in Capricornia and in Capricornians the Swagman's freedom, brotherhood and vitality, Herbert is celebrating what he sees as the characteristic Australian virtues.

The Swagman's freedom is, first of all, freedom from wage slavery. Mark Shillingsworth rejects the steady job, the concern for public opinion and the social climbing of the Squatter secure in the knowledge that in Capricornia (unlike England) freedom is the right of every man, for masters could not wield their whips to terrify in this true Australia Felix, Capricornia. No because the sack here meant not misery and hunger but freedom to go adventuring. (p.20)

Although there is some irony here in so patent an excuse for laziness, there is no hint of irony in McRandy's later praise of the "workin' man's paradise". Mark's attitude may show the seamy side of Australian freedom but it is nonetheless a freedom to be proud of.

Australia bein' a workin' man's paradise, which is better than it bein' a paradise for Plutes...We're a great people we Australians...there is something special about us...our freedom from slavery to industry and our sunshine and our elbow room. (pp.319-20)

The Swagman is jolly because he is free of responsibility. He roams where he will, never tying himself to a job, never becoming a rich man, simply surviving — and happy in his freedom. The land gives sufficient for basic needs and true Capricornians take what is offered, refusing the prison of jobs whose sole purpose is to provide more than they need. For all their faults, the feckless reprobrates, Chook Henn, Titmuss and company are shown to be infinitely more attractive than the Poundamores and Playfair Flutes — not only more attractive but more Australian.

(Aборiginals) simply preserve their game and fruits and things by drawing on 'em carefully and so save 'emselves the labour of havin' to till and sow and the trouble of gettin' all mixed up financially over their stock as we do. You might call that Primitive. But lookin' at it closely and comparin' it with our system of sweat and worry and sinfulness. I dunno but what it aint quite as good. (p.325)

If when Mark and Chook need a bit of money, they take what they find lying around unused in someone else's pocket, they are simply following the true Australian model — the binghi spearing a bullock or the Swaggie knocking off a jumbuk. It is only "the imported people foreigners, what have a strong sense of property and a different way of looking at things." (p.330)
The second aspect of freedom stressed in the novel is freedom from political tyranny. Again and again throughout the book the Jolly Swagman myth is replayed as troopers go out to apprehend, first Mark, then Tocky, then Ket, then Norman. The description becomes as repetitive and stylised as a Homeric formula and always the sense that it is right to protect a man's freedom by opposing the troopers. "Few citizens cared to debase themselves by acting as policemen." (p.131) "Norman's talk of intent to betray the murderers was only blather. He had no illusions about the kind of fame he would win among his fellow-citizens by doing so, nor so much love for the man-trackers that he would help them in their wretched business." (p.404) In Capricornia it is only the Trooper, minion of the Squatter, who seeks to limit a man's freedom and for that he is detested by all "self-respecting, law-despising Capricornians." (p.132)

The law and its servants are never seen as protectors of the weak or instruments of justice — only as opponents of liberty.

In Poor Fellow My Country Herbert uses the courts and police in a more complex way. The relationship of Australia to Britain, of white Australians to blacks and of the individual to the state are all called into question during court scenes and scenes involving the police. In Capricornia there is none of this complexity. The issues have been simplified down to "freedom" or "deprivation of freedom". Regardless of the nature of the crime, the reader is invited to side with the fugitive and forget the victim's claims. Con the Greek, one of the few whites to treat halfcastes with humanity, is an attractive character. Ket, his murderer, is not. Yet once Ket is arrested, we are encouraged to forget Con and think only of the right of all men (even the least attractive) to be free of law courts and prisons. The central myth dictates the response. Ket in the jungle is the Swagman at the billabong, his freedom threatened — not a greedy killer rightly brought to justice for the murder of a fellow Capricornian.

Again Herbert emphasises the "Australianess" of Capricornian codes by linking the Swagman's custom with the Aboriginal's. McRandy praises Aboriginal freedom from authority. The anthropological accuracy of his description, in this as in other respects, is open to question but Herbert clearly intends readers to accept his view.

(African) tribes are families, in which no-one is boss, in which no-one is entitled by any sort of right to bully and grab...If we'd thought of birth control a thousand years ago, providin' we hadn't allowed a few greedy hounds to rule and rob us, today we might've been livin'as simply as the Binghis 'emselves. (p.325)

In Capricornia the law is never seen as anything more than the power that enables "a few greedy hounds to rule and rob us" and that is why its enforcers, the troopers, will never be respected.

"Brotherhood" is, for Herbert, the second great Australian virtue. True Capricornians are generous-spirited. They give without counting the cost or calculating future profit. It is only outsiders like the mean-minded pommy, Jock Driver, who behave differently.
An ordinary Australian of the locality would have taken Mark’s word for what he said about the machine, and would have said Yes or No to the price asked, and, as a preliminary to doing business would have stood the needy seller treat. Mark had to stand treat himself and had to take Jock out to inspect the plant. (p.47)

The same goes for hospitality. The meanness of government officers brands them as outsiders, of squatter breed. True Capricornians welcome all travellers, with

the hospitality that all in Capricornia except the Government officers and the most jealous of the combos were always willing to extend to travellers.

(p.168)

Capricornian brotherhood appears most powerfully in the relationships between characters. In an influential article on Capricornia Vincent Buckley argued that,

In this universe people are unable to meet one another in any very satisfying way...people (hardly persons, just people) meet and collide like random molecules. In the whole book there is not one constant and satisfying relationship established.7

This judgement is simply wrong. The book is full of satisfying relationships, although they are not the kind a critic steeped in European literary traditions might be looking for. European literature is primarily interested in heterosexual relationships and these are, indeed, inconstant and unsatisfying in Capricornia. We are never shown any deeper bond between men and women than sexual compatibility and that only between black and white; marriages between whites are, without exception, failures. But failure of one type of relationship does not imply failure of all. In this book it is the relationships between friends and between parents and children that are the deep and lasting ones. We do not find such relationships explored in great depth for it is not that sort of book and Herbert is not that kind of writer but that does not mean they are inconstant or unsatisfying.

What, for instance, of the relationship between Mark and Chook. Disreputable certainly, but as devoted as any old married couple!

So Chook died alone with Mark, suddenly stricken with paralysis while trying to help Mark, who had first shown signs of distress. No doubt it was the sort of death he would wish for. And he died as he had chosen to live for fourteen years, a voluntary exile, a martyr to his affection for Mark. Mark had buried him with his own half-paralysed hands, weeping into his shallow sandy grave the first tears his eyes had shed for years...and from the side of the humpy had removed a sheet of bark so as to keep the grave in constant view. (p.403)
The love between Mark and Chook is in a classic Australian tradition: the tradition of mateship between two adult males. It is characterised by total loyalty and considerable unselfishness and it expresses its love more comfortably in deed than word. It is matched in the book by the constancy of O'Pick and Ballest, by the relationship Norman establishes with Cho Sek Ching at Red Ochre, and even by the love between Heather and Mark since there is more mate than lover, more friendship than passion in Heather's relationship with Mark. Like Chook Henn, whom she sees as her rival, Heather is totally loyal to Mark whatever he may do. Her love remains constant in the face of all his backsliding and evasion and in the end she is rewarded. Our final picture of the couple is straight out of a pulp magazine story. No question about it. This is THE HAPPY ENDING!

"A boom!" cried Heather again. "Oh no credit to booze-artists this time — and no thieving bookkeepers." She turned shining eyes on Mark and cried, "You wouldn't do a bunk with the cash, would you dear?"

"Me?" laughed Mark. "And leave a treasure like you behind?"

She took his arm, and then Norman's, and drew them to her. (p.509)

Such pictures of family harmony are not unusual in Capricornia. Throughout the novel, family relationships, particularly those between males, are characterised by unselfish loyalty in time of need and by deep love expressed with surprising passion during moments of crisis. When, for instance, Oscar was accused of the worst of all offences in the Civil Service — Blabbing” his brother Mark, seeing him looking "so bemused and miserable", is "smitten to the heart" and glories in sacrificing his own career to save his beloved brother. (p.21) In Mark’s time of need Oscar reciprocates. Straight-laced though he is and though he has "no doubt about Mark’s guilt”, he not only lies in court for Mark but in so doing "had never felt more love for Mark before"! (p.130) When Oscar dies, we find Norman utterly distraught, weeping for love of his foster father. When Mark arrives a fugitive at Red Ochre, the son he has abandoned and neglected all his life welcomes him like the prodigal son, rejecting at his request a good mate, Cho Sek Ching. Family loyalties come first. When Norman is arraigned, petty ill-feeling is immediately forgotten as Mark leaps to his support.

When Oscar dies, we find Norman utterly distraught, weeping for love of his foster father. Mark arrives a fugitive at Red Ochre, the son he has abandoned and neglected all his life welcomes him like the prodigal son, rejecting at his request a good mate, Cho Sek Ching. Family loyalties come first. When Norman is arraigned, petty ill-feeling is immediately forgotten as Mark leaps to his support. If relations between husband and wife are unsatisfactory in Capricornia, relations between parents and children are, without exception, loving. Differ, Oscar, the doting Pansy McLash and even (except where race intrudes) Mark, all cherish their children — while some of the most successful scenes in the whole book are the delightful ones between father O’Cannol! and his adoring brood. Significantly O’Cannon treats his daughters as sons: it is the father/son relationship that appeals most powerfully to Herbert.

Again Aboriginal custom is used to validate a Capricornian code. Capricornian brotherhood is matched by Aboriginal tolerance. Aboriginal willingness to help goes beyond anything found in white society. While outcasts like Nawnim and Ket are not welcomed by the tribe they are not rejected as they have been by whites. The Aborigines tolerate them as they tolerate "dogs for which they had no love but had not the heart to kill or lose." Connie Differ,
abandoned by her white "protector", is "made very welcome" (p.145) by Aboriginal relations — however little they can offer her in the poverty of a native camp.

Freedom and brotherhood are shared by both swagman and binghi; the third quality Herbert finds in true Australians is unique to the swagman. Larrikin vitality is very much a whiteman's contribution to the Australian ethos. Capricornians show little energy for the daily grind of a wage slave but they have it in abundance when it comes to enjoying themselves. Nowhere is this more evident than in the relish of their fighting. Rarely is there any real malice — except again when an outsider like Jock Driver takes the whole thing seriously in a mean-minded, un-Capricornian way. A normal Capricornian fight is typically "matter more of mettlesome hands than malicious hearts" (p.173). The fights between O'Pick and Ballest are "always entertaining" (p.151). Those at the O'Cannon wedding are "grand". And even Pastor Hollower enjoys a scrap with the blacks who come to steal back their lubras for "it was all great fun for everyone, including Mr. Hollower who never would admit it." (p.247)

The bustling vitality of Capricornian life is further emphasised in set piece descriptions such as the following:

(The Paddock) was the home of scores of children of almost any colour one might wish to see, and of a multitude of mongrel dogs, and of a medley of weird sounds — laughter and chatter of strange people, tinkle and boom and wail of outlandish musical instruments, and, at night when yellow lights were purring, of possums, dismal cry of kwiluks. (p.119)

Similar cram-to-the-brim energy runs through widely disparate descriptions of life in Capricornia. From the doctor’s day ("the amputation of a gangrenous leg, the delivery of a Greek woman of triplets, the vaccination of a score of Compound natives" [p.183]) to the loading of cattle ("blazing lights and dust and flies and stench and din" [p.217]) all is hectic in Capricornia. All is a jumbled, fascinating, energetic mixture of 'mad' elements. All is alive and there is life in abundance for "it never rains but it pours in Capricornia." (p.213)

What I have been arguing is that when he wrote Capricornia Herbert still believed, somewhat naively, in the stereotypical Australian qualities of freedom, brotherhood and vitality. It is tempting for a critic to assume that Herbert cannot be as simple as that, and must be scornful of such stereotypes. But the evidence in the book points the other way; I do not see how one interprets the scenes between McRandy and Norman differently. The Herbert who wrote Capricornia still believed in the utopian socialist potential of native-born white Australians. Later on he lost this faith and it is for that reason that we find in Poor Fellow My Country none of the naive trust in Australian brotherhood and freedom that fills Capricornia. The Herbert of Poor Fellow My Country is as passionately patriotic as ever but it is the disappointement, angry patriotism of a Swift or Solzhenitsyn — bitter at lost opportunities rather than proud of achieved greatness. In Capricornia he is beginning to understand the potential weaknesses of the Australian character but the extent of the danger is not yet clear to him. The limits of his awareness at this state are interestingly reflected in the unconscious ambiguity of his use of the phrase "Spirit of the Land" — an ambiguity that has disappeared when the phrase reappears in later books.
In *Capricornia* there are two different views of 'The Spirit of the Land' and it is important to see (more clearly probably than Herbert did) that they are different — and indeed reflect accurately a confusion in his mind over where the true hope for Australia lay. Did it lie in the essentially rationalist, humanist idealism of the early socialists or did it lie in a more mystical search for national soul and national identity? The two uses of 'Spirit of the Land' in *Capricornia* reflect the two possibilities. On the one hand there is the 'Spirit of the Land' sung to Norman by the Golden Beetle and on the other there is the 'Spirit of the Land' sailing across the Coral Sea in defiance of the stuffy bureaucracy of Port Zodiac. The first is the spirit we find again in parts of *Seven Emus* and pervasively in *Poor Fellow My Country*. It is the spirit Herbert says Australians lack: the true, unique, non-European, Australian ethos symbolised by the land and its Aboriginal inhabitants. The second is the spirit of the Jolly Swagman, the spirit of freedom, brotherhood and larrikin vitality, fittingly symbolised by a boat that keeps Mark free from wage slavery, from the law and from responsibility generally.

The fact that the phrase becomes, in later books, so clearly attached to the spiritual, Aboriginal meaning can mislead readers who know their Herbert. They may look for and find a stress on the spiritual that is simply not present in the earlier book; they may miss the fact that the 'Spirit of the Land' in *Capricornia* is the spirit of the Swagman not of the Aboriginal. In *Poor Fellow My Country* the very centre of the book is the halfcaste hero's relationship with the land and its spirits. In complete contrast, as *Capricornia's* halfcaste hero develops, we find him becoming, not more and more Aboriginal but more and more representative of the Jolly Swagman, more and more like his father Mark. Buckley interprets this fact as an indication of failure.

Norman (is driven) to a sort of permissive carelessness... "She's right". In fact Norman seems to me easily the best example in our literature of what is generally supposed to be the typical Australian.8

A perceptive and accurate assessment; the only question is whether Herbert would have agreed with its critical tone. There is no hint in the text that we are to criticise what Norman finally becomes. And if we accept that Herbert is indeed happy not only to accept but to extol the 'typical Australian' characteristics of the Jolly Swagman the development of Norman should cause the reader no surprise. He becomes a better version of his father — the Swagman spirit without its sleazy accessories. As much a model and hero to the early Herbert as Prindy is to the later.

The significance of Aboriginal culture in *Capricornia* is not the same as its significance in *Poor Fellow My Country*. In the later book it is used to comment critically on the lack of spirituality in white Australia. The bushman's lack of culture (seen, for instance, in his low musical taste) is ridiculed and contrasted with the richness and depth of Aboriginal culture. The Aboriginal's spiritual relationship with the land is contrasted with the bushman's casual rape of that same land. The bushman's scorn of Aboriginales emphasises his inability to understand anything deeper than material well being. In *Capricornia* the opposite is true. Here it is the similarity between Aboriginal culture and
bushman culture that is stressed, not its difference. Nowhere in Chapter 24 is there any stress on the spiritual relationship between Aboriginals and the land. When Mooch speaks of the ‘Spirit of the Land’ he is speaking of brotherhood and freedom, not of that mystical relationship with the land itself which becomes so important in the later book. Here the Aboriginal way of life is described as essentially the same as white Capricornian life — opposed to the sanctions of the law, avoiding the slavery of work, taking as need arises but with no desire to own more than is necessary to survive. Even more significant is the fact that Herbert shows no interest whatsoever in following Norman the one time that he comes closest to true Aboriginal culture. His weeks of living in the bush with Aboriginals are simply not described because in this book they are not important. Contrast this with the importance given in the later book to Prindy’s wanderings in the bush with his tribal mentors.

To say that Herbert has high hopes for the swagman’s spirit is not to say he is certain of its value. The prevailing irony of the book allows him to question and to warn even as he paints an essentially optimistic picture of Australia. Throughout the book Herbert maintains an ironic stance towards individual Capricornians that raises doubts even as it praises:

When the town became crowded with idlers just before Christman, Mark, who had in him all the makings of a good Capricornian, chafed because his job went on. He was in this mood when the good Capricornian Krater came back to town to idle... (p.14)

When Ned Krater and the town layabouts are offered as models of ‘good Capricornians’ we are forced to take a closer look at McRandy’s eulogies of the working man’s paradise. The ineffectual use such men make of their talents is mocked: Mark’s wind-driven fans that only work when they are not needed and tide-driven dynamos that provide light by day and dark by night. When he describes the transformation of Flying Fox Island’s seedy commercialism into the piously efficient commercialism of the Hallelujah Copra Company, Herbert seems genuinely unsure whether to praise the missionaries for doing something useful with the land and giving purpose to Aboriginal lives or to blame them for introducing an alien note of greedy exploitation into Capricornia. In one sentence he is mocking ‘normal’ Capricornians, in the next taking sly digs at the hypocrisy of lazy capitalists preaching the work ethic to exploited employees:

The Gospellists, contemptible by reason of their virtue in the eyes of normal Capricornians had done something the normal ones had failed to do, that is, had developed methods of doing business successfully...Of course they themselves did not hew and dig and sow, as scoffers pointed out. But did Moses leading his people through the wilderness go out and gather manna for them...The Gospellists offered (the Aboriginhitemen of the kind they were themselves. Surely better pay than a pound a month and pigswill and the status of a dog prescribed by the government. (p.244)

The uncertainty of the irony in this passage reflects the uncertainties of its author. Herbert wanted to believe in Australian freedom, brotherhood and vitality but he knew they were not the whole truth about Australia.
The treatment of Aborigines is, of course, the strongest indication of what is missing in the freedom and brotherhood of Capricornia. Capricornian defence of freedom stops short of Aboriginals; its brotherhood is not broad enough to include them. Capricornians are content to let the oppression of the law take its course if a Yeller Elbert or a few unimportant blacks are in the dock; their interest is only in the freedom of whites. Capricornian generosity does not extend to blacks. Norman, on his travels, finds that even a superior halfcaste must be content with a battered tin plate on the verandah and the leavings of his white superiors. For brotherhood extends only to humans and to most Capricornians the Aboriginal is not human. When Tim O'Cannon demands help for a woman in distress he is told firmly that Connie Pan is not a woman, she's "a halfcaste — and a halfcaste's a lubra." (p.180)

Nonetheless, despite Herbert's awareness of the dangers in Capricornian work ethics and of unforgiveable limitations in its application of the ideals of freedom and brotherhood, the novel is still, and in marked contrast to Poor Fellow My Country, full of his hope for Australia. He might laugh at its madness but he says it is a madness the world would do well to emulate. There is no hint of irony when he contrasts the freedom and happiness of Capricornia with the mess the rest of the world makes of its affairs.

Thus Capricornia, freest and happiest land on earth was dragged into a war between kings and queens and plutocrats and slaves and homicidal half wits...(p.93)

There is no irony in McRandy's praise of the "manly carefree" way, the "glorious wild" state of Capricornia — and those phrases describe Mark, Krater and Chook Henn just as well as they describe the land and its original inhabitants:

I like to think that the Great Bunyip, the Spirit of the Southern land of ours, the Lord of your Aboriginal forefathers from the beginning of time, and now the Lord of us who's growin' up in your forefathers' place and goin' the same old manly carefree way, wants to keep a bit of the place in its Aboriginal glorious wild state and has chosen this here Capricornia for it. (p.321)

**Notes**

3. Herbert, Xavier. 'Recording for the National Archives'. 12 July 1961. From a transcript held in the Sadie Herbert Collection, Fryer Library, Queensland University.
4. Herbert, Xavier. 'Speech to the Adelaide Arts Festival' (1962). From a transcript held in the Sadie Herbert Collection, Fryer Library, Queensland University.
5. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
Sometimes, she thinks, we have a burden laid on us so heavy it almost seems a special honour . . .

Talking to her younger son in prison blue through glass that’s thicker than its millimetres, she tells herself: So it has finally come to this — it’s like when he was little and I used to go to see him in the hospital. What can I tell him now to ease the mystery of his condition?

On either side, in other cubicles, the families and friends, the wives, fiancées, lean forward, strain to hear the words that must suffice until next week, next month, next year.

“Time’s up!”

But not that other time which opens with the vast prison gates to suck them in (the loved and foolish ones, the born unlucky) back down its corridors to echoing cells, expelling her at the same time into a world where her incarceration, shaped to theirs, remains invisible to others, waiting upon that day that seems so far when the stopped clock will startle the whole house by taking up its tick again, and, in life’s movie, unfreeze the frame, give motion back its meaning.
The Floating Island

Sometimes
the floating island
shrieks across the water
like a puma on heat
pacing her cage —

I can’t set free
the floating island
while I’m shivering and impotent
in the freezing shallows —

Other times
the floating island
is an emerald asylum
where I long to go mad;
but no amount
of self conscious gibbering
will make the water part —

It’s then
I throw stones
and jeer;
my sour voice
attacking the mist
like an acid —

nothing cuts like I do
in disappointment.
Looking

A solicitor, thirty-five, glasses, almost podgy, drinking whisky in the evenings. He sees a lot from the front window of his terrace. She lives next door — long nose, like the beak of a proud bird, fashionably underweight, tight jeans, blonde hair — desirable. No men friends. Each morning her high heels snap at the pavement, car door slams, engine fires, thunders away. Fast. Always hurrying. How to gain her attention?

He is cleaning his Alfa, lovingly. She emerges: revealing dress, defensive make-up, scurries to her car. "Hello", he says, hoping the nervousness doesn't show. Startled, she recovers quickly. "Hi!" The "i" is elongated, nasal. She gets into her car. A flick of legs, stockings, hopes. She drives off, tugging at her seatbelt as she goes. He polishes the Alfa where it shines already.

On a Saturday he sees her — head bandaged, burgundy bruises about her eyes, and a nose guard, like ancient Spartans wore on their helmets. A female friend helps her from car to terrace. She seems groggy. An accident? "Can I help?" he wants to say, but doesn't.

When next he sees her, weeks later, he stares. Her nose is new, pert, American, cute. He gapes. She smiles, confident in new loveliness. "Hi", still nasal. "Hello". He nearly stammers. "Lovely day", he adds. "Super". She tears off in her car. He washes the Alfa, spraying his feet with the hose. "Damn", he says.

One evening he sits in the front room with his whisky, and Mozart on the record player. A Triumph Sports draws up, maroon, glistening. A sticker on the rear window advertises a health and fitness centre. A man slithers out, shining too: tailored tracksuit, upper body moulded by weights, tinted by sunlamps. His gaze lingers on his image in the side-mirror. Studiously, as though expecting applause, he strolls to her door. Perhaps he models clothes. "Hi", the watcher hears her say. The door shuts.

Another evening, returning from his office, he finds them in the park — stretched upon the grass eating fish and chips from the paper, hands to mouths. He wonders how much cossetting, how many careful salads missed meals are obliterated by one seductive, greasy bundle: a public defiance of a private discipline. She doesn’t notice him, but as he walks home her twanging laughter jangles in discordant pursuit.
The Triumph stays late. He knows it will be there in the morning. He feels the roll of flesh cuddling his belt and wonders if jogging might help. His glass needs refilling. He reaches for the bottle — finds it empty. He has another in the kitchen.
A Whiff of Brimstone

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills .... young hills, the jagged edges not yet worn off, mountains even, and splendid, rimming the small plain of the town with their haphazard crenellations. Always different, say the locals. You never get tired of them. They change every five minutes, so many moods. Blue and soft, or harsh and brown, smudged planes or stiff escarpments, shadows chasing or snow smoothing. Everlasting shifting patterns under the wheeling sky.

Meg, walking along the dusty road to the town, village rather, does not agree with the locals. She is tired of the bloody hills already. That is because she has a jaundiced eye. Oh, they are beautiful, no doubt, and their monumental jaggedness can soothe. But you cannot build a whole existence on a moving view. No help at all comes from them to deal with a life where nothing happens; they offer no incidence or accidence to fill her voids.

The dust stirs about her, though she is walking with a flat-footed paddling motion in order to avoid picking it up into her sandals, under her dress, into her nose and eyes. There could be a footpath, but here it is waist-high in seeding grass. Pretty seeds, complex and delicate in structure; she could pick some and put them in a large pottery vase. But that would be a cliche, and she wishes to avoid cliche above all else. Not to mention boring; she likes her plants and flowers to be ephemeral, to be alive and die, since that is their essential charming nature.

She has little business in the village. The freezer is stocked with meat, bought economically in the city, the garden with vegetables. Thermae (how erudite the founding fathers were, though they might have thought again had they foreheard the locals pronouncing it Thermy) is in the middle of nowhere, a beautiful nowhere of mountains and native beech forest. You have to take hot springs where you can find them and be grateful. The sulphur bubbles up through the earth and permeates the whole town with its dirty yellow smell.

"How boring," says Meg to her husband David who having brought her here suffers mutely her attacks on the place. "Nothing but shabby old sulphurous pools. Not any decent thermal activity. No boiling mud. No geysers. No incipient volcanoes. No Champagne Pools or Devil's Cauldrons. Not to mention a Hell's Gate. Even geographically nothing's happening in this hole."
Commercially there's not much either. Thermae has an old fashioned grocer's shop (you almost expect him to weigh out sugar and biscuits by the pound, while you sit on a tall bentwood chair, but alas he never does) and a minute supermarket, both equally expensive. (It's the freight, say the shopkeepers. It's killing.) There's a garage, and a Boutique which has dresses and sheets and cosmetics, some shoes and even books. There's a coffee shop struggling to life, calling itself The Emporium in memory of an ancient predecessor. An antique shop: the town's only trade is tourist. A post office, quite new, with a postman to match. A bank open twice a week for several hours. This is one side of the main street. On the other, disguised with parks and giant trees, are the town's two great institutions, its raison d'être: the hospital and the hotel, the Thermae Rest House for the Disturbed and the Hydro-Alpine of departed glory. The hospital used to be a tuberculosis sanatorium, but now that there are more diseased minds than lungs about it has changed function, and the hotel is no longer the elegant watering place it once was. The town worries about it. They are both built around the hot springs; patients and guests alike can bathe in the salubrious waters, but of course in separate establishments.

But Meg hasn't got to this hub of things yet. She is still trudging along through the dust and heat — Thermae's summer being short but intense — thinking that 35 is too young for her life to be over. Suddenly she is engulfed in extra dust, clouds of it, and a voice with an air of prestidigitation is saying from the centre of it:

"Like a lift?"
"Well, it's only another two hundred yards ..."
"Better than walking. Jump in."

The dust clears enough to show the shape of a landrover. She climbs in beside Tony, who works in the forests in summer and will be a ski-instructor in the winter when the sports flourish. She knows who he is and he knows who she is, though they have never met. Thermae is that sort of place.

"Got a lot of business in the village?" he says.
"Hardly any," she sighs.

She is in fact going to buy a stamp and post a letter to her daughter Melissa who is at boarding school in Christchurch. It didn't seem fair to condemn her to a 40 mile bus trip to the next town's doubtless indifferent high school, so they left her behind almost a year ago when they came to Thermae. "But a walk fills in the time. You've got to do something in this god-forsaken place." She laughs distastefully.

He knows what she means. "I'll tell you what, you go and do what you have to and meet me here in ten minutes. I'm going up Little Sugarloaf, and you could come for the ride."
"Why not," she says.

Little Sugarloaf is a small conical hill on the edge of town. The only road up is a forestry track, kept locked; everybody else has to walk up a pretty mountain path. It's worth it for the view.
"Your husband's at the loony bin," says Tony.

She looks at his brawny brown arms covered with silver down as they wrestle the land-rover up the track.
"Well, yes," she says.
“I said at, not in,” he laughs, turning towards her his crinkled brown face, suntanned summer and winter, smiling with large teeth and light blue eyes under his cap of hair, silvery too. Normal values seemed reversed in his face: hair and eyes so pale, skin so dark.

“Yes, I know. It’s just so funny to hear it called that. Everybody I meet is so careful about the words they use for the place and the patients.”

“He’s head shrink, isn’t he,” says Tony.

“Head shrink at the loony bin. You’ve put it in a nutshell.”

“Does he like his job?” says Tony curiously.

“He adores it. It’s absolutely what he’s always wanted to do. He’s been writing a book for years and this gives him all the scope he needs.” She does not like to sound so bitter.

“But not you.”

She hears herself telling him, this brawny young man with the outdoorsface and the smile that seems to lap around her, not just polite, in fact not polite at all, about her lovely job in Christchurch; perfect, teaching English part-time in a very intellectual girls’ school, but of course hardly a career like David’s. And since she believes husbands and wives should stick together, here she is. In bloody Thermae. Footloose and fancy free.

“I mean, without a job, and none of the things you can do in a city: theatre and cinema and museums and coffee shops and libraries. It’s an awful change.”

Why is she telling him all this? He will call it culture and find it the most unattractive thing in the world. He’ll be thinking she’s a boring old blue-stocking. Dull. Stuffy.

What he is thinking is the difference between her face and her shape. He’s stopped out of devilment; here’s another old duck, why not give her a lift. And then when she gets in he’s seen that her face doesn’t go with her rather stocky middle-aged body, with its broad hips and heavy breasts. It’s not just that it’s youthful and unlined, or that the dark hair is beautifully cut to frame it. It’s a quality of being at the beginning of experience rather than the end of it, an air of perhaps pleasurable expectation. When she looks at that face in her bathroom mirror she thinks that possibilities might still lie in wait for it. And she desairs even more of Thermae.

Tony doesn’t think all this. He observes a girlish face on a mature body, and finds it titillating.

“But tell me about you,” she says.

Oh, there’s nothing to that. He’s 22, and Australian, of course she knew that as soon as he opened his mouth. His father has a ski-lodge at Thredbo which is how he knows about ski-ing. He wanted him to go to university and he tried it for a couple of years, but what was the point. It all seemed such a waste of time. So he’s going about the world slowly. He’ll stay here for the winter, then head north, go to America and across to Europe, to Austria and see the family, and Switzerland, and when the time comes he’ll go home and take over the lodge from his father.

“You have family in Austria?”

“Oh yes. My parents are Austrian. Can’t you tell by the name?”

“But I don’t know your name.” She laughs.
"Tony Baumwold." He spells it. "Make sure you say it right," he says. "I had trouble with the kids at school. They'd pretend there's no a. But they pretty soon got the message." He's proud of this.

She tries it out. "Tony Bumwold ... oh, I see." She laughs again, immoderately. She's rather pleased that he should warn her against such vulgarity. Tony waves a fist under her nose, briefly. He needs two hands for keeping the land-rover on the wretched track.

The views are spectacular. They get out at the top and walk up to the Gazebo. The town is down below and the rim of hills from this height even more monumental. Going back to the car she stumbles, and Tony catches her arm, holds on to it until the roughness is past.

"Let's stop off at the Hydro-Alpine for a drink," he says, but she has found his taking her arm so pleasing that propriety demands she say no.

"Another time," he says, and before propriety can interfere she says yes.

It's the next day. She is walking to the village to see if the antique shop has got anything amusing, and he is on his way up to the Adelaide Falls to check on firebreaks. Afterwards they have their first and only drink at the Hydro-Alpine.

This splendiferous old spa hotel has got distinctly tatty. The wealthy no longer stay there, they prefer the modern motel, and the poorer like the motor camp with its natty little cabins. So the hotel is a great lumbering liability, and a source of endless argument. Pour millions of dollars into it and make it fit again for the rich? Very risky. Pull it down and build luxury flats? But it's a monument. In the meantime only the bar does a good trade.

Meg and Tony sit on the verandah and drink beer and talk. They talk and talk. She is amazed to find there is so much to say. They arrange to meet again next day.

She goes home, and eventually her husband comes in at his usual late hour full of his usual cool enthusiasm about his day. Over dinner he talks to her, news of the hospital, some gossip, really just a letting off of some of the steam of excitement his work generates in him. After dinner he gets out his notes for the book he is writing. Before he can get immersed in them she says quickly:

"I'm not really finding Thermae any easier to cope with, you know."

"You need something to do. It's idleness that's responsible for boredom, as I don't need to tell you."

"What about the idea of a job at the hospital?"

"I'm keeping my eye open, but it's a matter of being patient. Waiting for something to turn up. Can't be seen to be uxorious." He smiles. He likes little jokes with erudite words.

"Being patient is a pretty boring pastime too."

"What you need is a hobby. Some craft work? Weaving, or pottery. Or painting. Or what about writing? After all, you were an English teacher."

"You're right, of course. What I need is a hobby," she says, and David goes gratefully back to his notes.

No need to plot on with this any further. Of course Meg and Tony become lovers. Now they are careful. Don't sit on the verandah of the Hydro-Alpine drinking. Never meet in the main street. She takes one of the paths into the forest, and he picks her up there. Luckily it's summer, and doesn't often rain.
Their favourite place is the Mountain Beech forest. He takes a rug and they do the most amazing things on it — well off the beaten track, of course. Tony is something of a connoisseur of love-making; he’s read all the right books and had plenty of practice, in all positions. “With all those snow bunnies, I suppose,” she gibes. He in turn is amused by her amazement. “You married to a shrink and stuck in the old missionary position!” She blushes to think she has thus betrayed David. “Not at all,” she says, but he guffaws and doesn’t believe her.

He teaches her to enjoy the generosities of her own body. His is muscular and hard, the contrast pleases them both. He’s never made love to an older woman before. “Cushiony,” he calls her, “pneumatic”. It’s all slightly shameful, but she enjoys it. Afterwards they lie and look up at the tall trees above them. They give an elemental quality to their passion, as though it is something primitive and pure, not decadent and feather-bedded.

The beech tree trunks are covered with fine black plush and from it hang sweet silky threads. It’s called honeydew, he says, and puts out his tongue to lick it up. It tastes lovely, and after that they play games with delicate tongues licking the sweet honeydew.

That night she tells David about this marvellous phenomenon of the native forest. Thinking starry-eyed and changing the pronoun to suit, “And she on honeydew hath fed / And drunk the milk of paradise”. She’s so full of pleasure, she has to say something. And anyway studying the forest is her new hobby. He knows all about the stuff.

“It’s just scale, you know. An ugly pest. Remember in the Christchurch garden we used to spray with white oil to get rid of it. An insect. You get that nasty black stuff, and somehow they extract the sap from the tree and exude it. God knows why it should be given so ludicrously romantic a name. Doesn’t sound as though your study of the forest is very informed.”

After that she is kept busy not just with meeting Tony and the subterfuges involved but with swotting up on native forests in order to appear suitably knowledgeable. And of course there is Thermae’s social life. This is quite copious, with dinners and parties and drinks and things at the golf club and meals at the one surprisingly good restaurant. The only thing is it’s always the same people, and there’s nothing to do but drink and talk, and the conversation is always the same, gossip and shop: forestry shop, or hospital, and a bit of shopkeeper’s. The gossip doesn’t have even that variety. It is almost entirely adulterous.

Coming home late and inevitably drunk from one of these parties Meg grizzles to David.

“So bloody dull. Same parties same gossip same dull round of infidelities adulteries bed-hopping. Boring boring boring.”

Like all unfaithful spouses she believes she has been successful in hiding her own affair, unlike those other careless transparent shameless creatures.

“It’s the absence of art and cinema and theatre; people have to make their own. That’s all your arts are, you know, the sublimation of the same old boring passions.”

“Yes, but sublimation is everything.”
“Well, you’re the expert.”

Nature takes a hand in their affair, and turns out wet. They try the back of the land-rover, but it’s full of lumpy tools and very dirty. It feels sordid. Meg imagines a large headline: Local Couple FoundCopulating in Landrover. Tony has an inspiration. The pools. The famous thermal pools.

“Urk,” says Meg. She does not care for the pools. There are three of them, at temperatures of 38, 39, and 40 degrees, large discs about 15 feet across; in them the sulphurous water sits viscous and dense and murky and the smell of sulphur fills the air. It is reputed to be good for arthritis and rheumaticky problems. To one side is a notice, attached to the wall of the dressing rooms:

ATTENTION
Amoebic meningitis
DANGER
patrons are requested
to keep ears noses eyes and heads
out of the water
no running, jumping, diving, splashing

There are benches around the inside edges of these pools, and the bathers sit on them quite motionless with just their heads protruding from the water. They look like a stargazey pie.

What’s a stargazey pie? It’s a herring pie in a round dish; you arrange the fish in a circle with their heads poking up over the edge and cover the middle with a piecrust. You don’t eat the heads, which is why they are outside the pie; they’re left on while they cook for their oil to run down and baste their bodies and make the pie rich. You can’t waste something so nourishing. Just so these leathery brown heads stick out of the opaque yellow piecrust of the pool. But they’re hardly gazing at the stars or even the sky; their eyes are inert, drooped shut or staring lifelessly into the water. Perhaps waiting to catch a meningitis amoeba unawares.

“I can’t imagine anything worse.” Meg shudders, thinking of all those fishy heads. “And it wouldn’t be private, not even in the rain.”

“No, the public pools, idiot, the spout pools.”

“Oh. Meg is still doubtful. The spout pools (“Why are they called that?” “I dunno,” says Tony) are for private bathing, for those who do not wish to exhibit their arthritis to the general public, or who wish to bathe naked. They are roofed and walled, but roughly; there are gaps between to let the sulphurous airs escape. They may not be dramatically named Devil’s Cauldrons but there is a whiff of him here, not Monsieur the Prince of Darkness elegant and subtle but of his vulgar medieval demons, capering, malicious, jokey, shaking horns and pointing tails in steaming clouds of brimstone. Fire and brimstone destroying the wicked cities of the plain. Burning lakes and sulphurous pools and fallen
angels lolling there. Sitting in their effluent one can believe that hell is not far away.

Naturally Meg says nothing of these literary fancies to Tony, and is persuaded that the spout pools are a good idea. They meet there, surreptitiously, arriving and leaving separately, enjoying the dangerous sauce of clandestinity to their couplings. Which are great fun. Their movements in the water must be slow and deliberate to prevent splashing (attention the dreaded amoeba) so their bodies in the warm dense water that laps and holds them achieve a fluid dreamlike movement that easily suggests ecstasy. They become quite addicted to the spout pools, but discretion, or anyway their version of it, obliges their use only in bad weather.

David and Meg still go to parties and dinners and drinks. David is still assembling notes for his book. One night as they sit as usual in their charming sitting room, David at his vast desk in the bow window, Meg reading in an armchair with her feet tucked under her, he says suddenly,

“And how are you sylvan studies going?”

He has to repeat the question before she works out what he means. And she’s been forgetting to bone up on useful forest facts lately.

“Oh, as usual. It gets more fascinating the more you go into it.”

“I can imagine,” says David. He smiles. “You know, you’re absolutely right about this dictionary. It is a mine of amazing information.”

His finger jabs down at her Shorter Oxford Dictionary, open in front of him. They used to argue about its merits, he criticising its old-fashionedness and lack of scientific precision, she defending its literary and historical qualities. “Listen to this. I happen to come across the word ‘thermal’. Of or pertaining to the nature of thermae or hot springs.” Well, I suppose we all knew that. Living in this eponymous town. But there’s more. Meaning number 3: thermal equals “heated with passion, erotic, passionate, impassioned”. Isn’t that charming?

“Hardly a common use of it,” she says. “I’ve never heard it in that context.”

“Maybe. But it exists. That’s the important thing. And ought to be resurrected.”

Were she in a less thermal state herself she might suspect disingenuousness and indeed irony in this sudden dictionary enthusiasm, but her euphoria is almost impregnable. Not totally. A slight unquiet pierces it.

“We must be careful,” she says to Tony.

“We are.”

“But very careful.”

“Why, does you husband suspect?”

“Oh no. I should hope not.”

Meg though dimly is aware of potentialities of disaster. There is no future with Tony, even her besottedness sees that. Her future is with David, and doubtless just as well. But she can only survive by deliberately not thinking: of Tony off to see the rest of the world, of winter when the snow comes and he blossoms into a glamorous ski instructor, and where will they make love then? The poplars are golden already, already there is a melancholy chill in the air. The warmth of the spout pools is welcome. Greedily she sucks at the present.
“Of course we’re safe. I just felt nervous for a bit. But it doesn’t matter. I was being silly. Forget it.”

The thick sulphurous water supports them. Their love-making is elaborate and entranced. Meg allows herself to swoon into ecstasy. And slips under the yellow water. She bucks violently, churning up heavy wallowing waves in her panic to turn herself round and get her head up out of the water, but it’s in her nose her eyes her mouth her ears. She spits and hawks and forces sneezes but cannot spew out the vile yellow taste. She vomits but it’s still there. She sits snivelling with her head on her knees; already amoebae swim blindly towards her brain. She sits clumsily naked, shivering, her hair in rats’ tails about her head, her face buried. She is ugly, and Tony is embarrassed.

“Never mind,” he says, vaguely patting.

“The symptoms,” she shrieks. “The symptoms! What are the symptoms! What does it do to you!”

“I dunno.”

“You fool. Fool.”

“Death, usually. Or one becomes a vegetable. Pretty lethal one way or another. Attacks the brain, of course. The reason it’s called amoebic meningitis. Why?”

“Oh, I just wondered.” She has carefully painted her face to hide her bedragglement. “Thinking of that notice in the pools. Seems rather dangerous to let people use them at all.”

“Only if you’re foolish enough to put your head under the water. The amoeba is ingested through the nose. And of course you could be lucky. It’s not guaranteed, just possible, that you’ll catch it if you go breathing in the spring water. Which of course nobody does, so it’s quite safe.” David looks at her narrowly.

She looks subdued. Even miserable. Quite a change from the simmering gaiety of the past weeks.

Of course she isn’t lucky. She doesn’t expect to be. In the night her temperature goes up alarmingly, she tosses and moans and talks to the strange fancies in her head. She slips between sleeping and waking, is aware of attention. People feeling and listening, cajoling with pills and drinks and spoonfuls of soup, her body inert and her mind already dying, its delicate precision no match for the invincible amoeba, the most primitive of all life easily defeating the most sophisticated.

But her brain doesn’t give in without a struggle. It puts on a show of its most gaudy pyrotechnics, determined to go in a blaze of colour and fantasy. Sometimes these are abstract: whirling op-art patterns that draw her into their vortices, tunnels of threatening colour through which she falls, endlessly accelerating. Sometimes they are representational, though in the most nightmarish sense: fiery rains of brimstone falling into burning lakes that wallow up in great yellow floods to destroy delicate cities, a yellow-haired angry god breathing sulphur flowers of flame upon puny disporting bodies that are consumed utterly, monstrous horned shapes chuckling frenetically on the fringes of her inward vision. There is no escape from the horrors. She is possessed.
Until the funeral. This is calm, even elegant. The day is grey, the sky ready to weep; against it the mountains carve their violent purple monuments of stone. The mourners wear black, the women mysterious in veils; the trees except for the sombre conifers are bare. All colour is gone from the world, but the light is faint and pearly. This gives the scene its elegant filmic quality; the patterns are arranged by an artistic eye. It moves in on the coffin, and there is a blaze of white lilies; the ebony box is covered with sheafs of these fleshy emblems. The eye moves closer, discovering in their midst the face of Meg, eyes closed, slightly expectant; possibilities may still lie in wait.

She opens her eyes, and David is there, grinning a bit.
"How long have I got?" she asks, her lips thin with terror.
"For what?" He is gentle, coddling.
She is irritated. The dying deserve a little more sensitivity.
"To live." The crude words flutter out like a last breath.
"Oh, quite some decades, I should imagine."
Her eyes flap open. There's still strength enough for amazement.
"People don't die of pneumonia, not these days, not at your age and state of health." His precision qualifies. But then he's always been something of a pedant.
"Pneumonia ...."
"Yes. Fevers, hallucinations, crises, the whole works. But you're on the mend now." He looks at her sternly. "Doubtless you got wet, cold, did something foolish ...."
"Yes." She's so weak with illness plus relief, a violent positive grateful flooding relief that she is alive and likely to remain so, that she can hardly speak. "Very foolish."
"You must be more careful in the future."
Dear David. His irony is good for her guilt.

Meg's convalescence is quite quick, as befits one of her usual health and strength. She sits in the sun in the living room and reads a little, but mostly thinks. She often raises her eyes to the hills .... from whence cometh my help .... She doesn't think so. Yet the locals are right; they are fascinating, they do change endlessly as the minutes pass, and given a properly quiescent body and brain do give comfort to the restless eye. And soon the snow will come.

But in the end the help comes from David. "I've got a job in Christchurch," he says. "In the spring. I'll have done enough here by then. I can write up the stuff back at home; conditions will really be better for that there."

Tony is never mentioned. She wishes never to see him again and imagines he shares her sentiments; certainly they never meet. She doesn't know what David knows; presumably all, from her ravings under the fever. He doesn't seem to need to talk about it. She is grateful and full of love for him.

So they leave Thermae, where the brimstone bubbles out of the earth, and return to the civilised green lawns of Christchurch, where there is other than adultery to pass the time, and Meg becomes again a virtuous busy wife.
"At present, the phenomena of butchering, drowning and leaving to die female infants have been very serious." (The People's Daily, Peking, March 3rd, 1983).

They say a child with two mouths is no good.
In the slippery wet, a hollow space,
Smooth, gumming, echoing wide for food.
No wonder my man is not here at his place.

In the slippery wet, a hollow space,
A slit narrowly sheathed within its hood.
No wonder my man is not here at his place:
He is digging for the dragon jar of soot.

That slit narrowly sheathed within its hood!
His mother, squatting coughs by the fire's blaze
While he digs for the dragon jar of soot.
We had saved ashes for a hundred days.

His mother, squatting, coughs by the fire's blaze.
The child kicks against me mewing like a flute.
We had saved ashes for a hundred days,
Knowing, if the time came, that we would.

The child kicks against me crying like a flute
Through its two weak mouths. His mother prays,
Knowing when the time comes that we would,
For broken clay is never set in glaze.

Through her two weak mouths his mother prays.
She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood,
For broken clay is never set in glaze:
Women are made of river sand and wood.
She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood.
My husband frowns, pretending in his haste
Women are made of river sand and wood.
Milk soaks the bedding. I cannot bear the waste.

My husband frowns, pretending in his haste.
Oh clean the girl, dress her in ashy soot!
Milk soaks our bedding, I cannot bear the waste.
They say a child with two mouths is no good.
ETHEL WEBB

Deserted

Evenings are the worst.  
Brandied television  
fills space of his leaving.

She laughs, knowing she can  
turn handsprings on the carpet  
if she chooses.  
No question

Yet she wakes from sleep screaming.  
Then snuggles into grey dawn  
thanking Heaven for the space  
of his leaving.
Angels For Charlie

Angels are in you
wings open
to embrace the start of day
Angels lift bones
from your bag
of dreams
interconnecting
all working parts
and walk you
to breakfast half awake —
who else pours
the milk? spreads
the jam?
Angels For Alice

Seraphim sing in the flutes
of your bones
Chagall's angels play
your violin

So
here are the angels of your moods:
hellfire angel of your
dark anger;
angel of laughter
when your spirit sings;
angel of dance
in your shining grace.

You brush their wings
in our kitchen
as you practise
song and dance.

Tribal angels amongst us
gossip
in this meeting place
EMMANUEL S. NELSON

Black America and the Australian Aboriginal Literary Consciousness

Literary influence appears to be most frequent and most fruitful at the times of emergence of national literatures...[when] authors may seek in form or ideology [from foreign sources] that which they can adapt or transmute for their own consciousness, time or nation.

--Joseph Shaw

Models come from your encountering a work in which you recognize a kinship, and that helps you.

--Galway Kinnell

There is general consensus among Australian critics that American literature, particularly during the last few decades, has exerted a considerable influence on Australian writing. Recent works such as Joseph Jones' Radical Cousins (1976) and Joan Kirkby's The American Model (1982) examine in detail this American impact on Australia. Such a literary connection between the two nations, even the extent of it, should not come as a surprise; it is, after all, a part of the much larger international pattern of American cultural influence. However, studies that explore the impact of the cultures and literatures of American ethnic minorities on related or comparable minority groups in other countries are yet to be undertaken. Fay Zwicky's poignantly personal essay titled "Democratic repression and the admission of difference: the ethnic strain",3 in which she speaks of the liberating effect of Jewish American literature on her private quest not only for a Jewish identity in an Anglo-oriented culture but also for her identity as a Jewish writer in Australia, is a brilliant step in that direction. My paper, though not personal, has a related objective: to examine the significance of black America in the context of Australian Aboriginal literary consciousness.
The similarities between the Afro-American and Aboriginal Australian experiences — historical as well as contemporary — are substantial enough to warrant a comparative study: both black Americans and Aboriginal Australians share a common colour; both are colonized peoples; both have essentially lost their pre-colonial cultures and languages; both are minorities in their respective countries; both have long histories of violent contact with whites; and both continue to face varying degrees of white racism.

While these similarities are significant, one should also acknowledge the vast differences between the two groups. Though they share a common colour, they are racially unrelated. While the Aborigines were defeated and colonized on their own land, Afro-Americans were enslaved and transported to an alien continent. They differ in their numerical strength: the Aborigines constitute less than two-percent of the Australian population whereas nearly twelve-percent of Americans are African in origin. In contrast to black Australians, black Americans are a powerful minority group: they are largely literate; they enjoy, relatively speaking, a high standard of living; they have an influential and articulate middle-class; they have thousands of elected public officials and hundreds who hold key positions in the American power structure; and they have, especially because of their spectacular successes in the sports arena and in the entertainment industry, become a dominant force in the American popular culture.

The similarities which the black Australian perceives between himself and his American counterparts are likely to generate in him at least a vague sense of emotional identification. However, what captures his imagination is the crucial difference that exists: the considerable political clout and cultural power that blacks are perceived to enjoy in the United States. The coherently orchestrated militancy which black Americans displayed during the sixties and the quiet assertiveness they have shown more recently appeal to the Aboriginal consciousness. The largely successful Afro-American struggle for civil rights provides the Aboriginal Australian with an exemplary model for personal and collective liberation. The militant assertiveness of the modern black American sensibility inspires the black Australian who faces not so dissimilar dilemmas. Of course, as one might expect, the influence of black America is restricted primarily to those detribalized urban Aborigines who have some level of literacy and who possess a self-conscious awareness of their Aboriginality. (The plight of tribal Aborigines resembles that of American Indians, not American blacks.) The Afro-American influence is particularly strong on those who are politically informed; hence its manifestation is most prominent in Aboriginal politics where its function is largely inspirational. Since all well-known Aboriginal writers, such as Kevin Gilbert, Colin Johnson, Jack Davis and Kath Walker, are detribalized, urban, literate, racially aware and politically informed individuals, they constitute the group that is most likely to be receptive to black American influence.

Before we can grasp the Afro-American influence on individual Aboriginal writers, we need to understand the substantial interactions that have taken place between black America and black Australia during the last few decades. Although black American entertainers, especially those associated with theatre
groups, had performed in Australia since the middle of the nineteenth century, it was not until the Second World War that American and Australian blacks came into any significant contact. The war led to massive American military presence in Australia and hundreds of black soldiers were a segregated part of that presence. During the sixties the Australian media, particularly television, substantially — and perhaps inadvertently — enhanced Aboriginal awareness of black America. The frequently violent civil rights struggle in the United States received extensive television coverage in Australia. Since an overwhelming majority of urban Aborigines had access to television sets, it is likely that scenes of violent black revolt in America, presented in visually striking images of massive demonstrations, large-scale riots and brutal police responses, had an emotional impact on the Aboriginal consciousness. Subsequent reports that blacks were forcing sweeping social and political reforms in America also perhaps played a role in increasing the Aboriginal discontent with the then Australian racial realities.

There is also a considerable body of evidence that proves direct political links between black America and black Australia. Delmos Jones and Jacquetta Hill-Burnett, both American sociologists, argue that an unnamed member of the American Black Panthers visited Australia in the late sixties and conferred with many prominent Aboriginal activists. It was followed by a series of visits by black Australians to America. For example, Bruce McGuinness, Bob Maza, Patsy Kruger, Jack Davis and Sol Beller attended the African Peoples Conference held in Atlanta in 1970. Among the black American activists they met were Jesse Jackson, Ben Johnson, Whitney Young and Ralph Abernathy. Upon their return to Australia it was obvious that the Aboriginal leaders had been greatly inspired by the Afro-American model of resistance to oppression; many of them, in fact, began to articulate their racial anger in rhetoric that was almost identical to that of the American Black Power activists. Characteristically Afro-American expressions such as "Uncle Tom", "Black is Beautiful", "right on, brothers and sisters", "honkie" and "talking black and sleeping white" began to appear with insistent regularity in the speeches and writings of many young and angry Aborigines like Paul Coe, Bobby Sykes, Denis Walker and Bruce McGuinness. Encouraged by the black American willingness to use violence to achieve social and political rights, many young Aborigines began to speak of violence against white Australians. In 1972 the Black Panther Party of Australia, patterned after its Afro-American model, was established in Brisbane.

These political links and influences were reinforced by surprisingly extensive cultural contacts between black America and black Australia. During the late sixties and early seventies, several black American entertainers, many of whom were also politically active, visited Australia. For example, Harry Belafonte, while in Sydney, made it a point to visit the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs. Winifred Atwell, who took an active interest in the problems of black Australians, participated in a number of fund-raising concerts. Carol Johnson, a former member of the internationally reputed New York Negro Ensemble, was in Australia in 1972; in addition to working with the National Black Theatre in Sydney, she travelled extensively in the tribal areas of central and northern.
Black Australian artists too have visited the United States and interacted with their counterparts there. In the seventies Rosalyn Watson, member of an influential Aboriginal family in Brisbane, spent a year in New York with the Harlem Dance Company. In 1975 the Aboriginal Dance Group performed in the United States to enthusiastic reviews. Aboriginal actor-director, Bryon Syron, studied in New York City with Leslie Uggams (black American actress and activist) and worked with Lloyd Richards (the highly acclaimed black American director of the play *A Raisin in the Sun*). Syron's interesting observation that the Aboriginal theatre should develop in the way the black theatre has evolved in America in order to become the "soul of the country" underscores the vital similarity that he perceives between the experiences of blacks in Australia and in America.

It is in the context of such significant political, personal artistic connections between black America and the Aboriginal elite that one has to examine the Afro-American influence on individual Aboriginal writers. All prominent and well-established Aboriginal writers, such as Kevin Gilbert, Colin Johnson, Jack Davis and Kath Walker, evince varying degrees of responsiveness to black American influence. This influence, however, tends to be primarily psychological; direct literary influence, though it does occur, is generally minor.

Among the four major Aboriginal writers, Kevin Gilbert shows the least degree of direct Afro-American influence. This fact is rather surprising, since he is clearly the most militant among black writers in Australia. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest indirect, psychological influence of black America on Gilbert. He has considerable interest in the black American experience. He has broad familiarity with Afro-American literature and quotes from the works of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X. He perceives a clear parallel between the experiences of blacks in Australia and in the United States. While he recognizes the uniqueness of Australian racism which he considers to be different from "the sex-obsessed racism of the United States", he insists that both types of racism have the same "practical results on the psychology of blacks". In his call for violent Aboriginal resistance to white thuggery, he evokes the Afro-American model of retaliation:

> In the USA, whenever white society does another rotten thing to blacks, black resentment expresses itself by dragging whites out of cars and giving them a hiding, or summer ghetto riots, or by firing a building full of white tenants.

Then he goes on to recommend similar tactics, suitably modified for Australian conditions, as an effective way to minimize white mistreatment. The images of black American violence that Gilbert uses in this passage are particularly interesting: "dragging whites out of cars and giving them a hiding", "summer ghetto riots", "firing a building full of white tenants". They are highly selective and sensational images that are clearly media-derived.
But Gilbert is also cautious, perhaps realistic, in his attitude toward Afro-America. While he considers black Americans to be brothers in struggle, he expects little concrete assistance from them. He feels that "the best profit that Aborigines can make of other blacks in other countries is in the sphere of opinion-making".15

This cautiousness perhaps explains the lack of any evidence of direct Afro-American literary influence on Gilbert's poetry. As an Aboriginal nationalist perhaps he wishes to emphasize the unique features of the black experience in Australia. Although one may hear faint echoes of the aggressively defiant poetry of Claude McKay, Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baraka in some of his more militant poems such as "Look, Koori", the similarities are probably a result of the writers' shared posture of militant resistance rather than a matter of direct influence.

Like Kevin Gilbert, Colin Johnson has a substantial familiarity with black American writing. The authors whom he admires most are Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver — two of the most militant figures of the sixties.16 He is familiar with the works of Malcolm X as well. In a 1975 interview he compares himself with Malcolm X and asserts that "his life and my life are roughly similar, except that I didn't have the Ku Klux Klan riding down when I was being born".17

Johnson also has considerable interest in Afro-American music. In a 1959 letter to Mary Durack, his white Australian friend who wrote the foreword to his novel *Wild Cat Falling*, he says

> I also still feel Rock and Roll and Jazz, and dance and sway to them. I can be moved with the Blues and cry with the Negroes of old.18

He continues to have an enthusiastic interest in black American music. He still listens to the soul music of the sixties, particularly to groups like The Temptations. He is also interested in "rap", a specifically urban black American music that became popular in the late seventies.19

Johnson’s interest in the blues is particularly significant because the blues profoundly influences the thematic as well as narrative structures of his first novel *Wild Cat Falling*. Clearly one of the greatest contributions of black Americans to world culture, the blues is an art form that evolved out of the Africans’ nightmarish experience in America. A uniquely Afro-American art form, the blues is a musical articulation of private anguish. Ralph Ellison defines the term most eloquently:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.20

Johnson uses the blues in *Wild Cat Falling* to define the protagonist’s feelings of anguish and to reinforce the theme of alienation that is central to the novel. Interwoven into the narrative are bits of five different blues songs. On each occasion the introduction of the blues poignantly underscores the narrator's
desolate sense of isolation. For example, while he is out on the streets of Perth, with little money and no friends, he hears bits of a song that are being played in a record store:

Out in the streets again, I dawdle past a music shop from which comes the sound of a familiar song... *Trouble in mind. I'm blue.*... A solitary drummer beats a slow death beat behind the words. A slow saxophone wails out in long drawn notes of pain. Blue shades of sorrowing dark people, all with trouble in mind.... The voice of an old-young negress singing into my heart... *Trouble in mind.*

In addition to emphasizing the theme of loneliness, the blues shapes the structure of the work as well; in fact, *Wild Cat Falling* can be viewed as an extended blues song. The novel has several characteristics of this black American music form. For example, the novel, like the blues, is narrated in the first person and it is cast in the autobiographical-confessional mode. The narratorial stance of the central character, like that of the blues artist, is one of tragi-comic detachment. Just as a blues singer, the narrator examines his painful condition and shares the details of his anguish with the audience. The tripartite structure of the novel too bears resemblance to the blues. A typical blues song follows three stages: the singer first indicates his sorrowful mood by introducing his private tale; then he reveals the depth of his personal pain by tragi-comically exploring it in detail; and he concludes the song with an assertion of transcendence through reconciliation with his painful condition. The narrative structure of *Wild Cat Falling* follows a similar pattern: the opening section, "Release", acquaints the reader with the narrator's recent imprisonment and his present state of hopelessness; the second part, "Freedom", tragi-comically probes his despair; the final section, "Return", ends with his coming to terms — at least tentatively — with his plight:

...but I feel different now. Like I was somebody else. Before I've always tried to run away. Why not stick around and face up to something for a change.22

A blues song, while it gives aesthetic shape to the singer's suffering, never ends on an unrealistic note of falsely romantic optimism. On the contrary, it concludes on a note of victory over pain by bringing pain under control by boldly confronting it. Like a classic piece of the blues, Johnson's novel ends on a note of triumph, though precarious, that is won through a momentary existential act of confronting oneself. Such a confrontation contains promise of new possibilities.

Jack Davis is another major Aboriginal writer whose works and views reflect Afro-American influence. Poet, playwright and civil rights activist, Davis has directed the Perth Aboriginal Centre, served as the president of the Aboriginal Advancement Council and edited the now defunct Aboriginal journal, *Identity*. He has traveled extensively in the United States from the Deep South to the ghettos of the urban industrial North: he was in Atlanta in 1970 as an Aboriginal delegate to the African Peoples Conference; he has walked the mean streets of Harlem.23
Davis's informed interest in Afro-American politics is evident in his works and interviews. His remarks on the roles played by Eldridge Cleaver, Sammy Davis Jr. and Sidney Poitier in the black American civil rights struggle suggest that he has more than cursory familiarity with that chapter in American social and political history.24 His affectionate reverence for Martin Luther King is obvious in his elegiac poem written soon after the renowned civil rights leader's assassination.25

Like Kevin Gilbert and Colin Johnson, Jack Davis perceives significant parallels between the experiences of blacks in America and in Australia. That he is inspired by the Afro-American model is evident in his argument that the Aborigines should emulate the black American example of achievement and "set up their own presses, their own television media, their own radio stations".26 While one of the characters in the play The Dreamers articulates his racial anger, he draws on the black American model of violent retaliation:

There should be more smashin' and burnin' of these cars! We'll make wadjellas [whites] sit up... They can't treat us Blackfellahs like that. We'll be like them fellas in America: we'll really get into these bastards.27

At least one of Davis's poems shows evidence of direct Afro-American literary influence. "Tribal Man in the City"28 bears striking resemblance to James Emanuel's widely anthologized poem "Negritude".29 The poems are similar not only in tone, structure, imagery and content but also in their richly evocative use of the word "Black". The similarities are too strong to be dismissed as coincidental:

Tribal Man in the City

Black is the night my mother bore me
Black her pain to give me birth
Black the wailing o'er me
Black my tribal death.

Black the sound of alien laughter
Black the twitch at a whispered word
Black the rage and black the after
Black the pain of plea unheard.

Black the days and nights of walking
Black the cities' loneliness
Black the fears for ever stalking
In concrete wilderness.
—Jack Davis (1978)
Negritude

Black is the first nail I ever stepped on;
Black the hand that dried my tears.
Black is the first old man I ever saw;
Black the burden of his years.

Black is waiting in the darkness;
Black the ground where hoods have lain.
Black the sorrow-misted story;
Black the brotherhood of pain.

Black is a quiet iron door;
Black the path that leads behind.
Black is a detour through the years;
Black the diary of the mind.

Black is Gabriel Prosser’s knuckles;
Black is Sojourner’s naked breast.
Black is a schoolgirl’s breathless mother;
Black her child who led the rest.

Black is the purring of a motor;
Black the foot when the light turns green.
Black is last year’s dusty paper;
Black the headlines yet unseen.

Black is a burden bravely chanted;
Black cross of sweat for a nation’s rise.
Black is a boy who knows his heroes;
Black the way a hero dies.
--James Emanuel (1968)

Black American influence is also evident in the works of Kath Walker, Australia’s most popular Aboriginal poet. Like the other Aboriginal writers, she perceives an obvious parallel between black Australian and black American experiences:

When blacks are banned, as we know well,
From city cafe and hotel
The stink of Little Rock we smell.30
She too has interesting American connections. She has the distinction of being the first Australian writer to be inducted into the Mark Twain Literary Society of America. Her first collection of poems, *We Are Going*, sold sixteen editions in the United States within six months of its initial publication there. This American interest in her work is matched by Walker's own interest in the American, especially black American, literature. She states that her interest in Afro-American writers, which she says is part of her interest in ethnic literatures in general, stems from the fact that she shares with them the "same passion for rejecting oppression". She recognizes the "example and encouragement" of the militant black American writers of the sixties. In her interview with Julianne Schwenke, Walker points to Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin as writers whom she enjoys reading but singles out Amiri Baraka for special admiration. There are other sources of indirect influence too. For example, her son, Denis Walker, was instrumental in founding the Black Panther Party of Australia. Therefore, it is logical to assume that she has more than a casual acquaintance with the Panther ideology. Also, in the mid-seventies she travelled to Lagos, Nigeria, to attend the World Black Festival of Arts; her participation in this event, which brought her into the company of several prominent black intellectuals and which introduced her in a direct way with the concepts of Black solidarity and Third-Worldism, has had a significant impact on her consciousness.

Her interest in and praise for Amiri Baraka is particularly noteworthy. Baraka, a founder of the Black Arts Movement and the chief exponent of the Black Aesthetic, is one of America's most militant poets. Like Walker, he is a public poet who views his art as an instrument for liberation. She can, without difficulty, identify with his rhetoric of racial outrage; and she probably has relatively easy access to his poetry because much of it is forcefully clear. Against this background it is possible to grasp the pronounced shift in the tone of her recent poetry. Much of her early poetry, though occasionally angry, is largely conciliatory. Sometimes she naively trusts white liberals and expects them to be redeemers of the Aborigines:

All white well-wishers, in the end
On you our chiefest hopes depend.  

Sometimes her naivety is pathetic:

Gratefully we learn from you,
The advanced race.  

Suddenly caught up in the white man ways
Gladly and gratefully we accept.
Even when she writes relatively angry "protest" poems, such as "Aboriginal Charter of Rights" (1962) and "Colour Bar" (1964), the tone of protest is quite subdued.

In her most recent work, however, Walker sounds much more assertive. Her new cultural confidence may be due to numerous factors: her widespread popularity, her personal maturity, her fuller involvement with Aboriginal issues and the substantial civil rights gains made by the Aborigines during the last decade or so. But her acquaintance with Afro-American writing, especially the aggressive and angry poetry of the Black Arts Movement, and her personal contacts with black intellectuals (Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean and African) during her visits abroad have also certainly contributed to her new racial assertiveness. Representative of her new tone is one of her most recent poems, "Black Commandments"38, which unapologetically celebrates the legitimacy of the Aboriginal cultural consciousness:

Black Commandments

1. Thou shall gather thy scattered people together.
2. Thou shall work for black liberation.
3. Thou shall resist assimilation with all thy might.
4. Thou shall not become a black liberal in a white society.
5. Thou shall not uphold white lies in a black society.
6. Thou shall take back the land stolen from thy forefather.
7. Thou shall meet white violence with black violence.
8. Thou shall remove thyself from a sick white society.
9. Thou shall think black and act black.
10. Thou shall be black all the rest of thy days.

Many of the expressions in the poem are reminiscent of the militant Afro-American rhetoric of the late sixties and early seventies: "black liberals", "white lies", "sick white society", "think black", "act black", and "be black". The choice of the phrase "think black" is particularly interesting because it happens to be the title of a collection of poems by Don Lee, who, like Amiri Baraka, is a militant Afro-American cultural nationalist and a poet who enthusiastically endorses the Black Aesthetic. Equally interesting is Walker's seventh commandment: "Thou shall meet white violence with black violence". The conciliatory tone of her early poetry has given way to a call for retaliatory racial violence. She no longer "Gladly and gratefully" accepts white values but now commands her black readers to "think black", "act black", and "be black". This new racial assertiveness and cultural confidence evident in her poetry, no doubt, is at least partly due to the "example and encouragement" of Afro-American cultural nationalists.
While it is obvious that all four major Aboriginal writers evince some measure of responsiveness to the Afro-American model, I do not wish to suggest that they have an uncritical admiration for black America. Kevin Gilbert, for example, believes that black Americans are still too preoccupied with their own battles to offer any meaningful assistance to Aborigines in their struggle against Australian racism. The most that black Australians can expect from black Americans, according to Gilbert, are verbal assurances of solidarity. Colin Johnson, on the other hand, has self-proclaimed bias against black Americans; he feels that they are, in general, "tainted with Capitalism". He claims a greater sense of affinity with the Caribbean and African peoples.

Also evident among some Aboriginal writers, especially Kath Walker and Colin Johnson, is an unwillingness to explore in any detailed manner the influence of black America on their personalities and works. This reluctance is understandable, since influence may sometimes imply paucity of creative originality. Such an anxiety, though understandable, is unfounded; after all, even the greatest writers have freely acknowledged their indebtedness — psychological as well as intellectual — to other writers. The reluctance may also reflect certain racial sensitivity: as Ali Mazur points out, in an African context, it is "in the nature of nationalism to be inhibited in acknowledging a debt to foreign inspiration". Of course, what appears to be an unwillingness to admit influence could be merely unawareness: the writer being influenced may not always be consciously aware of it. The influence of the blues on the structure of Colin Johnson's *Wild Cat Falling*, for example, is more likely to be an unconscious than a conscious process.

While the degree of Afro-American influence on the general *Weltanshauung* of the four major Aboriginal writers varies, there are certain sharp similarities in their basic responses to black America. All of them recognize a striking parallel between the experiences of Afro-Americans and Aboriginal Australians. All four writers are inspired by the Afro-American model and they view black Americans as an effectively organized and militantly assertive minority group. The influence of black America on each of these writers is primarily psychological and only marginally literary. All of them cite individual black Americans — literary and/or political figures — whom they admire: Kevin Gilbert mentions Malcolm X and Frederick Douglass; Colin Johnson talks about Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver and Malcolm X; Jack Davis refers to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, among others; and Kath Walker cites Amiri Baraka, in addition to Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. What is worth noting is the fact that many of these black Americans are/were militant activists with a radical and uncompromising commitment to racial justice. Hence it is clear that the trait that Aboriginal writers most frequently associate with and admire in Afro-Americans is their militant resistance to oppression. It is the power that blacks are perceived to command in American culture, society and politics that most strongly inspires the modern black Australian consciousness and influences the contemporary Aboriginal literary sensibility.
NOTES

7. Ibid.
8. Identity, 1,6 (November 1972), 33.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
17. Bruce Bennett and Laurie Lockwood, "Colin Johnson: An Interview", Westerly, 3 (September 1975), 35.
18. Quoted by Mary Durack in her Forward to Colin Johnson's Wild Cat Falling (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1979), p. xii.
21. Wild Cat Falling, p. 48.
22. Ibid., p. 130.
25. Davis, Jagardoo, p. 17.
27. Quoted in Adam Shoemaker's "An Interview with Jack Davis", Westerly, 4 (December 1982), p. 113. These lines, inexplicably, were deleted from the final version of the play.
32. Ibid.
33. Julianne Schwenke, Audiotaped interview with Kath Walker, University of Queensland, Audiovisual Section, Tape No. 4, Side B.
34. Ibid.
39. Kevin Gilbert, Because a White Man'll Never Do It, p. 191.
41. Walker and Johnson, Personal letters to the author, dated 3.4.1985 and 4.7.1985 respectively.
Son Speaks to Father

"Father why do you love the red herefords
Why not sell the fat sheep

They grow old in your shadow
Soon no one will buy them
Is it because you know each one
by the name your own hand burned on its skin

The larch you planted thrives in rich soil
Great branches shelter the red hives
Roots bigger than your feet
lock the earth’s gate under them
Is that what you call love
The farmers laugh at you
Don’t you hear
Your animals die from old age
You owe money
to banks with calcified fingers
Our own mother is caged with you"

I watched you grow old in a geriatric home
a pension strapped to your waist
to keep your pants up
You did not need the mean light globe
above the bed
Although threadbare
almost blind
your eyes had just enough sight left
to see big bulls mount the heifers
rams touch ewes at night
calves rage about at dusk
white lambs playing under trees
in the country where you were always a stranger
Her Handbag

On Judgement Day she'll plead to have it —
I mean, what if she should need a Quickeze, Disprin, Vitamin C, Soother, tissue or spare dollar at the Gates?

Halfway there her resources, bound in leather, show a clutch of permits, accounts paid, sundry snaps, appointments for feet teeth hair dog, two cards from Gav and Mother's ruby ring. To hand, her chequebook assures.

Away from the scrabble of keys, Cie, Oroton and Parker, in one of a dozen separate housings (Lou's flattering request made a decade before lies in another) a token Saint Christopher, long forgotten, carries her years as once he bore the Christ-child so they say, across the stream to safety. Pinned and bonded, he honours the burden of commitment, a pledge to travelling on and on.
She, sneezing in the hallway, he standing on the lawn, hear the wind rush over tin, voices from the past; murmurings, whisperings, vignettes, the wind brings memories of family left back there, behind, in hometowns with boring cups of tea, (his father rattling the front door, her mother telephoning twice daily). The wind rushes around the house / she’s dropped a cigarette butt in the sink, “Thats what Chinese people look like from the air”, he thinks. They writhe, white bodies on white sheets, not yet asleep; toast & jam, tissues swimming in margarine. All that lies between their skin is one fat cigar & the after dark sigh. They used to be full of the grunt, she in flattsies & a sensible skirt weighed down with notions lit by him on a Q’land beach; now they own new wood panels, friends remark, “Well it looks good, only its laminex.”

Moving from each other like far flung plates, with mundane ritual & work syndromes, he motions to her, ”Just this afternoon, I wondered whether it was thin smoke or a thick spider web’s strand drifting across the yard.”

The wind roars all around the house.
Lasseter and the Red Nebuchadnezzar

He had guessed at seeing
it on two or three previous
occasions

it had appeared amongst the brush
and spinifex — a fire tumble.

Of course, there had been
numerous scrub fires over the
passing summers

but rarely (seen) at night

and rarely seen from the rise
of the reef rolling deep into
desert, vanishing and reappearing
with the sand dunes, burning
without fuel.
The Shire of Connel is to set up a Podiatry Clinic for the elderly. Cr Frank Sergant announced the Council’s decision at a business luncheon yesterday.

The clinic will be situated in the Ralph Phillips Memorial Senior Citizens’ Centre in Wallace St, Deakin.

“It will be the first of its kind in the State,” said Cr Sergant. “We have always prided ourselves on being bold and innovative in this Shire,” he added.

The clinic is intended primarily to meet the needs of the elderly. The service will be free for pensioners.

“A sizeable minority of our residents are well-aged,” said Cr Sergent. “And they have feet, most of them, that play up one way or another. Corns, bunions, fungal infections, ingrown toenails, poor circulation, fallen arches, dead nails, spur heels, blisters gone to fester — the list of feet ailments is infinite, and a podiatrist will be able to tend the lot,” Cr Sergant said.

Cr Sergant stressed that use of the clinic would not be restricted to the elderly. Younger members of the community could avail themselves of the podiatrist’s services for a nominal fee.

“Youngsters have trouble with their feet too,” Cr Sergant said. “The Council is not unsympathetic to them.

“My grandson is a case in point,” he added. “He is only 16, yet he suffers from tinea and a fungal infection which has killed half the nail of his big toe. It’s the current craze amongst youngsters for wearing tennis shoes without socks that did it.

“And that’s another thing,” he said. “The Shire’s podiatrist will be able to educate people on what’s best for their feet.”

Asked to sum up his feelings on the venture, Cr Sergant remarked cryptically, “How caring the Council.”

Although he was too modest to comment, it is obvious that Councillor Sergant played a significant part in the Council’s decision to establish the clinic.

Cocky Clips Nails

The Shire could save money by giving pensioners pink-and-grey galahs, according to one ratepayer.

Mrs Lawson-Jones, who has lived in Connel for 62 of her 71 years, phoned the Reporter after reading details of the Shire’s proposal to establish a Podiatry Clinic for the well-aged.

According to Mrs Lawson-Jones, her pet galah clips her toenails and prevents them from becoming ingrown.

“My cocky’s always done my feet,” said Mrs Lawson-Jones. “Why do we need a new-fangled clinic?”

“They say it’s free,” she said, “but they’ll hit us somewhere for it. I’ll have to skin the cat if my rates go up any more.

“Besides, you can talk to cockies,” she added.

The Connel Reporter, April 27.

Nuclear Free Fight Clinic

Dear Sir,

I would like on behalf of myself personally (and not speaking as the President of the Nuclear Free Connel Movement, which I am) to express solidarity with the views expressed by Mrs Lawson-Jones in the last Reporter.

Why do we need a foot clinic which is supposed to be free, but which it won’t be for long? Whose stupid idea was it anyway? Probably Councillor Sergant, I’ll wager, who it is well known has a bunion.

The Council pretend they are concerned for the well-aged, which they aren’t. How can they care about people’s feet when they don’t care about nuclear war and us all being blown to pieces, which we will be if we don’t get the Shire to become a nuclear-free zone.

Yours in solidarity,
Jeff J. Jeffries,
President,
Nuclear Free Connel Movement,
Candidate, West Ward

Sinister Politicking, Says Councillor

Dear Sir,

I trust you will allow me the courtesy of replying to the scandalous letter published in the last (May 4th) issue of the Connel Reporter.

The endorsement of parrots to prune a pensioner’s toes is about what one would expect from Mr Jeff Jeffries and the Nuclear Free Connel Movement. ‘How naive the Nuclear Free?’ is a question on the lips of many at the present moment.

But what one would hardly expect is the slanderous implication that I, a faithful servant of the citizens of Connel for over twenty years, wish to see the establishment of a Podiatry Clinic in order to receive free treatment myself.

Mr Jeffries is in fact correct in his assumption that I initiated the project. I am proud to have done so. And, so that the members of our community may know that my motives are pure, I place it on record that I will never personally use the services of the Podiatry Clinic without paying for them.

Mr Jeffries’ letter is a sinister and ill-disguised bit of politicking intended to undermine my standing in the community in the run-up to the forthcoming Council elections in July.

Although I had absolutely NO political motives in proposing the free Podiatry Clinic for our well-deserving well-aged residents, I am confident that all West Ward ratepayers will demonstrate their approval of my actions in the appropriate way at the polls in July.

May I say in conclusion that it grieves me to the quick to see such nonsense as Mr Jeffries’ letter and the “Cocky Clips Nails” article in an otherwise sensible paper such as yours.

Sincerely,
Councillor Frank Sergant.

The Connel Reporter, May 11.

Shire of Connel
WEST WARD
At the forthcoming elections on
July 23rd
VOTE FOR YOUR FEET

Vote
FRANK SERGANT (1)

Remember: A vote for Frank Sergant is a vote for a free Podiatry Clinic. Keep a good man on his feet.

Authorised by J. Wilson, 7 Ainsby Rd, Deakin.

The Connel Reporter, May 11.

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Parrots For Podiatry

Mrs Lawson-Jones reacted with outrage at the Council’s decision to block her proposed Podiatry Training School for Parrots. She made the surprise announcement by phone to the Reporter on Tuesday.

Mrs Lawson-Jones owns a pink-and-grey galah that clips and manicures her toes. She believes that any galah can be taught to tend feet. “You don’t need a diploma and high wages,” she said, “just a beak and a packet of sunflower seeds.”

“There’ll be no need for a fancy, costly Foot Person,” Mrs Lawson-Jones declared, “if everyone’s got a bird to do it.”

Mrs Lawson-Jones hopes that other birds will learn to care for their owners’ feet by following the example of her own galah.

Entry to the school will not be limited to pink-and-grey galahs. Major Mitchells, sulphur-crested cockatoos, twenty-eight parrots and rosellas will also be accepted for training. “They’re all teachable,” she said, “which is more than you can say of some people.”

Mrs Lawson-Jones hopes that birds will complete the course in two weeks. “Some birds may take longer,” she said.

A diploma will be issued to each successful graduate. Mrs Lawson-Jones has applied to the West Australian Post Secondary Education Commission (WAPSEC) for accreditation of the diploma; and she hopes to affiliate her School with the School of Veterinary Science at Burdock University.

“Before too long, every person who needs one will have a trained cocky,” said Mrs Lawson-Jones. “That’ll stonker the stinkers,” she added, referring to those Councillors advocating a Podiatry Clinic.

The Connel Reporter, May 25.

Council Blocks Parrot School

In a shock announcement on Wednesday, Councillor Frank Sergant declared that the Shire would act to prevent the establishment of a Podiatry School for Parrots by Mrs Lawson-Jones.

“Had the dear lady bothered to discuss matters with the Council before grabbing headlines,” said Cr Sergant, “she would have been informed that her proposed venture was in violation of the Shire’s business by-laws and health regulations. There is also the question of her neighbours’ consent,” Cr Sergant added.

When asked if the Council’s move could be viewed as a political act, Cr Sergant said, “How naive the public if they fall for that nonsense.”

Mrs Lawson-Jones was unavailable for comment.

The Connel Reporter, June 1.
Shire of Connel
WEST WARD

At the forthcoming elections on July 23rd

VOTE FOR YOUR FEET

Vote
FRANK SERGANT (1)

Cr Sergant has pledged to establish a free Podiatry Clinic for the Elderly. Keep a good man on his feet.

Authorised by J. Wilson, 7 Ainsby Rd, Deakin.

The Connel Reporter, June 1.

Outrage Over Council Decision

Mrs Lawson-Jones, an outspoken opponent of the Council's proposed Podiatry (foot) Clinic, has decided to establish a Podiatry Training School for Parrots. She made the surprise announcement by phone to the Reporter on Tuesday.

Mrs Lawson-Jones claimed that the School would not be in contravention of either business or health regulations. “Poppycock!” she said. “I’d be lucky to make two bob out of it, so how can that be business?”

Concerning the health regulations she said, “The birds would be dusted regularly for mites. And bird droppings are good for the garden — especially tomatoes.”

Asked what she would do in the light of the Council’s decision, Mrs Lawson-Jones said, “The old codgers haven’t heard the last of me yet, you can bet an emu’s beak on that!”

Mr Jeff Jeffries of the Nuclear Free Connel Movement has asked Mrs Lawson-Jones to campaign with him in the forthcoming elections against Councillor Frank Sergant and the other Conservative Councillors who are backing the proposed Podiatry Clinic. Mrs Lawson-Jones has not made up her mind.

“I might start up my own Party,” she said.

(See letters page 4.)

The Connel Reporter, June 8.
Plea For Sanity

Dear Sir,

Sometimes I think people haven't got no brain with which to think with. Why can't Counsellor Sergant and Mrs Lawson-Jones sit down like two adult, grown-up, mature adults and agree on things? Surely sanity says that they can patch up their differences if they try. Our Prime Minister has set an example for consensus. Why can't they follow his example?

CONCERNED

(Name and address supplied.)

*The Connel Reporter*, June 8.

Come On L-J

Dear Sir,

No wonder Australia is going down the drain with people like Councillor Sergant at the helm. As soon as someone like Mrs Lawson-Jones shows some initiative, some government bully-boy stomps on them.

All I can say is, Come on L-J, come on!

L. Coff,
Mullaloo St, Deakin.

*The Connel Reporter*, June 8.

Nuclear People For Parrots, Too

Dear Sir,

Speaking officially as the President of the Nuclear Free Connel Movement (which I have been since January last year), I would like to condemn the Council's decision to stop Mrs Lawson-Jones' Parrot School, but what would you expect from a Council which they don't care if we are all blown to smithereens?
It’s more than time for some of those irresponsible, war-mongering Councillors to be replaced with more progressive and responsive people like myself.

I would like to express the Movement’s public support for Mrs Lawson-Jones, and pledge our every assistance. We say publicly, Join with us, sister, and help us crush this Fascist Council.

In solidarity,
Jeff J. Jeffries,
President, Nuclear Free Connel Movement,
Candidate, West Ward.

*The Connel Reporter*, June 8.

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**Jack-Boot Tactics**

Dear Sir,

Cr Sergant says we should “Vote for our feet”, but he puts jack-boots on his and stomps on old ladies and ratepayers alike.

May I remind Cr Sergant that ratepayers are people too?

June Aarons,
Keeping St, Connel.

*The Connel Reporter*, June 8.

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**Councillor Objects**

Dear Sir,

I found your news item announcing the formation of the Parrots for Podiatry Party (*Reporter*, June 15th, p.6), along with the accompanying photograph of Mrs Lawson-Jones and Mr Jeff J. Jeffries embracing under placards proclaiming “Ban Nuclear Ships” and “Love is a Galah”, absurd in the extreme.
For Mr Jeffries’ information, Connel is a land-locked Shire, 28 kilometres from the coast and 67 kilometres from the nearest port.

And Mrs Lawson-Jones’ slogan is too silly for words. In response to it, one is tempted to ask, “How senile the old dear?”

I must say in closing that I am disappointed at the Reporter’s bias in its coverage of this matter. The letters attacking me personally for a Council decision to reject a ridiculous Parrot School were scurrilous and slanderous. I can only hope for fairer treatment in the future.

Councillor Frank Sergant.

The Connel Reporter, June 22.

Out of Hand

Dear Sir,

I think this whole business about the parrots and the feet has got out of hand. I would like to see the Councillors, Mrs Lawson-Jones, her galah, and the Nuclear Free people rounded up and shot. Then we could get back to sanity in this Shire.

Bruce Beckingham
Lupin Ave, Connel.

The Connel Reporter, June 22.

German Shepherd Society Upset

Dear Sir,

The Executive of the German Shepherd Society has directed me to write on behalf of the Society in protest at the campaign slogan adopted by Mrs Lawson-Jones for her Parrots for Podiatry Party) namely, “Love is a Galah”.

Due to the unfortunate double meaning of the word “galah”, our Society feels that the slogan demeans the whole meaning of love. Also, we feel that it improperly mimics our own slogan, “Love is a German Shepherd”. Our Society has spent a great deal of money and energy promoting the “Love
is a German Shepherd™ slogan — as any motorist will appreciate re bumper and window stickers. We feel that by her slogan, Mrs Lawson-Jones will create a confusion in some people’s minds concerning galahs and German Shepherds. This might benefit galahs, but it will certainly do nothing for our dogs.

We publicly urge Mrs Lawson-Jones to change her slogan for one more appropriate. For example, “Feathered Friends for Feet” might be more forceful while at the same time being less overstated.

M.K.M. Mitchel,
President, German Shepherd Society.

*The Connel Reporter*, June 22.

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**Back Copies Requested**

Dear Sir,

I have been keeping a scrapbook on the Parrot-Podiatry affair. I seem to have missed the article to which Cr Sergant, Bruce Beckingham and M.K.M. Mitchel refer in your letters column, June 22nd. All my friends have used their copies of the *Reporter* for either scraps or fires, so I can’t get hold of the article. Could you (or one of your readers) please send me a copy of the June 15th article about the Parrots for Podiatry Party?

Thank you in anticipation,

Janice Boulton,
18 York Way, Deakin.

*The Connel Reporter*, June 29.

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**Drastic Measures**

Dear Sir,

I would like to amend my letter in the last *Connel Reporter*. After reading the letter by the German Shepherd people, I think they should be rounded up,
with their dogs, and shot, too. “Love is a German Shepherd”! The idiots can’t know anything about love with a slogan like that. Love is beautiful and kind and only humans have it. Shoot them all, that’s what I say.

Bruce Beckingham,
Lupin Ave, Connel.

_The Connel Reporter_, June 19.

Shire of Connel
WEST WARD

At the forthcoming elections on
July 23rd

KEEP A GOOD MAN ON HIS FEET

Vote

FRANK SERGANT (I)

Authorised by J. Wilson, 7 Ainsby Rd, Deakin.


The Galah Behind The Fuss

_The Connel Reporter_ sent its journalist, Robin Watson, to visit Mrs Lawson-Jones, this week. He obtained this exclusive glimpse of the galah behind the fuss over the Shire’s proposed Podiatry Clinic. Robin Watson writes:

Mrs Lawson-Jones lives in a weatherboard and iron house in Deakin. She welcomed me into her house enthusiastically, and immediately introduced me to her pink-and-grey galah.

The bird inhabits a cage in the corner of the lounge room. There were a few sunflower seeds on the carpet around the cage.

The cocky is surprisingly unattractive. Except for its head, it is almost bald. Quills show bluntly here and there beneath its pink skin; and several tatty feathers protrude from the stump of its tail. Apparently the bird suffers from a disease which makes it pluck out its feathers.

When I tried to scratch it, it bit me savagely. I asked Mrs Lawson-Jones how she could trust such a bird with her toes.
"He's as tender as a lamb," she said. "He only got snarky with you because you called him 'Cocky'.

"He doesn't like that name," Mrs Lawson-Jones said. "My late husband called him that. He hated my husband. Used to tease the dickens out of him."

When I asked the bird's name, Mrs Lawson-Jones replied: "Used to call him Leo, after the Pope. But then my husband taught him to say, 'Meat on Friday', so I had to change it. He was a wicked man, my husband."

At this point the cocky interrupted with a retching sound.

He learnt that from my husband too," she said. "He used to cough up a bucket of catarrh every morning. Smoking."

It turns out that the bird's current name is General Birdswood.

"Because he hasn't got a feather like a general bird would," Mrs Lawson-Jones said.

Mrs Lawson-Jones was only too eager to demonstrate how her galah tends her toes.

She lay on her back on the couch and placed the bird on her stomach. The galah immediately walked along one of her legs and down to her foot. When I asked if there was a danger that the bird's claws might tear one of her varicose veins, Mrs Lawson-Jones replied, "Never!"

The bird began a fascinating ritual on its owner's toes. First it nibbled at the edge of the nail of the small toe until it was pruned back flush and smooth with the flesh. Next it began to bite the pap of the little toes, closing its beak right over it, kneading it gently.

"It always does that," Mrs Lawson-Jones remarked with obvious pleasure. "Good for the circulation."

The bird repeated the procedure for each toe. But when it came to the big toe, instead of nibbling the nail, it gently wedged the hook of its beak underneath the nail and prised the nail up.

"Ingrown toenail," Mrs Lawson-Jones remarked. "I used to suffer like a Black before I had General Birdswood."

Mrs Lawson-Jones suggested I have my toes manicured by her remarkable bird. I declined the offer, but felt inclined to believe there is some merit in her proposed Podiatry Training School for Parrots.


Councillor Charged Over Galah Killing

Councillor Frank Sergant was charged by Police for the killing of a galah belonging to Mrs Lawson-Jones on Monday.

Cr Sergant allegedly visited Mrs Lawson-Jones at her house on Monday afternoon at 3 p.m. to ask her to reconsider her attitude to the Shire's proposed Podiatry Clinic. Cr Sergant allegedly killed the bird in a fit of anger when Mrs Lawson-Jones refused to change her views.
Cr Sergant refused to comment to The Reporter.
A deeply distressed Mrs Lawson-Jones said, “He’s a murderer, and I hope he hangs.”


Shock Reversal Of Podiatry Proposal

In a shock announcement the Shire President, Cr W. Guild, announced that the Council had decided not to proceed with plans to establish a Podiatry Clinic to service the elderly residents of Connel.

Cr Guild would not comment on the Council’s decision.

Mrs Lawson-Jones said that she did not care what the Council did, now that her General Birdswood (her pet galah, allegedly killed by Cr Frank Sergant) was gone.

Jeff J. Jeffries from the Nuclear Free Connel Movement said the Council’s move was a cynical attempt to avoid a major defeat at this Saturday’s Council election. “It’s only because they have to face the people that they changed their minds,” he said.

“But that cocky killer,” he added, referring to Cr Sergant, “won’t escape the people’s verdict, no matter what.”

Remembering Ophelia

1. Blood trickles down from the castle filling the flowers that fill her eyes.

2. Confused, and the victim of confusion... How water clarifies the mind.

3. As they lay littering the hall in their blood she lingered in crumbling masonry and pillars, in weeds and flowers intermarrying outside the walls.

4. Centuries later, she returned with a film crew. She was wearing jeans, an Indian shirt covered with flowers and a head scarf. He was still lying there among the others with their sprawling limbs and broken swords. After the filming, she took off her badge and pinned it to his chest — 'Take the Toys from the Boys' it read — then left without a farewell kiss, though she was compassionate, and over the bitterness by now.
5.
He wasn’t mad because he knew he was mad.
She was mad because she didn’t.
That’s why he knew when he was dying,
but she didn’t.

Did she know he wasn’t mad?
No, because she couldn’t.

Did he know she was mad?
— 'Madam, I never think of such things!'

6.
Invisible rape.
He had penetrated and withdrawn without
laying a finger on her. You wouldn’t find it
in any statute book... It made her think
the real thing must be awful. Sometimes
she laughed and cried for hours, but mostly
there was her sewing now. And she fiddled
a lot with her shawl.

7.
He died surrounded by enemies who were really
friends who were really enemies etc...
She died alone. But up on the hill were
autumn hedges full of leaves, birds’ eyes
and knots of wood, all watching.

8.
The rats were leaving the castle,
grey drops sliding down escarpments -
prelude to some final loneliness.

9.
She was surprised when they asked her to do
the flowers for the funeral — such an outsider
in her bare, small plot against the wall.
‘I suppose they like everyone to be involved,’
she thought, and agreed. It was a grand
State Funeral, of course, with a huge monument
plumb in the middle of consecrated ground.
She decided on violets, daisies, rue — all
her old favorites.
Strange, he had never liked flowers. 'Such frail things,' he'd winced, 'so ephemeral, so easily crushed... -Like you,' he'd added with a sneer. 'Oh, we're all mortal,' she'd replied, 'and anyway, I'm not afraid of ghosts!' (She could stand up to him in those days.) And how apt her words... Death had come for them both, soon afterwards; and now she was a ghost, and saw how natural it was, knew she'd been perfectly right not to be frightened.

10.
How could Ophelia, still in the mermaid state, drown? On a bank of the river she combed her hair, refreshed after her swim. A humble fisherman, passing by, conceived an immortal love for her... Merciful, she gave him a smile, and a nice big kiss, and sent him home.

11.
She could remember him much younger, muscular chest and loins straining through leather as he whispered, 'God, Ophelia, you're a real turn on!' Her Mum had said, 'Just keep your distance for a while,' and then, with a wink and a smile, 'They get like that sometimes — he'll get over it!' Then he had gone away to College, and come back. ('A real hinterlectewal,' sneered her Dad.) One day, she met him in the High Street. There was a long silence, then she said, 'Funny world, isn't it?' 'Rotten,' he said, and walked on. He's just not interested, she thought, just as I'm getting to be with all those fantasies of kissing, and fondling, and swimming naked in the river.

12.
'It's not polite to leave the world without saying goodbye.' That's what they told her on the Other Side, and sent her back. Now she's a florist in Kensington. She's got to know the world a bit better this time round, and is almost ready to say hello.
LILY BRETT

I Wear Your Face

You never recovered
and I
and others mother
wear your burden

hugging it to me
like a collapsed cloak
a tattered coat

I wear your wariness
can't hug another
mother

I wear the glare
you froze me
with

I wear your desperation
and carry
warring strangers within myself

I wear your fear
with practised ease
pleasing you

I wear your face
and mother
the green witch howls behind it.
GEORGE BOWERING

Interviewed by Reginald Berry*

George Bowering: The Fact of Place on the Canadian West Coast

As a Westerner and (worse) one who lives and writes in Vancouver, George Bowering has never been taken seriously by Canada’s Eastern literary establishment, despite his prolific publishing record since the early sixties and two Governor-General Awards (for poetry 1969 and fiction 1980). There are several reasons for this: the lack of serious “surface” in much of his works; his proclaimed detachment from Eastern dependence; and most important, his early, habit-forming membership with the Tish group of poets. The significant collaborative acts of the Tish poets (originally Bowering, Frank Davey, Fred Wah, Jamie Reid, and David Dawson, but later with others, including Lionel Kearns, and Melbourne-born Daphne Marlatt) were to publish a poetry newsletter and to make real the place they all lived in by writing it. Although their roots were in the region of British Columbia, their technical bias (via the Black Mountain poets at first) was, somewhat paradoxically, strongly American, and this resulted in charges of “continentalism” by the “reactionary nationalists” in the Canadian East.

Although Bowering formally left the Tish group after nineteen issues of the newsletter to pursue his own work and career (in London, Ontario, Montreal, and Calgary) before returning to Vancouver in the seventies, his subsequent writing can be seen as working out what opened up in the Tish collaboration. In essence, Bowering’s work is not “about” the West Coast or British Columbia, but simply “from” it. “Here,” for him, is a fact of place, without definition in terms of regions or countries elsewhere. With that established, Bowering could deal, as he has done in most of his works from the early seventies on, with the act of writing. “Consciousness is how it is composed,” says Bowering in his 1972 prose-poem Autobiology. That consciousness, or self-consciousness, of writing has moved Bowering out of imagist works of the sixties and into his post-modern fictions of the seventies and eighties; but all of this ultimately, is written out of the fact of place.

*This interview was recorded in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 20 May 1984; Bowering subsequently took part in a “Language and Place” seminar at the Festival of Perth in February 1985.
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West Window: Selected Poetry (Toronto: General, 1982).
Kerrisdale Elegies (Toronto: Coach House, 1984).

Fiction:

Mirror on the Floor (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).
A Short Sad Book (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1977).
A Place to Die (Ottawa: Oberon, 1983).

Criticism:

The Mask in Place: Essays on Fiction in North America (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1982).
A Way With Words (Ottawa: Oberon, 1982).

Berry: What kind of identity do you find in "place"? Is it important for you to work with "a place"? And do you find it necessary to remain in Vancouver to write?

Bowering: One thing I cannot do, to answer the last question, is write while I'm on the road. All kinds of people do that, and some people do that well — say Allen Ginsberg. He combines that with the fact that he does all his writing in notebooks, and then fetches out of the notebooks stuff to make his books of poetry. So he writes on the road, he writes in cars, on planes, bus stations and so forth. I just put aside everything in terms of writing, unless I go to a place specifically to write, such as I did with my last novel [Burning Water]. I went to Italy and Costa Rica to write. But it's true, I have to be sitting at my writing place in Vancouver to write; I can occasionally make a note somewhere, but I'm one of the few Canadian writers that doesn't use trips, such as this one, to produce half a book of poems. It's a very common thing for people like Gustafson, and Purdy, and Birney, and Layton — everybody writes poems about their travels. I did at one time but I don't any more. So "place": at one time in the old Tish days, the two poles of our poetry/recreation were "voice" and "place". "Voice": not necessarily that "find your own voice" routine, but to signify to any reader of the poem that it was "voice" codified on the page, and to investigate "place". And so in a lot of the early poems of my friends
and myself in *Tish*, you find the metaphor as a kind of an identification made between the movement through the poem and the movement of the mind and body through the place. So you get all these poems about exploring the coastline, going over bridges, checking out what was going on in Vancouver history.

*Berry:* But that was only because no one else had ever done that from the point of "place" in the West.

*Bowering:* We keep getting fads in lit-crit in Canada, and one lately has been "mapping". Canadian writers are interested in "mapping" a great, big, wide place that doesn’t have names all over it yet. We’ve got to stick the name on. Of course Robert Kroetsch says that what you’ve got to do is exactly the opposite: get the map clean again. As it happens, my last book of poetry has the name of a place in it: Kerrisdale. That’s my neighbourhood in Vancouver. But in a sense that’s just there because it identifies the place that I have lived in over the last ten years, during my newly-discovered middle-age. So in a sense “place” becomes a “condition” in that poem, because I never would, as a young man, have lived in a place like Kerrisdale. And the novel I’m writing now is a sequel to my previous novel, and in addition to that it is the middle piece of a triptych, and one of the definitions of that triptych is that B.C. — the whole province of British Columbia, or the whole place called British Columbia — is where it has to be set. So the first one was set off the coast, in the water, in the 1790s. This one is going to be in the Interior, on the earth, around 1890. The next one is going to have to do with air, and be set and written in 1990. It’s very complicated because some of the same characters are in all three novels, and they’re going to be spread over a period of two hundred years [laughs].

*Berry:* You already did a bit of early work on George Vancouver in 1970 [*George, Vancouver, A Discovery Poem* (Toronto, 1970)]. How does that fit in with *Burning Water*?

*Bowering:* That poem was really peculiar, because it *does* relate to the question of place. That poem was written in London, Ontario, and before then I had lived in Vancouver and in Calgary, Alberta, and in both places all my writing was very highly attentive to the fact of place, and exploration of place. I did a whole book of poems on Calgary, on Alberta, just for that [*Rocky Mountain Foot* (Toronto, 1968)]. But when I went to London, Ontario, I found out that I was either out of place or, to put it the way I felt at the time, I couldn’t get my fingers on "place". There didn’t seem to be any "place" there. Whether that was because it was foreign to me (although I’d lived there when I was younger) or whether it was somebody else’s place, the way I put it was that there wasn’t any "place", all that was there was *names*. That is to say, you couldn’t get lost in the woods because there weren’t any woods. There were wood lots, and the wood lots had somebody’s name attached to them, and had had for two hundred years. So what I said was, “what am I going to write?” During that time I was
writing poems, and I said "okay, I'll go somewhere else," and I went into memory, into dreams. One day in the library, for some reason or other — I don't know why — I found the diaries of Menzies, the botanist on the last voyage of Captain George Vancouver. They had been reprinted by the British Columbia government in the early 1930s. I found that and was really fascinated. It told me a whole pile of things about the Vancouver area that I hadn't known about before. So that coincided with the fact that I had newly found myself devoted to the idea of writing, or found myself able at last to write, a book-length poem. It's a fairly short book [39pp.], but it's still a book-length poem. So it became a poem. Later on it became a poem-for-voices-cum-play on the radio, and then it became a novel, and I had friends who were half-seriously contemplating turning it into an operetta [laughs].

Berry: The business of finding it difficult to settle into a "place" because it has so much history, does that have any connection with the experimental writing on the West Coast, where there isn't as extensive a history?

Bowering: Most of us in Vancouver who were doing the experimental writing and actually joining together in order to do so and work out some kind of poetic every day had to cross a whole pile of streets that had Spanish names. But none of us would be able to tell each other why those Spanish names were there, whether they were names of ships or people, or Spaniards back home. What were they? So, being pretty new to the working out of poetics coincided with being pretty new to that area, because none of us were from Vancouver — we were all from other places in the Interior, and on Vancouver Island, or up north, who had converged there at the same time. We got into history not the way a historian would but the way an archaeologist would — a street name is a finding, right? Then we'd go and dig and try to fill up the holes from there. It's tempting to say that one can feel very lucky and be grateful that one grew up in a place that didn't have any history or whose history was secret from us. The whole thing was that as people growing up in the West, when we ever learnt any Canadian history it was always the history of the East. It's tempting to say that but I don't think that's absolutely true. I think that you can do something wonderful writing out of a place where the history is very well known, such as James Reaney does in Middlesex Country in southwestern Ontario, or you can do something wonderful in an area in which the history is not well known. And if you confront history in your writing, you will do it in different ways. The method with which we write probably has to do with the fact that each of us has to go out at the very beginning and be our own historian rather than read what historians do. So literally what Daphne Marlatt was doing when she wrote Steveston was to get in a car and go to Steveston every day. Well, it happened that she was doing a job too; she was doing an oral history project for the B.C. government. So she was actually writing two books at the same time: she was finding out that history and her own history. She was sort of the first historian on the scene in her own mind. Similarly with various other books that some of us have done: Frank Davey, with his sea-going stuff off the coast of British Columbia, and I, with all the various things
that I’ve done in terms of that place. That history is a gift, but I’m pretty sure
that if I were brought up somewhere outside of Toronto I could find whatever
happened in history there equally a gift.

Berry: Speaking of your own history, the "Tish years" may be something you
want to forget now, although people make a big deal of it. Were you aware
that you were doing something different, was it a conscious effort to find your
own poetic?

Bowering: We were aware of it. We were aware of the fact that we were doing
something that hadn’t been done before because there was a blank. We
obviously had a couple of models in the United States. We learned how to make
our newsmagazine, Tish, from reading one in New York that Le Roi Jones and
Diane Di Prima were doing called the Floating Bear, out of New York. We
got a reading list from them. We acted partly in a vacuum, and partly in the
vacuum of our own ignorance. We didn’t know about any other little magazine
activity on the West Coast, or very much in the way of poetry on the West
Coast. It was sort of like history, and we were new on the scene. Well, that
was three-quarters true. I’m sure that if we had known what had happened on
the Coast before, we wouldn’t have been all that much interested. We certainly
wouldn’t have thought of ourselves as an extension of it or any elaboration
of it.

Berry: What kind of influences were working on the Tish people?

Bowering: For most of us it was the example of various poets in the United
States. The local poets, who were very slightly older than us, would be Roy
Kiyooka and Phyllis Webb. When I first arrived on the Coast along with my
friends, in the late fifties, to go to university, there wasn’t any real scene. There
were a few students at U.B.C. who wrote poems, and pretty soon there was
a literary magazine out of there, because there are always literary magazines
at universities. But there wasn’t a great deal of devotion. So most of our models
came from the United States, except that Lionel Kearns and I, who were both
a couple of years older than the other guys, had some experience of Eastern
Canadian writers, such as the Contact Press people, mainly Dudek, Souster,
Layton, Doug Jones, and a couple of other people.

Berry: The Tish influence seems obvious to me in your work until 1971 or 1972,
and then there seems to be a marked change. The change is most obvious in
the late seventies stuff, which has become much more interested in its own
construction. Is that a conscious change, or something you just discovered?

Bowering: I think it’s a change the remaining Tish guys have also gone through,
Fred Wah and Frank Davey. We have still retained great contact and great
faith in each other’s work, but we’ve also attached ourselves, or been attached,
to other work that we might not have been interested in when we were a lot more insular in the old days. Not to say that we've become eclectic, it's just that, well, in one sense, you can say that battles have been won, we have learned how to do things and we've also made Canadian readers and even teachers understand that it was worth doing. *Tish* was interested in lyric poems and the first workings-out of long poems made out of macaronic lyrics, but I've always had the sense that you did all that writing of lyric poems in order to train yourself to take on larger work, and the larger work can be fiction or long poems. But our models were there right at the beginning. Charles Olson is the paradigm of the long poem in our time and he was certainly one of the first influences on the magazine.

**Berry: What reading have you done of Australian or New Zealand writers?**

**Bowering:** Back in the olden days — back in the sixties — when all the excitement of *Tish* and my own burgeoning career was going on, I paid a lot more attention to British, Australian, New Zealand, and Indian writing than I have more recently. There was a period of time (ten or fifteen years) when I didn't read anything, or very little, that was happening. But about three-quarters of a year ago, I actually read a whole pile of New Zealand poetry because I was going to do a radio programme with Ian Wedde. So I was looking at his work, and at anthologies. I'd also read all of Robert Creeley's poems that had to do with his going around New Zealand and Australia, and I'd been told by other people that New Zealand and Australian poets had made a lot of response to his visit. In the olden days, the most radical poet (it seemed to me) in New Zealand was Baxter. Now he doesn't seem radical at all, especially compared to more recent work. What I saw happening was what looks like the poetry of the fifties and sixties in North America — all of this open space on the page. There didn't seem to be this great attachment to the solid visual stanza that one saw before, plus end rhyme and all that business. Some of it looks right and some of it doesn't. I notice that when I heard Ian Wedde reading, he didn't sound exactly the way it looked on the page, and I suspect that that's true in other instances too. I think that that opening up — and that imitating of the North American modes — is probably a really good idea. What is going to happen is that everyone will become really dissatisfied and out will come this wonderful poetry from which *both* skins have been shucked off: the old drone of the iamb is going to be shucked off and so is the imitation William Carlos Williams poem. Then you're going to have wonderful New Zealand and Australian poetry for the next hundred years, until somebody comes along and says "Gawd, that old-fashioned stuff" [laughs].

**Berry:** One last question. I've heard a New Zealand writer say that we can't write poetry until we have cities, because we still keep reinventing the rural place. We're still obsessed with defining what New Zealand is, but New Zealand seems to be all these little rural places. Is that also true of Canada, that Canadian poetry came of age when it discovered the city?
Bowering: There is something in that. What happens in Canadian poetry as far as I am concerned up until the Second World War is that it is difficult to tell the amateur writing club poetry from the poetry that gets studied in schools. And it is usually a long, long repetitive apotheosis of maple leaves and birch bark canoes and all that stuff. There is some really exciting modern poetry beginning with the Contact Press guys. There's Souster, in Toronto, there's Irving Layton, who's clearly a city of Montreal guy, and Louis Dudek, who is also that. Previous to that, the image of the Canadian poet was "Group of Four" — one of those Confederation guys walking through the forest crunching maple leaves or stomping around in the marshes at Tantramar [laughs]. Both in what I've looked at in earlier New Zealand poetry and in early remarks about New Zealand poetry that seems to be the problem. The idea seemed to be to uphold either a fake, Anglicized image of the bucolic or a kind of sentimental Maori-ized one.
Still Life With Vase

I take it you’ve noticed
the vase on the table,
the one that’s stuffed

with used tissues
and faded petals.
But look! Those stiff

paper-thin petals
are almost the colour
of dried blood

some drops of which
are visible on the table
just over here: like eggs

in a perfect nest
they are cupped within
the circular stain

of an old tea-mug
which has just been moved
to reveal them. The whole

complex is completed
by a film of dust
through which a finger
may have traced a sign,
and by this soft
mouse-grey light

which nibbles at the window
above the table
then scampers diagonally

across one corner.
If you wish to know
what happened here

you should consult
these things once more
though all you may see

is something you failed
to pick up before
— and by this I mean

that shimmering tinge
of sea-water green
visible in the thick

inch-high base
of the dusty vase
— that vase from which

a pale or bandaged hand
has now removed
both tissues and petals.
Abracadabra

I
Taking off is like life itself:
over before you know it

and not quite "reality" you’d say
like that new landscape of flimsy

thick airborne snow, clouds actually,
a floating Antarctica of air.

Inside, hours stretch out like piers
on a faltering shoreline

where only gulls' prints stitch
sand and water together;

out on an empty headland
of sleep you doze, dreamily,

till you plunge through a smooth blue
tablecloth lain sky

then down again to
a whistling, windswept Perth day,

your body
ricotta cheese stretched
between the God-knows-how-different
time zone you left and this trim city

you step into, all the bright air
scudding about the trees.

2
To live in the present alone
is to fix the future.
The world’s windiest street
is named for a Christian knight
and mock-Europeanised
as a terrace: St George’s Terrace,
Terrasse de saint Georges,
Terrazo di Santo Giorgio,

Perth’s innocent nose-thumbing
gesture towards Europe. Toy knights
on its toy clock mock
the continent of passports and history,
here, where no stain of history
debunks the landscape,
all those tin can soldiers
on horse, the splotchy mania
of human rebellion whip-lashing
and bellowing over cobblestones
only to usher in
century no. 20:
the hamstring of experience
is snapped into line.
Even the convicts, plagues and fleets

were elsewhere, an East coast
world away. Under WA’s blitz of blue skies,
skies like an endless promise,
skies of a perpetual
shrugging of the shoulders,

lie a city mapped as rectangular neatness
where fingers snap and
the abracadabra of the future
cries out incessantly,
a grid of high-powered streets
where even at speed
nerves never need tingle,
pinpricks of hills, leschenaultia strewn
unwavering light, a civilised sensibleness,
and the empty, eternally present
endless ocean. Who here could not feel fluttering inside
the immense, tawny
moth of happiness,
_one great day after another_
sunset-flush’d upon the yellow sand?

Imagining I Cantori Sing _Go Down Moses_

The voices rise, simmer a moment
before a crisp audience
staun"hly polite,
then separate
into those that roll
like a low, harmless thunder
and those that swerve
up onto the rising air.
”Go Down Moses”
is all harmony and light.
I Cantori are neatly dressed,
classically in tune,
and the song
hangs there
clear before our eyes
like a plant
with all the earth
shaken off its roots.
BOOKS

*European — Aboriginal Relations in Western Australian History*, Edited by Bob Reece and Tom Stannage, Studies in Western Australian History VIII, December 1984. Department of History, University of Western Australia.

We are such stuff as dreams are made on", and it can be dangerous to interrogate these dreams. But this is what the contributors to this issue of *Studies in Western Australian History* have done and the dream they interrogate is nothing less than our communal myth, the collective explanation we give of ourselves and our presence here, what Tom Stannage in his Editorial Note characterises as the "gentry" tradition or myth. His description of it is polemical. Its central notion is the "idea of progress", progress being defined in terms of economic prosperity and political democracy so that "virtue is found on the side of the 'status quo'". Its ideal society is therefore one which is "open to the thrifty, the temperate and the hard-working individual...marked by harmonious social relations and general well-being." But the real challenge lies in the conclusion:

In essence, and in relation to much of the evidence of the past, the gentry tradition of historical writing is elitist, pastoral, sexist — and racist. It is a view of W.A. society from the portals of the Weld Club.

The essays which follow document this claim. Most of them rework the story of the past as it has been told by historians like Battye and Colebatch, or recorded in edited version by the settlers themselves. In her essay Christine Fletcher implies, for instance, that the so-called "battle" of Pinjarra was actually a massacre. Brian Fitzgerald documents the wholesale slaughter of Aborigines along the Forest River in 1926 in revenge for the killing of a white boundary rider and Sn Jane Hunt writes about the attempts of the clergyman, James Gubble, to bring to light similar killings in the 1880's. Elizabeth Goddard and Tom Stannage, examining John Forrest's attitude to the Aborigines, help to explain how it was that such things could happen. Like so many others then and now, Forrest was an implicit Darwinian. For him Aboriginal people were primitives, "a long way down the ladder of God's creation" doomed by the logic of evolution to die out, already "fast disappearing from the face of the earth" and thus not to be considered in any plans for the future. So, as Haebich shows, when Aboriginal people from the South-West applied for land under the Homestead Act of 1893 it was not to be thought of that they should become successful farmers. It was "not in them", the Minister for Lands declared in 1894. The assistance given to white men was not given to them, and the twenty or so families who applied for land were all driven off by poverty, or in some cases, trickery. For similar reasons Mary Ann Jebb concludes that in the North-West Aboriginal people infected with venereal disease were rounded up and shipped to so-called Lock Hospitals with appallingly inadequate facilities far from their traditional country without a thought for the emotional traumas involved because it was believed that they were responsible for their disease and were in any case dying out. Sheila Bailey's essay on the early Protestant Missions and Muriel Burman's reappraisal of the work of Bishop Salvado show how this ideology affected even such devoted people. In contrast Howard Pederson's essay on "Pigeon" — the Sandawarra of Colin Johnson's remarkable recent novel, *Long Live Sandawarra* — tells the story of an Aborigine who fought back to become a resistance leader and hold up white settlement in the Kimberleys for a number of years.

These essays are concerned with matters of fact. Tom Stannage's Editorial Note, Phyl Garrick's "Two Historians and the Aborigines: Kimberley and Battye" and Bob
Reece’s concluding review article, “Prisoners in their Own Country: Aborigines in Western Australian Historical Writing” deal with the interpretation of facts. The point that all these implicitly make, that the way in which historians write, indeed the facts they choose to record or omit, are governed by the way in which they see the world — that is, by ideology — may be as disturbing as the essays which deal with the darker side of the past. “Ideology” is a word with pejorative overtones, and to suggest, as Garrick does, that J.S. Battye’s history is something less than the “full and true account of the history of the State” it claims to be, but that it reflects the prejudices and misunderstandings of Aboriginal people and their culture which underlay — and perhaps still underlie — the destruction of their lives and culture, is provocative in the extreme. It is especially provocative today, as opponents and supporters of Land Rights for Aborigines glare at one another across a widening gap.

What then to do with these essays?

Brecht said once that human behaviour and experience is mysterious not because it has too few elements, but too many. The society, like the person, which believes that its definition of reality and value is the only one, and automatically rejects alternatives as wrong or even as evil is on the way to totalitarianism. It is also deluded. What we call “reality” is the product of social consciousness. Our identity and purposes as persons as well as the social institutions which serve them express our beliefs and form what Peter Berger calls a “symbolic universe.” It is this universe which defines who we are, where we belong, what our purposes are and protects us from the terrors of meaningless.

[It] also orders history. It locates all collective events in a cohesive unity that includes past, present and future. With regard to the past, it establishes a ‘memory’ that is shared by all the individuals socialized within the collectivity. With regard to the future, it establishes a common frame of reference for the projection of individual actions. Thus...all the members of a society can now conceive of themselves as belonging to a meaningful universe, which was there before they were born and will be there after they die.

The first settlers in W.A. like those in the rest of Australia, were faced with a mammoth task in creating such a symbolic universe for themselves. Here, everything was strange, the seasons upside down to their view, its animals, birds and vegetation, even the land itself, utterly unfamiliar, beyond anything in their familiar experience. There was one solution, of course — to learn from its Aboriginal inhabitants who had lived with the land for at least 50,000 years, become part of it in their myths, the Dreamtime stories which mapped their land, making it part of them and they part of it.

Few people understand how closely the Aboriginal identifies with his land. It is not just something he owns, but something he is. Each clan moves through its land along the path of a Dreaming track — the path taken by their ancestors in adventures occurring in the Dreamtime. Aspects of the land along the way, such as outcrops of rock, streams, boulders, are in fact metamorphoses of these ancestral spirits — the land itself, through these sacred places, is a living presence. But in addition, when a mother first feels the child moving in her womb, when she first realises she is pregnant, she believes she has been impregnated by the ancestral spirit in the place closest to her when she first felt the child move. Thus the living presence of the Dreaming, the spirit embodied in the land at that place, becomes the child. In this way, every person has a relationship with the land that is alive and potent and personal.

But for a variety of reasons the white settlers recoiled from Aboriginal people and
their culture, echoing and reechoing Dampier's sense of them as "the miserablest race on earth". Battye, for instance, speaks of their "ineptitude and lack of intelligence," their "absence of a moral and spiritual nature" and "their ingrained treachery"; as Garrick shows, this view then interprets the clashes which occurred with them as a kind of holy war, of a struggle between civilisation and savagery. Clergymen like Guistiani in the late 1830's or James Gribble in the 1880's who protested against primitive raids and killings were dismissed as meddlers. Writing decades later Battye echoes the feeling which justifies this dismissal:

Men who undertook the burdens of pioneering and went out into unknown districts carried their lives in their hands, and to shoot quickly was often their only safeguard! Such men may have been technically guilty of murder, but even that was preferable to being stalked like game and treacherously slain by blood thirsty savages.

This is the kind of argument we have come in this century to associate with a Hitler, a Stalin or, more recently, a Pol Pot. But it is important to understand its sources. If all social reality is precarious, how much more that of nineteenth century W.A. Threatened by the presence of realities meaningless, even disgusting in the settlers' terms, with a people and a culture already in possession, a people who were intimate with all they found strange and menacing, the settlers' panic reaction was entirely predictable — and I think this needs to be said. But 1985 is not 1885, much less 1835. European culture has survived and even flourished. Those under attack in 1985 are the Aborigines; it is their lives, livelihood and continued existence which are in question.

And that is why these essays are timely because they enable us to take stock. Remembering runs counter to the will to forget, to the desire to survive traumatic experiences by repressing them. Yet the society which attempts to live by the kind of collective alibi constructed by historians like Battye and his successors condemns itself to collective amnesia, organises itself around silences, taboos and unacknowledged guilts. As a result, the symbolic universe contracts, the future which does not yet exist replaces the past which has existed and shown us who we are, dreams of wealth and power prevail over humanity and the play of intelligence and creativity is replaced by "Group Think" by the illusion of invulnerability, the unquestioned belief in the group's inherent rightness and goodness which leads to the rejection of all that is different or critical.

These essays question this kind of thinking, and it will be interesting to see whether or not the tactics of Group Think are used to discredit them; pressure on the critics, charges of disloyalty, stereo-typing of criticism as prejudiced, malicious or "left wing", from self-appointed mind-guards who see their task as protecting our society from any information which may shatter our belief in the rightness of our views. Intellectually, however, the evidence assembled here is very difficult to refute. The essays are scrupulously documented, nearly all of it from primary sources, and their tone is judicious — though, properly, the Editorial Note is the exception. Nor are the essays polemical in themselves — it is only the context, the current climate of contestation between Aboriginal people increasingly aware of the wrong done to them and their right to some compensation and the society organised to deny these rights and ignore the wrongs. In this context Bob Reece's concluding summary points the way ahead. Showing the way in which most historians in the past were in complicity with this denial and contributed to this ignorance, more concerned "with the 'fair name' of their state and of the pastoral fraternity which had to be rescued from vile accusation and malicious innuendo" than with telling the truth, he suggests that a change is underway. Instead of being presented exclusively from the white point of view, the point of view, that is, of the invaders, the story is now beginning
to be told from the other, the Aboriginal, side. Apart from more sympathetic white historians like Stannage, Hallam, Stanton and Reece himself he reminds us of the growing number of Aboriginal writers like Jack Davis, Lois Tilbrook, Colin Johnson and so on whose number can be expected to increase. Since these essays went to press another work has appeared, a work which may well mark the beginning of a new way of looking at Aboriginal-European relations, Reading the Country by Kim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. "If history cannot produce solutions to contemporary problems," as Reece remarks, "it can at least help to explain their origins and in so doing help provide the basis for possible solutions".

Implicitly here there is an appeal to another world-view and another tradition of historical interpretation, the belief that everyone has the right to a "fair go" and that Australia is the place in which new possibilities open out for human dignity and freedom. Readers will have to make up their minds whether or not this world-view provides a viable alternative to the ideology of progress. If they do believe it does, then as Stannage and Reece point out, there is work to be done, not just to reinterpret the past but to bring these reinterpretations to bear on the present. Fortunately, the editors include a guide to the material available for this task; Tom Reynolds details the records relating to Aborigines in W.A. Government Archives and Robin Soult details the photographic sources.

In this sense these essays point beyond themselves, are part of the ongoing process of imagining ourselves into existence which still faces us as a people. Tom Stannage puts the position in dramatic terms:

Whether the new social history of the 1970's and the 1980's can convince the W.A. Community, especially those groups for whom the ideology of development remains central and all-embracing is not yet known. Indeed it may well be that the ghosts of Dr. Battye and John Forrest will carry the day. But the articles in this issue of Studies are based on a belief and a reading of the evidence that suggests the need for an on-going historiographical struggle.

Personally I would see the matter more broadly. The limits of the historian are by definition the limits of his/her discipline and its discourse which is still by and large the discourse of technological society — precise, univocal, rational and to a large extent emptied of its experiential and thus existen­tial content. As I see it, the fundamental question at issue in European-Aboriginal relations in this country arises at this level of experience. The prejudices, the passions and the dogmatism involved turn on the European side, on memories of expectations and frustrations, and more deeply unacknowledged, on the guilts and fears, and on the Aboriginal side on fidelity to a primordial way of thinking and feeling which most of us have been trained to condemn and despise. So the tools of historical understanding may not be the most appropriate for getting to the heart of the problem, certainly not of understanding the sources of its violence. We may need to supplement the historian's discourse with the knowledge provided by another kind of language, the language of the symbol. This brings us to the province of literature, traditionally suspect by the scientific historian whose criterion of truth is what is measurable and quantifiable. There is no space here to argue the case for the importance of this kind of knowledge. That is a task for another time. In the meantime, however, one hopes that readers will take up the challenge and begin to investigate the matter for themselves. It may be that what we white Australians most need is a reminder of who we really are and where we actually live, newcomers in an ancient land, who may need more than we realise to learn from the people...
who have lived here for millennia how to adjust to this environment. As Paddy Roe puts it in Reading the Country: "You people try to dig a little bit more deep — you bin digging only white soil — try to find the black soil inside."

Veronica Brady
DIANE FAHEY

Incident at a Holiday Cottage
At Polruan, September, 1984

A crystal talon curves from the stem fallen at my feet;
through its base, linoleum whirls, red and ochre.
Further into the room, glass mosaics the carpet,
slivers lie beneath bookshelves, chairs,
as if flung from a great height.

Afternoon bathes each cutting edge in light.
I brush particles, odd shapes, together
and they gleam among dust, crumbs, lint.
I cannot imagine them ever
recomposing a wineglass. Each fragment
is a jigsaw piece, jagged and bright,
holding manifold transparent others.
I open the window, put my hands out
into the cold air that covers
all I see — two villages held apart
by an estuary. Autumn skies radiate
amber and saffron to the eye through water-
grey cloud. As if snow had fallen from that
glass dome, the air is stripped, pure. The river,
broken by sea-bound ships, stays whole, intact.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

REGINALD BERRY — teaches English at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

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MARION HALLIGAN — was born in Newcastle, N.S.W., now lives in Canberra. She is a part-time teacher and book reviewer and has received a Literature Board Grant. Her stories have appeared in Australia literary journals.

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ANDREW LANDSDOWN — was employed by the Shire of Kalamunda as Writer in the Community in 1984, when "Parrots For Podiatry" was written. The story does not relate to the Kalamunda Shire, for whose kindness the writer remains indebted.

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FIONA McGregor — was born in Sydney in 1965, plays saxophone and works in a pub. "Cumquats" is the first piece she has submitted for publication.
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BRUCE OAKMAN — has previously published one short story and was a prize winner in the F.A.W. National Literary Awards, 1983 for unpublished writers.

DOROTHY FEATHERSTONE PORTER — lives in Sydney and has published three collections of poetry, including *The Night Parrot*.

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