

EUREKA STREET

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Bricks, mortar and beyond

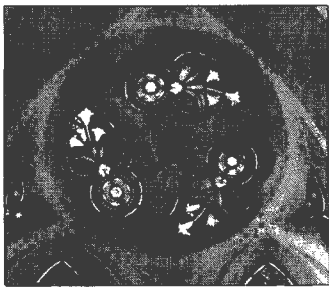
Margaret Simons and K.E. Power
on Australia's housing crisis

Dark nights and epiphanies

Ross Collings on St John of the Cross



Australia has long been one of the most generously housed countries in the world, but times have changed. There is no longer room at the inn for everyone. *See p.8*



Afternoon light,
Immaculate Conception Church,
Hawthorn, Victoria.

EUREKA STREET

Volume 1 Number 10
December 1991

A magazine of public affairs, the arts and theology

Eureka Street
*wishes its readers
all the blessings of
the Christmas season.*

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Of wanderers and children

CHRISTMAS, IF WE ALLOW IT TO DO SO, can turn all of us pensive. It is a time for believers to blow on the coals of their hope, whatever the year has brought. Passingly, too, disbelievers can reflect on what might have been, had there been some divinity in our flesh, and something more than days in our days. And all the time the children, not yet full members of either party, can watch to see how the game is played; hardly ever hinting at it, they are the scrutineers of our votes in life and the judges of our hearts. It is their season, whether or not they know it, and whether or not we notice it.

The poets, who like the children are often caught between belief and disbelief, have done a lot of musing about Christmas. The young Robert Lowell wrote in *Christmas Eve Under Hooker's Statue*,

*But we are old, our fields are running wild:
Till Christ again turn wanderer and child*

Hooker was a Civil War general; Lowell was magnetised and horrified by violence, and the question of who really was the Prince of the World came over him like a snowdrift during the Second World War. Yeats, years before, in *The Second Coming*, had been visited by the nightmare of a lethal half-human beast that emerged in the desert and slouched 'towards Bethlehem to be born'. Hardy, earlier, thought that he might, but knew that he wouldn't, join oxen at midnight in revering a child who was not just a child in the December cold, 'hoping it might be so'. Auden, thinking of Rilke's magisterial voicing of what it is to be bereft, called him 'the Santa Claus of loneliness'.

As we make our ways towards and past Christmas 1991, all these phrases might have been minted for us. Those things which are the common historical property, things like the Gulf War, the recession, the convulsing of Eastern Europe, the mutations of East Asia, attract endless analysis, as they should: but they might also call for the poets' phrasing of their significance. And when we come to the incalculably various psychic worlds that we inhabit, we have no comprehensive words for their contours and changes, yet I suspect that the notes touched by those four men can resonate in all those worlds. God help us if, at Christmas, we cannot find some sayings at once delicate, profound and pertinent to us all.

There are two reasons for saying this. The first is that for most of the year we tend to allow others to set the imaginative agenda for us, needlessly. Television's fantasy world is the easiest and most obvious example of this: the weird little module that squats in our living rooms offers to be the conquistador of our imagination's continent, and almost to a woman, almost to a man, we bless its arrival. Even without it though, many agencies would still, as they always have, offer us a pre-imagined, pre-formulated world. Our architects do this, our journalists, our political commentators, our garnishers of supermarkets, our bankers, our cosmeticians, our moralisers, our designers of clothes, the designers of our hearts.

It is a good thing that all of these people exist and do their work, but like even the best things in the world, none of them is enough, and each of them can be abused. I believe that most of us possess a creativity of vision of a kind, and to a degree, that has hardly ever been explored. There are computers that, from time to time, say reproachfully to their users, 'I am only operating at 15 per cent of capacity'. It is so with most of us. What we get from those we hire, as models and visions of the life we might live, is small change compared with what we might envisage for ourselves. The ironical figure who said, 'Live? Our servants will do

that for us!' did not have his reality only in another century, another world: he is our own dubious sibling. The first thing that we have a right to demand of artists is that they should be gadflies of our own possibilities, *agents provocateurs* of the imagination.

Entertainers make hay; artists make trouble.

BUT WHAT HAS THIS to do with Christmas? Here I come to my 'second reason'. The fact is that, in the midst of all the precious companionship of the season, and behind all the materialist charades that precede it, Christmas is a summons to a change of heart, to conversion; there is a Holy Week just beyond its Mardi Gras. Ours, said St Paul, is a creation struggling to be born. Our world is a waif, with a waif's capacity to stay just that way—attenuated, uncommitted, god-forsaken because self-forsaken. Every great social critic or satirist in the western tradition, whatever they have thought about formal religion, has identified our shared temptation towards a perverse trivialising not only of imaginative capacities,

but of our moral and spiritual ones too—a pursuit of what might be called aggressive narcissism.

The gospel account of Christ's birth gives the back of its hand to all such postures. Rebutting all of the human inclination to settle into the given, the incontestable, the 'way of the world', the 'so it goes', it is all about transferral, upheaval, outbreak. Every principal figure is plucked from somewhere else: Mary and Joseph from Nazareth, shepherds from their flocks, angels from their choral base, and the Son of God from heaven. It is a moment of perturbation and of promise, both.

The Christmas of the gospel, like the Christ of the gospel, is *wanderer* and child.

A few months ago, Henri de Lubac SJ, a good man and a great theologian, died. He had meditated for decades not only on Christianity but on what the French so properly keep calling 'the human condition'. He once wrote, 'The humility of the saints is not the humility we attribute to them. Nor is their love what we imagine it to be. And to say everything—if we must—our God is not their God. Yet each of us, at the bottom of his heart, has some inkling of the difference, and can begin to measure the gulf. And that knowledge helps us to reduce it. Each one of us, if he will but attend, can have some premonition of the strange new country in which the saint finds his

home.' The 'strange new country' cannot be mapped as Australia, but it can be mapped by living Australians.

De Lubac was not a man to cherish illusions. He had seen his country shamed, his friends shot, his church ignoble as well as noble. He could have murmured, in concert with Lowell, Yeats, Hardy and Auden that he knew the stink of the stable. But he also knew that it is not only at festivals of nativity that we can be seized by the hope of new birth and rebirth. It is a humiliating thing, in a way, that we Australians are so often uncertain what to make of ourselves, caught between a cringe and a strut: but at least our ungainliness can remind us that the case is not closed, our venture is still open. Emmanuel Mounier said, 'for all we know, we may be first-generation Christians'; who is to say that he was wrong? And why on earth would we want to? ■

Peter Steele SJ is reader in English at the University of Melbourne.



A sensitive issue

From Frances Keighery

I haven't been able to read November's *Eureka Street* yet because of the smell, which I can only describe as the 'new car smell'. I have lately become very allergic to several things and am beginning treatment, but I thought I would let you know in case you get any other complaints.

Frances Keighery
South Yarra, Vic.

Left out

From Bob Corcoran

I understand that constraints on space make it desirable to curtail the length of contributions to *Eureka Street*. However, I feel that deletions from my letter published in the October issue resulted in a distorted and lessened indication of my disagreement with Robert Murray's beliefs about the Movement.

In particular, I suggested that anyone interested in the matter should study other source material in addition to Murray's *The Split*. My recommendation that Paul Ormonde's *The Movement*, should also be read was deleted from my letter and this saddens me, as I feel it is essential to read both books to gain a rounded view.

Ormonde's work takes a much more critical view of the Movement

Eureka Street welcomes letters from its readers. Short letters are more likely to be published, and all letters may be edited. Letters must be signed, and should include a contact phone number and the writer's name and address.



than Murray's and contains first hand accounts of the manner in which the Movement operated in practice. One of these was my own contribution in the form of an appendix. As *The Movement* is now out of print and difficult to obtain from libraries, I would be pleased to send a copy of this appendix to any of your readers who may be interested.

Bob Corcoran
Edithvale, Vic.

Cross purposes

From Elizabeth Fowler, curator, Chapter Hall Museum, St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney.

It was with some surprise and irritation that I read Joanna Mendelsohn's review of 'Windows on Eternity' (*Eureka Street*, July 1991) an exhibition of icons at the Chapter Hall Museum.

This style of criticism does nothing to further critical analysis of museum exhibitions. Instead, it only serves to illustrate the lack of good criticism in this area. Again, we are subjected to a 'review'. Further, the reviewer is an art critic and 'Windows on Eternity' is not an art exhibition and makes no claims to be such.

As a museum exhibition, its concern lies with introducing the visitor to some of the different icons used in Christian homes and churches, and in placing these within an historical

context. To avoid errors, a good critic will ensure all the facts are correct by establishing contact with reliable sources of information. This did not happen. The reviewer made no contact with museum staff, and hence did not have the information which may have led to an understanding in her review of the rationale behind the museum and the exhibition. The end result is that the readers are presented with an imbalanced, uninformed account.

The exhibition is not an exercise in selecting the ultimate works of Eastern Christian art. It was arranged to celebrate a significant religious and historical event in the life of the Redemptorist Congregation which for 125 years has been promoting religious devotion to the icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help.

The museum does not claim that the icons on display are great works of art, and no one would dispute that the best icons are found in Russia (except perhaps the Greeks). In fact, many good examples are found elsewhere. Yet our reviewer finds it necessary to inform us that the Northern Hemisphere houses most of the world's great museum collections. So what? Does that mean that the small museum is Australia should deny the public access to our 19th century and earlier examples, all because they are not the biggest and the best? Surely it is better to view these icons for what they are, learning something of another Christian tradition. One does not always have to travel to the Northern Hemisphere to learn.

The Chapter Hall Museum is not a cathedral, nor is it inside a cathedral. The cathedral is a place of worship and the museum is not. The critic's reference to the cathedrals as museums makes no sense, because we are not talking about cathedrals in the first place. Although numerous art and craft exhibitions have been held in the museum since it opened in 1988, these have been of a commercial nature and are not the primary focus of the museum.

The International Council of Museums defines a museum as a place for research, conservation, exhibitions, acquisitions, education and enjoyment, all of which are aspects of the Chapter Hall Museum.

Elizabeth Fowler
Sydney, NSW



Exiles 1: Cambodia

THE CAMBODIAN PEACE TREATY has not been a beacon of hope for all Cambodians. A group of Cambodian boat people fear that it may be used as an excuse to block their applications for admission to Australia as refugees.

The group numbered 114 when they arrived in Broome in April last year. They were taken to the Enterprise Migrant Centre in the Melbourne suburb of Springvale, where they were to have remained while their applications were considered by the Immigration Department's 'determination of refugee status' committee.

In August, however, Cambodian radio reported that they were to be repatriated, and on 19 August five Cambodians went missing from the migrant centre. Immigration officials retaliated swiftly and on 23 August removed 10 men from the group, placing them in the Maribyrnong Detention Centre. The men were told that, although they themselves had done no wrong, they were being separated from the larger group because five others had escaped.

Sr Rose Duffy, a Victorian Bridgeline who has worked with the Cambodians since they arrived at Springvale, said they were terrified by the detentions. 'It was the kind of tactic they associated with Pol Pot—the sort of experience from which they were seeking refuge,' she said.

Another six left the centre on 25 August, and at 6am on 30 August all Cambodians at the Enterprise Centre were awakened and told they were being sent to Westbridge Detention Centre, near Sydney, to ensure that there would be no more escapes.

More than 100 officers were present to load 107 Cambodians onto buses—the group now included children born since their parents arrived in Australia. Families were separated, with men in one bus and the women and children in another. Before taking the group to Tullamarine Airport, the buses called at Maribyrnong to collect the 10 who had been separated earlier.

After arrival in Sydney, the group were issued with new identification papers. At Enterprise their papers had been stamped 'Cambodian boat people'. The papers now read 'Detainee'. When *Eureka Street* went to press in

mid-November, the Cambodians at Westbridge still did not know their fate. They fear they may be sent to join other Cambodians in detention at Port Hedland, prior to being repatriated.

Sr Rose believes they are all genuine refugees—people who have left their homeland out of a well-founded fear of persecution. 'That is so even though individuals may not be able to prove that it is well-founded,' she said. 'And with their memory of genocide, it isn't surprising that the signing of a piece of paper by warring faction leaders has not allayed their fears.'

The Cambodians hope that the Immigration Department will see it that way, too.

Exiles 2: Vietnam

WITH PRESSURE ON the United States to normalise relations with Vietnam, and with many countries already geared up for massive investment in Vietnam, the voices of Vietnamese in Hong Kong detention centres who do not wish to be repatriated are going unheard.

In November, there were 19,637 Vietnamese boat people in Hong Kong who had been through the screening process but had not met the criteria for refugee status under Hong Kong's interpretation of the internationally recognised definition, and are now termed 'illegal immigrants'.

The first practical step in the recent repatriation talks occurred when Hanoi agreed to take back, if necessary against their will, those who have returned to Hong Kong for a second time after volunteering to go back to Vietnam. The second step, it seems, will be for Hanoi to accept back boat people whom the Hong Kong government intends to screen out on arrival.

A spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Alex Casella, said UNHCR was satisfied that none of the 15,000 boat people who had returned to Vietnam from Asia were being harassed.

But Paul White, a volunteer with the Jesuit Refugee Service in Hong Kong, said many could not trust Hanoi's assurances that they would not be mistreated, and had nothing to go back to anyway.

'Vietnam is still poor and reports of corruption are frequent,' he said. 'Things can't improve until the US

lifts the trade embargo that has strangled the Vietnamese economy.'

Tax talk

TAX, LIKE WAR, can be a little less odious and burdensome if guided by a few clear principles of performance. Dr Terry Dwyer, a former Treasury official who is now consultant to the National Catholic Welfare Commission, argued for a number of them at a seminar on consumption and income taxes in Canberra in September. The seminar was sponsored by the National Tax Research Foundation, and Dwyer spoke on income-tax basics. He argues that tax policy should be based on three principles:

'The state should do no harm. Public tax/transfer arrangements should not undermine either self-provision against poverty or voluntary private redistribution.

'The poor should not pay tax.

'Taxes should be levied according to the ability to pay.'

He explains: 'The current income tax system violates these principles because it has virtually abandoned any regard to pay tax of a family breadwinner. It is no answer to the deficiencies of the tax system to suggest that indigent families should throw themselves on the social security system. It is morally, socially and economically preferable that family breadwinners be encouraged to support their own dependants.'

'If the tax system ignores family dependants then the Treasury should not complain if taxpayers move their families into the social security system. The interesting severity of the tax burdens borne by families and, in particular, single-income families is borne out by statistics. From 1950 to 1988 the effective average tax burden on a single-income family of husband, wife and two children rose from 4.87 per cent to 18.86 per cent (see EPAC paper no. 35, 'Income Support Policies, Taxation and Incentives', appendix 3, p.86).

'The basis of income taxation is that income should be taxed once only, and in the hands of the beneficial recipient. In families the beneficial recipients of income are *not* necessarily those who earn the income but *all* who are sustained by it. To pretend otherwise is to deny reality.' ■

THE NATION
MARGARET SIMONS

There's no place like home

A home of one's own has long been part of the Great Australian Dream, but the dream is moving further and further from reality.

IN 1969, GOUGH WHITLAM SAID that in building cities 'we come nearest in scale to what God does in creating the stars, the hills and the forests.' It was a grand and reassuring statement, but most cities have not been consciously created. They have just grown, and the complex social, political and economic factors that mould the places in which we live have made our cities tangled and largely unsatisfactory. Ever since the industrial revolution, planners have been trying to come up with better ways of organising where and how city dwellers are housed.

Housing is politically fashionable again, and in Australia that means cities. Money is being doled out for Better Cities programs, and the government's approach to housing is under review from several different, and conflicting, directions. The question hanging over the debate about housing is whether we will be improving our haphazard urban creations, or just shaping them in the yuppie image of the policy makers.

Concerns about how and where we live cut across the question of how we are governed. The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Housing, Brian Howe, is Whitlam's direct descendant on this issue, and thus something of an irritant to the present, more prosaic regime. Like Whitlam, Howe believes housing and city

planning are largely about equity. As he put it in a speech earlier this year, in the '90s 'we must go beyond questions of income distribution if we are to develop a more equitable Australia.'

In 1990, immediately after the last election, Howe set up the National Housing Strategy within his department, and appointed Dr Meredith Edwards as its head. She has not pulled her punches. This year her unit came up with a set of embarrassing issues papers which showed, among other things, that the Labor government's policies had made it harder than ever for ordinary people to own their own home.

Due to financial deregulation and rising interest rates, the cost of housing finance has become prohibitive, with income needed to service loans rising faster than overall incomes. The deposit for an average home rose from just over a year's average pay in 1979 to more than two years' pay in 1990.

Yet the Great Australian Dream of home ownership has continued to exert a tyranny over Government



policy. Home owners have been effectively subsidised through exemption from capital gains tax, and all sorts of schemes are available to help those at the margins of home ownership afford that first loan. Australians renting private accommodation, however, have received much lower levels of assistance, while rents have soared. And reintroduction of negative gearing for rental properties has skewed the market, making low-cost rental accommodation a less and less attractive investment.

ACCORDING TO DR EDWARD'S OFFICE, this combination of policies has made private rental accommodation so expensive that almost 40 per cent of tenants spend more than a quarter of their income just on keeping a roof over their heads. Worse, just about all low income private renters were spending more than 40 per cent of their income on housing.

The situation described by the National Housing Strategy is the reverse of equity. It means that the poorest Australians have less and less chance of affording to live decently, and no chance at all of being able to afford a home. The proportion of home ownership in the population is stable at about 70 per cent, but this is largely because of the aging of the population. More and more younger people are delaying home ownership, or dropping out of the race altogether.

The National Housing Strategy made two important recommendations to redress the inequities it found. First, it suggested that the state subsidies for public housing tenants should be abolished, together with the meagre rental assistance payments the government makes to welfare recipients. These should be replaced by a broadly based system, under which the government would subsidise all low-income tenants who spend more than 30 per cent of their income on rent.

As a result of this proposal, the bureaucracy has been investigating ways of delivering broader based rental assistance through the social security system. However, it is not clear where the money would come from, unless the government is willing to abolish negative gearing. The National Housing Strategy's second recommendation was a proposal that the Government give tax incentives to encourage large-scale private rental property trusts, effectively extending the capital gains tax exemption to rental property. The trusts would then build low-cost housing for rent. These proposals are still under study by interdepartmental committees.

MARTIN ATTRIDGE, POLICY AND RESEARCH DIRECTOR for the peak housing body, National Shelter, has no problems with decreasing home ownership, and is definitely against government subsidies being directed towards increasing it. 'We believe the government should have no role in subsidising people into asset accumulation,' he says. 'Politically, no one seems prepared to touch home ownership, yet it has probably caused most of our urban problems. The quarter-acre block has forced

our cities to spread, and the poorer people are forced onto the fringe. We are developing very stratified cities with real class divisions, and, I think, long-term social costs.'

Attridge favours rental assistance, but not at the expense of the bricks and mortar of public housing. 'Why put money in the landlord's pockets when you could invest in the building itself?' he says. He is concerned about the blurring of private and public housing involved in the rental trusts idea. 'You are moving public housing into an area where it is expected to deliver a profit.' But he agrees that given grossly inadequate public housing—200,000 Australians are on waiting lists for public housing—it is clear that other methods of providing housing will have to be investigated.

Back in 1969 Gough Whitlam, still in messianic mode, said that equality of opportunity was 'really determined by where a family lives. So we have no pre-occupation with equality of incomes. We are striving for an equality of environment in the total sense.' It is here that the housing debate intersects with the debate on cities.

In July this year Whitlam's words were echoed by Howe, who said that the way Australia's cities are developing was not only 'economic lunacy' but also was entrenching 'unequal access to employment and services ... No matter what progress is made in achieving redistribution of incomes, these problems would entrench structural inequalities in Australia that might never be overcome.'

Hence the government's Better Cities program, announced in the last federal budget, and one of the most open-ended and experimental programs in this government's history. The government is offering \$800 million to the states and, strapped for cash as most of them are, they have been eager to soak it up. The federal government has been swamped with proposals for spending the money, many of them both innovative and equitable.

The 'doughnut effect' of Australia's cities, in which the inner suburbs are gradually depopulated in favor of the city fringes, would, if not arrested, see more than half of Australia's new dwellings in the next 10 years built on the city fringes, involving billions of dollars being spent on transport, health centres, schools and the like.

Quite apart from the long-term indirect costs involved in gobbling up farm land, the infrastructure costs of developing each allotment in the main cities is about \$47,000 in Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane and \$60,000 in Sydney. About half of this is borne by the public purse.

No modern population anywhere in the Western world has yet desired to reduce its living space. If government tries to force such an historic reversal, trouble is likely.

—HUGH STRETTON

*The poorest
Australians have
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all of being able to
afford a home.*

Social, environmental and economic imperatives, and certainly fashion, all seem to point the way towards an end to the quarter-acre block, and a move to smaller, denser cities.

But not everyone agrees. In an article in the magazine *Architecture Australia*, the historian and urban economist Hugh Stretton said: 'No modern population anywhere in the Western world has yet desired to reduce its living space. If government tries to force such an historic reversal, trouble is likely.'

Others have also expressed scepticism. The head of the urban research program at the Australian National University's research school of social sciences, Professor Patrick Troy, questions Howe's assumption that the infrastructure in the inner areas of the cities is of a standard to support increased populations.

He believes the government needs to establish a policy which recognises that as people increase their standard of living, they will want more public and private space. He advocates policies that would foster employment and facilities in regional centres, and at public transport 'nodes' within the metropolitan area.

Troy's ideas sound like some of the ideas behind Adelaide's Multi-Function Polis, which is to be developed not so much as a single unit but as a set of interconnected villages. The MFP, aptly described recently by the secretary of the ACTU, Bill Kelty, as 'a clever little thing that's got everyone confused' is being touted by its own publicists as the 'model city' for the future.

Criticism of the MFP has now passed beyond the stage of concern about racial enclaves. It is anticipated that the racial mix will be much the same as the rest of Adelaide. Instead, the worry is that it will be a yuppie enclave. It is estimated that 50,000 people will live on-site at the MFP in high density buildings, including apartments and terrace housing, which will be designed so people can work and study at home using high technology. These buildings will be located in linked but self-contained 'villages' of about a kilometre square, each with its own facilities divided from each other by park land and open space.

The people who work in the MFP will necessarily be highly skilled and educated. At the moment, the area surrounding the Gillman site, 15 kilometres outside Adelaide, is semi-industrial and working class. The project director for the MFP, Mr Rod Keller, says measures are being taken to try to ensure that the MFP benefits those areas as well. No schools will be built in the MFP, meaning children will be educated in the surrounding area. No large shopping centres will be built, forcing MFP residents to go to surrounding stores.

Keller disagrees with suggestions that Australians will not be able to prise themselves away from their quarter-acre blocks. 'I think the generally acknowledged thing all over the world is that people live better in a

community which they can identify with.' He points to the enormous changes in garbage collection due to recycling and composting as a sign that attitudes can change quickly. 'That's been done without a major effort. If you just force the pace a little, I think you can change practices and attitudes quite fast in this area.' But whatever the MFP might have to offer in the way of new urban design, nobody pretends that it will have much to say about equity. Will the Better Cities money be distributed more equitably?

BUILDING BETTER CITIES, if it means anything at all, means wide scale cooperation between state, federal and local governments. It is here that the housing debate cuts across the debate about how we ought to be governed, and is in itself a challenge for the special Premier's conferences now underway to reform the Australian federal system.

At present, almost half of the money the Commonwealth gives the states is in the form of special purpose grants—made for designated purposes, such as housing. Under the new federalism arrangements, the Commonwealth has agreed to radically cut the number of special purpose grants, freeing up the way in which the states can spend their money.

It is a proposal that could have profound implications for the housing debate. Given the recession-induced collapse in state revenues, housing authorities would have far less chance of attracting their share of public revenue if their grants were not tied.

Attridge says: 'Bluntly, the states cannot be trusted to deliver proper services. That is the reason why specific purpose grants were established, and why they comprise almost half Commonwealth payments to the states. It is the only confident means by which a national standard of services can be encouraged.'

In September, after a stormy meeting between state and Commonwealth ministers, it was agreed that the Commonwealth-state housing agreements would remain, but be renegotiated, meaning that money provided for housing would still come in the form of tied grants. These negotiations hinged largely on the special Premier's conference that was scheduled to be held in late November.

The new federalism agenda has the potential to run directly across the National Housing Strategy proposals. Some papers from the National Housing Strategy, including one on the future role of state housing authorities, have already been rescheduled.

The Better Cities money, following the trend, is not being made as a tied or special purpose payment, although the Commonwealth Government will have the power to negotiate with states to make sure that 'agreed outcomes' are achieved.

None of the states have had trouble coming up with ways of spending the Better Cities money. New South Wales, for example, proposes reclaiming Commonwealth land in St Mary's and the city west for new housing and better public transport links. The question



Looking to bridge the gap: Brian Howe and Meredith Edwards at Lynch's Bridge

[Photo: courtesy of *The Age*.]

is, given the federal government's relaxation of control over the money, and the piecemeal nature of the funding, can anybody ensure that Better Cities planning continues to be about equity?

ONE OF THE MOST ADVANCED projects qualifying for funding is the Lynch's Bridge project in Melbourne, which is being developed on the site of old stock markets in Kensington, a working-class suburb that is rapidly gentrifying. Under the aegis of the Victorian Government's Special Project Unit, Lynch's Bridge is one of the biggest suburban 'infill' projects now underway, and probably the most advanced example of government-encouraged denser housing.

On the Lynch's Bridge site, there will be an average of four dwellings to each suburban-block sized piece of land. The unit cost of providing sewers, roads and other services is about \$13,000 a block, compared to between \$50,000 and \$80,000 a block in the outer suburbs.

When completed, it will incorporate about 1500 dwellings, at least a fifth of which will be public housing indistinguishable from the other houses. Better Cities money is earmarked for flood mitigation works allowing government land to be developed to expand the project.

In spite of the public housing requirements, when Lynch's Bridge first began to be developed, the assumption was that it would become a yuppie suburb. In 1989, the first developers built luxury boxes, complete with jacuzzis and microwaves, and put them on the market at prices of up to \$300,000. Houses in the surrounding streets were selling for half that amount.

The recession meant the units did not sell, and some builders went broke. With the project stalled, the government forced a change of direction. Pioneer homes,

with their reputation for basic, low-cost housing, were actively courted by the government, and have now built units that sell for prices in the low to mid \$100,000s.

The project's director, Jon Shields, who has overseen the change of direction, says: 'The yuppie enclave idea was totally wrong ... This still isn't exactly low-cost housing, but it's more in line with prices in the surrounding suburbs.' Now, areas of Lynch's Bridge close to busy roads have been sold to builders wishing to construct low cost private rental housing. Mr Shields says: 'The sort of brick six-pack flats that people built a few decades ago simply aren't being built any more, and they have realised there is a gap in the market for some sort of low-cost flats.'

One of the questions now on the Victorian Government's agenda is what to do with the money it will make from selling Lynch's Bridge land. Should it be used to provide more public housing, on Lynch's Bridge or elsewhere, or should it go to low-start home loans and similar schemes aimed at increasing home ownership among people on low incomes? Shields is not in a position to comment, but says given the present state of the Government's finances, there is no guarantee that it will stay in the housing area at all. 'It just goes into general revenue.'

In the case of Lynch's Bridge, it was not government policy which forced the change in direction, but market forces. Just as the states cannot always be relied upon to make housing a priority, the markets cannot always be relied upon to work so equitably.

Creation is a complicated business. ■

Margaret Simons is a freelance journalist based in South Australia. She is a regular contributor to *Eureka Street*.



Making it *our* house

What do women look for in housing policy? In 1991 Women In Supportive Housing (WISH) collaborated with a Victorian government ministerial adviser in a statewide consultation. They produced a report, 'Speaking of Housing', which has since been used by the Victorian Council against Violence, the Department of Housing and Construction, and Community Services Victoria.

K.E. Power discusses the report's findings.

WOMEN SPEAK OF COMMUNITY AND HOUSING in terms of a spirit among people. Phrases like 'a place to belong', 'where somebody knows my name', echo through their discussion of what matters. It is about being close to people you know, helping one another, real friendliness; it is about 'talking over the back fence'. It can also mean being part of a network that provides information about jobs and housing—this is especially so in the country. Good neighbours are also considerate, do not hold lots of noisy parties, are not violent, and keep their yards nice. They welcome newcomers, care for properties and pets during absences, and 'everybody communicates'.

Knowing people means not hiding behind big fences, being able to meet people walking along the street. But first and foremost it usually means knowing one's neighbours. Two typical comments were: 'If you have good neighbours, you're right,' and 'People stand behind you, really rally to help.' Good neighbours are invariably those who 'are there if you need them but they don't live in your pocket'.

For some women neighbourliness includes inviting and being invited into each others' homes; for others it is a concern that does not intrude on their personal space. An old woman spoke of young neighbours who keep an eye on her: if they do not see her about they check on her, but 'they don't come in, they always ring up'. And this is what she prefers. This tension between group identity and the need for privacy was expressed by one young woman, commenting on women's perceptions of her suburb as peaceful and quiet. She said:

'You hear the silence. I love listening to the silence, but I know there is something on the other side. Now, during the day, I know there's nothing on the other side of it. No one to help, no one to go and have a cuppa with, no one; just five minutes company, so there's none

of that on the other side of the silence.'

Being known by local people creates a sense of security. A young woman spoke of the sense of personal safety she felt knowing most other youngsters by their friendship groups and schools. If anybody 'tried anything', you would recognize them, name their friends and their schools. And in the community you know who to avoid, and who to tell to 'piss off'. This is consistent with older women's comments that you feel comfortable when you know the people 'surrounding you', and that in a good community your kids are safe and everybody helps supervise them. This is especially so in small country towns where most people recognize the kid from round the corner.

With the increased awareness about public and domestic violence towards women, however, safety is a relative concept. Few women feel perfectly safe in public, or when home alone; many spoke of locking their doors at times when they never would have years ago, and of the tension between seeking safety and security, and feeling that they were living in 'gaol', a 'fortress', or a 'compound'. Many women resent their confinement within a home that is no longer safe anyway. One preferable alternative, for them, is to set a curfew on men, and let women have safe access to public spaces.

SOME WOMEN SUGGEST that unity derives from shared beliefs. For some groups this meant a shared concern for the environment, in others a shared religious vision, in others it meant growing up with one another. Growing up together can make a powerful contribution to the sense of personal worth and security people feel. A young woman told us about her small town 'banding together' to take on the shire council over road safety issues.



In groups where the sense of 'community' is grounded in a shared ideology of home ownership, it is not uncommon to find that the community perceives itself as exclusive. There are concerns about having rental properties in their area, because they 'go to seed'. Tenants are often excluded from community networks, and women perceived as living in sub-standard housing can be deliberately isolated or rejected. In one such case, there were public meetings to stop public tenants from moving in and causing 'single-mother slums'. In another locality, people were worried about residential units for the intellectually disabled, fearing a drop in property values. Cultural stereotypes can also function in this way, to exclude Aboriginal or migrant women. One Aboriginal woman commented: 'We need an awareness of understanding of everyone's culture. There's no one right way to live.'

So shared goals and common concerns can serve to bind some but exclude others, and may create divisions within a community, or lead to alternate communities within a geographic area. There is a perceived need for a personal investment in the maintenance and sustenance of the community, and adaptation to community mores. It is important to 'mould' into the community. One woman spoke of her experience soon after moving into a country town: 'I was a working mother in partnership with my husband. I went up the street in sundress and scuffs, and women looked at me like I was a hooker. On Fridays in Castlemaine, women dress like in Collins Street.'

Initially, personal involvement in a community can occur through neighbourly contacts, which often happen through children; it can take the form of consideration in times of illness and incapacity, and time to stop and talk with people you meet—women especially see small shopping centres as supporting 'community contact'. Not only do you meet people you know, you get to know shopkeepers who take a personal interest and are less likely to 'rip you off'. The way to invest on a larger scale is through 'joining things to learn about the community'. Volunteer work, sporting bodies, kinder and school activities, mothers' clubs, churches, and bowling clubs were some of the avenues mentioned.

The experience of women in small country towns highlights both positive and negative aspects of communities where ties are strong. Country communities are still centred on families, and family support networks are usually very strong. One woman described them as dynasties in which family and local politics are inter-

mingled. If townships are very small, women say that they are too small for cliques, and everyone is absorbed into the community, but in larger towns newcomers can find it difficult to become included, especially women who are isolated in the home.

BUT IN LARGER COMMUNITIES it appears that one does not have to know everyone to feel accepted, as long as there is a place to belong: One old woman said, 'This is my community, St Vincent de Paul and this community house. I'm never in.'

Where community ties are tenuous, where individuals are excluded from the networks because of race, transience, or perceived difference, women do not feel that they belong and hence feel even less safe. A Filipina who was badly beaten by her husband, and whose screams were ignored by the neighbours in her block of flats was left distraught by the experience. 'Some women could die in their houses before anybody knows about it. Bodies can rot before anyone can find them. People should help each other. What is this love, care or community we preach when we don't care about violence?'

Feeling lonely or excluded reinforces feelings of personal inferiority. One woman described her experience this way: 'Living in sub-standard housing has social implications. The neighbours wouldn't visit and wouldn't play with my daughter. You start to feel inferior about yourself.' The women's experience I've related here underlines the interconnectedness of the factors involved in community:

Friendly relations with neighbours.

Permanence of residence.

A sense of belonging to one or more groups in the area.

Values that are shared among the group.

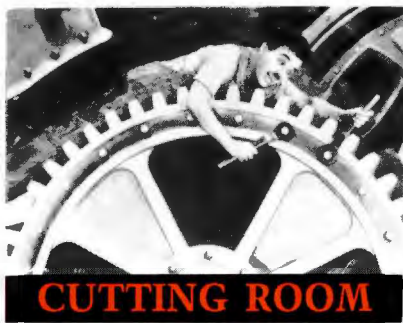
Drawing boundaries between public and private spaces, so that neighbours know when not to intrude.

Community resources that help people to interact.

Time, to talk, to help, to become friends.

One woman summed it up succinctly in her open letter: 'Adequate housing, with a real sense of 'home' is essential for a woman's feeling of self worth or wholeness. (I do not mean this in any monetary sense.) It has more to do with stability, belonging, having a place in the world.'

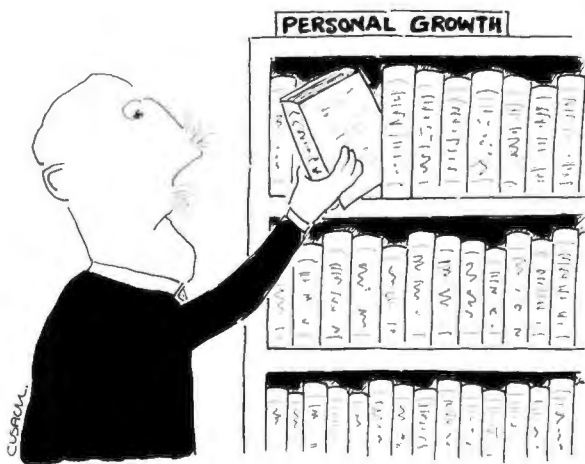
K.E. Power is a postgraduate student in religious studies at La Trobe University, and a co-author of the WISH report. The report is available from WISH, (03) 510 9229.



Iraqi exodus

Since the end of the Gulf War, Iraqi Christians have been running scared. Many are also running away. More than 30,000 are believed to have fled to Jordan and about 10,000 to Turkey, according to the director of the Middle East Council of Churches, Gabriel Habib. A majority of the Christians in Jordan would eventually return to Iraq, Habib said, partly because of limited chances of obtaining visas elsewhere. 'They are in a dilemma,' he said. 'They are afraid of tomorrow.' The problem is not a new one: Habib estimates that the number of Christians in the Middle East, the cradle of Christianity, has fallen by 30 per cent in the past two decades.

There are now about 14 million Christians in the region. In Iraq, Christians regarded the regime of Saddam Hussein as less threatening than that which his opponents would establish if he is toppled. Perhaps because he is part of a minority himself—he is a Sunni Muslim, whereas most Iraqis are Shiites—Hussein has courted favor among Christians. Estimates of the number of Christians



among Iraq's 17 million people vary. Habib puts it at 600,000, most of whom are members of the Eastern-rite Chaldean Church. The Chaldeans, who are descendants of the ancient Nestorians, restored communion with Rome

in 1692.—William Mitchell, *National Catholic Reporter*, August 30, 1991.

War's allure

How many more wars will be generated to shore up our conviction that we can and must master the world through technology? As the myth of progress is challenged, the myth of mastery through technology becomes the only remaining way of asserting cultural predominance. As modern nations, once shaped by an overarching vision, now begin to disintegrate into collections of competing self-interests, war becomes a political necessity. As Stanley Hauerwas has put it: 'We are literally a people that morally live off our wars because they give us the necessary basis of self-sacrifice so that a people who have been taught to pursue only their own interest can at times be mobilized to die for one another'. How many more wars will be 'necessary' to provide citizens of the West with some reason to go beyond self-interest? —Mary Jo Leddy, *The Way Supplement* 1991

Written in flame

In most cases the name is unpoetical, although the fact is poetical. In the case of Smith, the name is so poetical that it must be an arduous and heroic matter for the man to live up to it. The name of Smith is the name of the one trade that even kings respected; it could claim half the glory of that *arma virumque* which all epics acclaimed.

The spirit of the smithy is so close to the spirit of song that it has mixed in a million poems, and every blacksmith is a harmonious blacksmith. The brute repose of nature, the passionate cunning of man, the strongest of earthly metals, the weirdest of earthly elements, the unconquerable iron subdued by its only conqueror, the wheel and the ploughshare, the sword and the steam-hammer, the arraying of armies and the whole legend of arms, all these things are written, briefly indeed, but quite legibly, on the visiting card of Mr Smith.

Yet our novelists call their hero 'Aylmer Valence', which means nothing, or 'Vernon Raymond', which means nothing, when it is in their power to give him this sacred name of Smith—this name made of iron and

flame. It would be very natural if a certain hauteur, a certain carriage of the head, a certain curl of the lip, distinguished everyone whose name is Smith. Perhaps it does; I trust so. Whoever else are parvenus, the Smiths are not parvenus. —G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, first published 1905.

It's all our fault

Aunt Etty was a very fierce anti-Catholic. One evening, at Burrows Hill, she attacked me on the subject. I was only about 18 and no match for her vehemence, but I did my duty and stood up to her as well as I could; and my friends could not have been more surprised than I was to find myself defending Catholicism.

She began: 'If you want a novel to hot you up against the Catholics, I've got a most shocking one here.'

Me, 'Well, I don't really need one just now, thank you, but what's it about?' Aunt Etty, 'It's about a priest who rides so fast to give a man absolution before he dies, that he KILLS his horse under him. Isn't it horrible?'

Me (mildly), Well, I suppose they believe that absolution matters more than anything else.

Aunt Etty (almost unable to speak with indignation), 'But doesn't the Horse matter? Doesn't *Cruelty* matter? How can they think, etc, etc?'

And so the battle was engaged. The whole evening the unequal contest raged, and I was thankful when, at ten o'clock, I was able to escort her up to bed, with all her luggage of hot-water bottles, and bags, and books, and shawls.

By that time I had a headache myself, and was I glad to go to bed, too. I was lying peacefully reading, and was beginning to feel a little calmer, when the door burst open and tiny, frail figure, in a red dressing gown and a white shawl, appeared at the end of my bed. Fixing me with eyes burning out from the deep hollows under her shaggy brows, she began without preamble: 'I could SWALLOW the Pope of Rome, but what I can NOT swallow is the Celibacy of the Clergy.' I think I must have become unconscious here, for I can remember no more of the interview. —*Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood*, by Gwen Raverat, first published 1952. [Raverat's Aunt Etty was Charles Darwin's daughter]



Victoria's Fairfield Hospital has national significance and an international reputation as a centre for the treatment of, and research into, infectious diseases. However, its future is in doubt.

The price of excellence

WITH A CUP OF TEA in one hand, a book in the other, Scott McCallum relaxes as the sachet of blood dribbles into his veins. For seven years McCallum, who is HIV-positive, has been visiting Melbourne's Fairfield Hospital for transfusions. The thought of going elsewhere worries him; there is a bond, he says, between Fairfield's staff and long-term patients.

Simon Willis, who has been admitted to Fairfield with complications from a severe form of eczema, is asked about his favourite drink. It is apple juice, but the hospital has none. A nurse drives to a milk bar and buys its entire stock.

David Menadue, who has had full-blown AIDS since early 1989, believes that treatment at Fairfield is keeping him alive. 'I know it's corny to say you're part of one big family there, but ...'

Fairfield's patients are deeply loyal to the hospital, and their abiding affection is a tribute to its widely recognised culture of care. It is also a major factor in making its possible closure a politically contentious issue. In June, the Victorian government approached Professor Peter McDonald, from Adelaide, and Professor Tania Sorrell, from Sydney, to review infectious disease provision in Victoria. The role of Fairfield, an infectious diseases hospital since 1904, was only part of

the professors' brief. But their recommendation in September that Fairfield shut its wards, continuing as a research institution only, has dominated subsequent debate. This debate has proceeded at a number of levels. In street rallies, on pickets and in the letters pages of the Melbourne press, the theme has been simple: Fairfield provides a first-class service—don't wreck it. But there are more complex concerns. Gay activists in AIDS organisations are anxious to save what they see as an oasis of sympathy and tolerance in an otherwise generally hostile medical world. Doctors and the Health Services Union see the hand of economic rationalism behind the Labor government's agenda.

And there is the more general question of the philosophy of medical provision; whether it is better to maintain specialist centres of care and research, or to incorporate minority fields into the mainstream. The professors' case for closure rests on two premises. The first is that Fairfield's separation from the general hospital service endangers patients by restricting access to the skills needed to treat conditions, like heart conditions or cancer, that are not directly connected with their infection. A corollary, the professors argue, is that treatment of infectious diseases in general hospitals has suffered because of the existence of Fairfield.

The second premise is that Fairfield has retained a 'quarantine' mentality. Given that about 42 per cent of patients suffer from HIV infection or AIDS, and the proportion is increasing, Fairfield is increasingly seen as 'the' AIDS hospital, allowing discrimination against AIDS patients to continue elsewhere in the hospital system. The professors concluded that Fairfield should become an infectious diseases institute, focusing on research and policy. Specialist units should be established at the Alfred and Austin hospitals, they said, and infectious disease training and services should be improved in all general hospitals.

Although no one is against better services in the major teaching hospitals, the review's recommendations have only found partial and qualified support. The claim that Fairfield inpatients are at risk is hotly contested. Dr Bryan Speed, an intensive-care specialist at Fairfield, says the hospital's panel of visiting consultants is selected from the best in the city. As evidence of the patchiness of the professors' research, he cites McDonald's claim that Speed is the only intensive-care expert at the hospital. In fact there are four, working a 24-hour roster. Speed's colleague, Dr Anne Mijch, says the review leans heavily on an assertion that the current level of care cannot be maintained, yet more than half the hospital's doctors are under 40.

McDonald acknowledges that, given the real problem of prejudice, there are risks in moving HIV and AIDS patients into general wards. The Alfred, in particular, has a 'chequered history' of dealing with AIDS. 'The first few will be those who create the room—the vanguard of changing opinions,' he says.

AIDS patients and their supporters are less sanguine. Tony Keenan, an official of the Staff Association of Catholic Secondary Schools, is president of the Victorian AIDS Council. He cites the case of a friend with

AIDS who was admitted to a major Melbourne hospital: 'He was placed in a ward with two old returned soldiers—there's a fairly significant difference in values and lifestyles. It made it difficult for his lover to visit and respond in a natural way.'

Menadue, who is convenor of the advocate group People Living With AIDS, says that simply moving AIDS patients into general hospitals in NSW has not improved the situation there. That doesn't surprise Keenan. Even Fairfield was not always a place where gay men felt comfortable. It took direct action—like physically removing unsympathetic staff from rooms—to help create the culture of care for AIDS patients. 'Now they're asking us to start again, Keenan says, '10 years into the AIDS crisis when we've lost hundreds of people, whole social networks wiped out. The energy isn't there.'

NO ONE OPPOSED to the review believes the claim that its recommendations are not budget-driven. Mijch says that although it contains some good ideas, they will be paid for by cuts.

Dr Chris Brook is director of the Health Department's North-Eastern Metropolitan Region, which includes Fairfield. He says the review was not commissioned on cost grounds, but concedes that the dwindling of inpatient numbers has affected the hospital's cost effectiveness. Victoria's Health Minister, Mrs Maureen Lyster, simply and categorically denies that cost-cutting is the government's motivation.

The circumstantial evidence points heavily in the opposite direction. According to the report, Fairfield has 154 beds—104 according to Mijch, if you allow for wards already shut for lack of funds. The review recommends the transfer of just 36. That signals danger, says Jan Armstrong, who is secretary of the Health Services

'Victoria is regarded as the leader of infectious diseases in Australia and we are in awe of the major achievements from institutions such as Fairfield Hospital ...' —**Professors McDonald and Sorrell.**

'Fairfield is regarded in the 'States and internationally as a very important research and clinical institution which is almost unique in its ability to do clinical research and care for a wide variety of infectious diseases ... Closure would be a big loss for medical science.' —**Professor Martin Hirsch**, director of the AIDS/virology program at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston.

'Simon wasn't left alone for more than 15 minutes before someone came through the door to check on him—not in an intrusive manner, but in a manner that says "Are you OK?".' —**Jennifer Willis**, mother of Fairfield patient Simon Willis.

'Fairfield Hospital has tended to see its primary role as caring for patients on site. Comment has been voiced by staff that the hospital has been "saved" by the influx of ventilator/dialysis patients and HIV patients. The reviewers believe that Fairfield Hospital no longer provides leadership in the breadth of infectious diseases and that alternative provisions are required.' —**Professors McDonald and Sorrell.**



Union Victorian no.1 branch. 'All hospitals are fighting for every dollar they can,' she says. Fairfield will get swallowed up and there won't be any special emphasis on patients' special needs.'

The review calls for existing funding to be reallocated so that the recommendations can be carried out. Yet critics say that transfer of Fairfield's clinical care wards—including the ventilator unit—could require new buildings, and research involving patients off-campus would need an ambulance courier service. The review also calls for the creation of two new positions at the level of professor. Yet the planned staffing level at the new specialist unit at the Alfred is thought to be two doctors for 12 beds. 'Those two jobs are going to be hell on wheels,' says Mijch. 'If they expect me to go down there they can stuff it up their shirts.'

What this all means is that closing Fairfield's wards and maintaining standards will need more money—and that is one option the government has not put on the table. Furthermore, the review concedes that 'there may be wisdom in co-locating' clinical care and research at a later date. Why then, say the review's critics, should they be split up in the first place, if not for financial reasons? Their suspicions are fuelled by the fact that the review was commissioned after the announcement that the wards would be shut.

Fairfield is a small hospital, handling only 12 per cent of admissions for non-HIV infectious diseases in Victoria, yet its budget is \$35 million. This creates, its supporters argue, an inherent instability between a dedicated staff and an administration ethos concerned with 'productivity', which in medical terms can only be measured in the turnover of patients. Yet specialised needs cannot be measured in days in the bed. Fairfield's chief physiotherapist, Barbara Burzak-Stefanowski, gives the example of Guillain-Barre syndrome, a collapse of muscle functions that can follow glandular fever. The patient needs intensive care for months—a nightmare for the bureaucratic mentality.

THE PROBLEM, THEREFORE, is not just a question of money. It touches on the division between the 'centre of excellence' as Fairfield is described by its supporters, and the 'mainstream' approach of general hospitals. At the centre of the debate is this question: at what point

does the bringing together of expertise, facilities, clinical care and research produce the best results? McDonald compares Fairfield unfavourably with Westmead Hospital in Sydney, which has an HIV research and care unit side by side with a 1000-bed general hospital.

He argues that specialised wards of 12 to 20 beds in bigger hospitals within the mainstream provide a combination of expertise and resources, while breaking down prejudice in the case of HIV patients. Victoria, he says, is suffering from a bad case of parochialism over Fairfield. 'What people have failed to come to grips with is the ability to provide services where they're being sought, including in the community.' Yet Dr Alun Jackson, co-ordinator of the HIV and AIDS sociobehavioural research unit at Melbourne University, replies that community care is more expensive than institutional care.

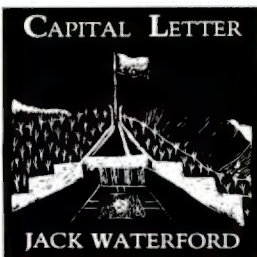
Fairfield's supporters reject the claim that the hospital has lost its leadership role. They point to the special atmosphere that has been built on decades of dedication, and the pivotal role the hospital plays in giving advice to GPs, and in training and in research. 'You only get good at doing things in medicine if you do them several times,' says Speed. There are, for example, perhaps 100 cases of malaria a year in Victoria. Spread across 15 hospitals, he argues, they provide general practitioners with precious little experience of the disease's vagaries.

IF FAIRFIELD DOCTORS SOUND ELITIST, it's a tag they're prepared to wear. As Mijch says, 'Most of us are just hard-working, but collectively we make something that's very good.' And Fairfield is justly proud of its research record. Chris Birch, a senior scientist in the virology department, says the hospital was one of the largest contributors of abstracts to a global AIDS conference in Florence this year.

McDonald says Fairfield is losing its research base. With nearly 90 per cent of infectious disease patients being treated elsewhere, the hospital does not have the requisite raw material. If Fairfield is to keep its leadership role, its work has to be linked into a network of general hospitals and community care. Fairfield staff say that hard-pressed GPs have a substantially lower rate of reporting of notifiable diseases than hospitals, that AIDS drugs testing would consume enormous staff resources if it was carried out beyond Fairfield, and that the ability to get samples to the lab within minutes is a significant factor in aiding research.

Officially, debate on the review will continue at least until January 6, the closing date for public submissions. The Minister is expected to announce a decision soon after. Most friends of Fairfield believe the health bureaucracy made its mind up long ago that the hospital must go, but that Lyster may still waver, given the Kirner government's unpopularity. ■

David Glanz is a Melbourne freelance journalist.



Conspicuous on consumption

WHEN THE HIGH COURT moved to Canberra 11 years ago, there were great hopes that its new visibility, in that ghastly crumbling fortress by Lake Burley Griffin, would bring it to its rightful place as the third arm of Australian government. More visible the court may be, but the move has failed to lift its profile. Little that the seven judges do makes the front pages, or even the inside ones. Judges are usually a retiring lot, but the diffidence and shyness of these incumbents is marked. There is more noise in the average Trappist monastery.

But appearances can be deceptive. The past 10 years of the High Court's work have seen the most profound constitutional change in Australia since federation, fundamentally altering the balance of power between the Commonwealth and the states. In the next few years, the court's influence could be even more significant. It will have a crucial role in determining debate on Commonwealth-state finances, and the shape of the coalition's proposed goods and services tax.

There is a perverse way of measuring the court's importance: a Labor government has been in power for almost nine years without losing a significant case before it. This is not because Bob Hawke isn't doing anything radical. The Commonwealth has moved to take up its power to regulate corporations, has made full use of its external affairs powers, and exercised powers over such matters as Aboriginal affairs and trade to force its will on the states in regard to the environment.

But the government's greatest boon came when the High Court threw out 85 years of confusing and contradictory judgements on the meaning of section 92 of the Constitution, which says that trade between the states 'shall be absolutely free', substituting a no-discrimination test that is relatively easy to apply.

The ruling struck out decades of border-hopping and tax-avoidance, and made possible real co-ordination between the Commonwealth and the states on matters such as road and trade regulation. Many of the benefits achieved in the 'new federalism' premiers' conference in July—agreements on transport regulation which will see trucking companies paying for their share of damage to the roads, microeconomic reform of railways and utilities, and uniform consumer laws, have their origin in the High Court's decision on section 92.

When the court shifted on section 92, many observers expected that it might move to patch up the other great area of stale constitutional muddle, section 90, which prohibits the states from applying excise or customs duties: in effect, any sales or consumption tax. A majority of members of the court probably favour doing so, if only they could summon the courage to throw out some accumulated precedents.

There are two ways it could happen, and each is politically significant. The court could rule that the states cannot do anything that looks or smells anything

like a consumption tax. Or it could say that section 90 is really about preventing states from discriminating in favour of their own produce or against that of another state's. In other words, provided there is no discrimination between goods produced inside or outside of a state, the state can impose taxes on them.

The problem is that the states already have consumption taxes, from which they raise about \$6 billion a year, or 10 per cent of their budgets. Thirty years ago, Professor Geoffrey Sawer of the Australian National University proposed a consumption tax that gave the appearance of avoiding the constitutional provision, and the High Court, at a time when contrived schemes won its admiration, let it go by.

The scheme worked like this. If there is a licensing scheme in which the licence fee is a direct proportion of continuing sales, then it is a consumption tax. But if the fee is a direct proportion of sales *over a different time period*, then it is not. So the states set up 'business franchise' taxes on goods such as cigarettes and petrol, setting the fee as, e.g., 'two per cent of last year's sales'.

In the *Dennis Hotels* case of 1960, the High Court ruled that this kind of subterfuge could work, and opened the floodgates. In a series of cases, the court allowed the states to get greedier and greedier, and to make the fiction more transparent. Some state consumption taxes are now levied on last month's sales. State consumption taxes amount to 10 per cent of total revenue in NSW, 11 per cent in Victoria, five per cent in Queensland, 14 per cent in South Australia, 18 per cent in Western Australia and 24 per cent in Tasmania. The ACT has even levied consumption taxes on pornography.

The new-look High Court is increasingly restive about the issue—and hopelessly split. At least two judges would rule consumption taxes out altogether. Another two would probably allow the states to have any sort of consumption tax, so long as it did not discriminate against goods produced in other states. Three others lean towards a total ban on state consumption taxes, but cannot bring themselves to stop the rot the High Court has brought on itself. The court's problem is that it cannot sit on the fence. It must decide, and there are any number of manufacturers willing to test the issue.

Whichever way the court goes, it will have a major impact on federal-state politics. If the court opens the gates even further, would the state taxes sit comfortably with the coalition's proposed Goods and Services Tax, or would they undermine it? Could any Labor agreement on revenue-sharing survive a High Court decision that would reduce the states to penury again?

The court, of course, has to be indifferent to such considerations. But do not write it off. It is going to be a big player in the game next year. ■

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

Cracks in the econocrats

*Free-marketeers still dominate economic policy-making in Australia and overseas, but they no longer have the debate to themselves. **Richard Curtain** discusses *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for Twenty-First Century Capitalism*, (New York, 1991), by **Robert Reich**, and **Paul Rule** looks at *Economic Rationalism in Canberra: A Nation-Building State Changes its Mind* (Cambridge, 1991), by **Michael Pusey**.*

THE COLLAPSE OF SOVIET COMMUNISM and the dominance of market economies raises more questions than it answers. If the free market is the answer, what's the question? Free-market economies based on individualism and deregulated financial markets, as in the English-speaking countries, are in the throes of recession. In sharp contrast, the stable market economies of Germany and Japan, organised on very different lines, are growing. These economies have been successful because they have overcome the market's perpetual emphasis on the short-term. Associated with cultures that promote collective responsibility, they have been able to combine cooperation with competition.

There is an increasing reaction to the moral consequences of the free market: such economies face a growing gap between rich and poor, and a decline in public services such as transport. In post-Thatcher Britain the industrial editor of *The Financial Times*, Charles Leadbeater, has written of 'the social market': the term is a means of highlighting the fact that society faces problems that can only be solved collectively. After the experience of Thatcher's 'reforms', Leadbeater argues, people now realise that it is *not* possible to sell off responsibility. Living in society involves more than merely complying with obligations to family or employer. A market economy must be able to sustain a sense of community and belonging as well as delivering consumer goods.

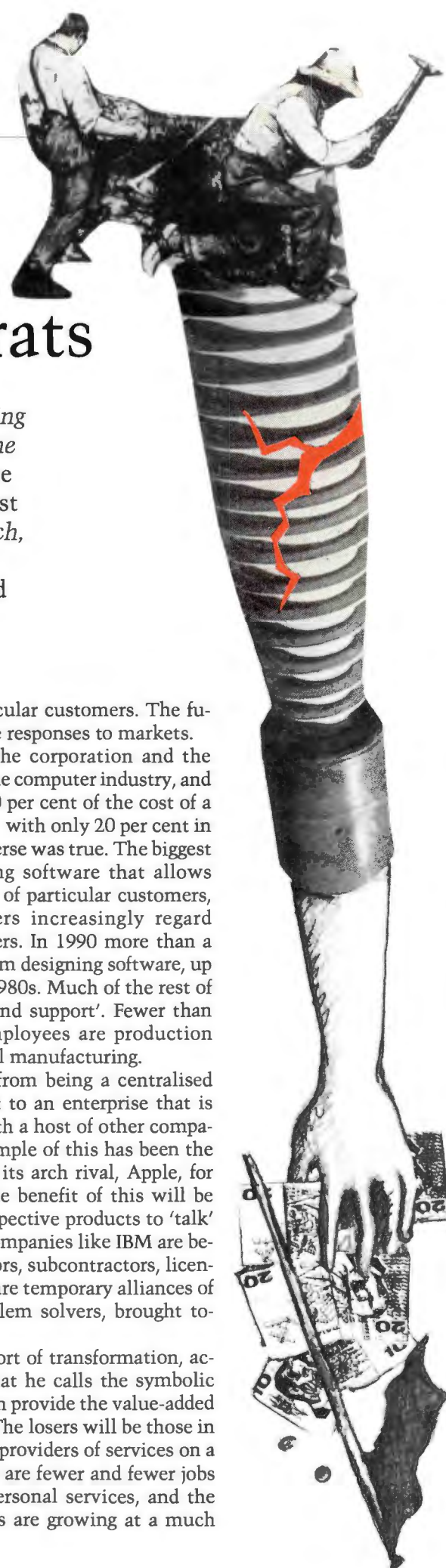
This fundamental contradiction in free-market economies is the theme of *The Work of Nations*, by the Harvard political economist, Robert Reich. The crux of future capitalism, according to Reich, will be the transformed corporation, which will emphasise high-value, rather than high-volume, production. This means a shift away from bureaucratic systems producing standard goods or services, and towards loose networks of people

focused on the needs of particular customers. The future lies in generating creative responses to markets.

The transformation of the corporation and the marketplace is illustrated by the computer industry, and especially by IBM. In 1984, 80 per cent of the cost of a computer was in its hardware, with only 20 per cent in software. But by 1990, the reverse was true. The biggest profits are now in developing software that allows computers to meet the needs of particular customers, and computer manufacturers increasingly regard themselves as service providers. In 1990 more than a third of IBM's profits came from designing software, up from 18 per cent in the mid-1980s. Much of the rest of the profit came from 'sales and support'. Fewer than 20,000 of IBM's 350,000 employees are production workers engaged in traditional manufacturing.

IBM itself has changed from being a centralised entity dominating its market to an enterprise that is prepared to form alliances with a host of other companies. The best publicised example of this has been the agreement between IBM and its arch rival, Apple, for joint ventures; the immediate benefit of this will be software that allows their respective products to 'talk' to each other. Increasingly, companies like IBM are becoming networks of contractors, subcontractors, licensees and partnerships. These are temporary alliances of problem identifiers and problem solvers, brought together by strategic brokers.

The winners from this sort of transformation, according to Reich, will be what he calls the symbolic analysts—individuals who can provide the value-added services that are in demand. The losers will be those in routine production work and providers of services on a person-to-person basis. There are fewer and fewer jobs in routine production and personal services, and the earnings of symbolic analysts are growing at a much



faster rate than those of lower-paid workers. In the US, the average weekly earnings of non-supervisory workers, adjusted for inflation, were lower in 1990 than in any year since 1965. The earnings of middle managers were

only slightly above the levels of the 1970s, whereas the incomes of chief executives soared ahead between 1977 and 1990, at 12 per cent a year. The gap is dramatically illustrated by the fact that in 1960, with a maximum tax rate of 90 per cent, a chief executive in the US was only

12 times better off in earnings than the ordinary worker. But by 1988 the difference had jumped to 70 times the wages paid to the average production worker, based on a top tax rate of only 28 per cent.

One way of narrowing this gap, according to Reich, is to have a truly progressive income tax, coupled with the closure of gaping tax loopholes. He is highly critical of the contrary strategy, a low marginal tax on the highest incomes and a growing reliance on sales and other consumption taxes, because it reinforces the gap between the wealthy top fifth of the population and everyone else. A second response is to enable more people to acquire skills, so that they too can offer higher value-added services. This would require substantial public investment to lift the quality of educational opportunity at all levels.

There must also be an explicit role for government in setting the framework in which the market has to operate. According to Reich, a series of specific choices needs to be made about the rules of ownership and exchange. The continuing tax incentive for loans to fund company takeovers is one small example of a bias in the system. Increasing capital gains taxes on short-term stockholdings and reducing them on longer-term holdings, together with a transfer tax, would serve to discourage speculative trading.

REICH ALSO SUGGESTS that lawyers could be constrained by limits on the contingency fees they collect from arranging takeovers. Unless it is regulated, the supply of the services by lawyers, investment bankers and other financial advisers generates its own demand. These advisers tell clients what they need, and then fill the need. There are obvious opportunities for supplying services in excess of what an unsuspecting client actually needs.

Beyond the activity of governments, Reich says, there is a role for 'positive nationalism', in which each nation's citizens take responsibility for enhancing the capacities of their fellow citizens to lead full and productive lives, but not at the expense of other nations' wellbeing. Positive economic nationalism rejects trade barriers and encourages the movement of money and

ideas across borders. Governments, nevertheless, should subsidise firms that undertake high value-added production. Nations should negotiate over the appropriate level and targets of such subsidies, stipulating the rules by which nations could bid for high value-added investment. Reich suggests that countries with large and relatively unskilled workforces should be allowed more leeway in bidding for investment than nations with smaller and more highly skilled workforces. Other kinds of subsidies could be pooled and given out where the fruits of research are likely to spread quickly.

A weakness of Reich's analysis is his neglect of the inefficiencies of the public sector. He sees the answer in terms of providing more funding, which appears too simple when viewed from an Australian or British perspective. The public sector has traditionally played a greater role in our economy, and lack of investment is only one reason why it is widely regarded as a poor performer. Poor service by the providers of public education and health care is an important reason why many better-off Australians have turned to the private sector for such services.

Attempts to reform the public sector in Australia have hitherto been only half-hearted. Fundamental decisions must still be made about how and by whom services are provided, about how they are paid for, and what we are entitled to. As Leadbeater emphasises when talking about the public sector in Britain, the old notions of mass provision of welfare services need to give way to a system that allows choice and flexibility.

Like Reich, Leadbeater argues that the crucial institution for reform in Anglo-American economies is the corporation. This is especially a matter of how it views its obligations. Where a company's main obligation is to its shareholders, the role it plays in the wider community is restricted. In Germany and Japan, the relationship with shareholders is only one of several obligations that companies accept. They train their workforce, help provide health care and security, are concerned for the environment and local economic development, and help suppliers of their raw materials to

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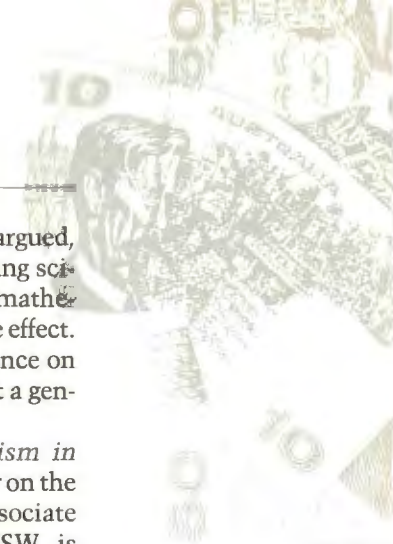
—Paul Rule

develop their products. This wider sense of obligation extends to the provision of public services such as research, development and training.

The roles and obligations of individuals, governments and enterprises within a market economy all require reappraisal in the light of what has happened

'Living in society involves more than merely complying with obligations to family or employer. A market economy must be able to sustain a sense of community and belonging as well as delivering consumer goods.'

—Richard Curtain.



during the '80s. High unemployment levels will continue for the foreseeable future, probably about nine per cent even after the economy comes out of recession. There is a ratchet effect: after a recession unemployment remains locked in at a higher rate. The widening gap between the rich and poor has to be a central concern for any nation if it is to meet the reasonable needs of all its citizens. ■

Richard Curtain is associate professor in the national key centre in industrial relations at Monash University.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE POLITICS OF GREED ARE NOW clear: unemployment, the collapse of financial institutions and public distrust in them, widespread hopelessness and self-centredness. The interesting question is not whether current policy is justifiable, but how it came to be accepted at all. Whence came this unholy alliance of bureaucrats, politicians and commentators, which measures success, progress, and value against the yardstick of deregulation, the sale of public assets, and structural 'reform'?

As a professional student of religions, I am tempted to apply the standard categories and theories of religious studies to the problem. Clifford Geertz and others have defined religions as symbol systems that integrate and justify all aspects of behaviour in a society. Is economic rationalism a new myth, a secular analogue of New Age religiosity, with its peculiar rituals, hierarchies, self-justifying and self-authenticating practices, key institutions, esoteric symbolism and language? One could finger its prophets and lawgivers, high priests and acolytes, even its witchdoctors and medicine men. 'Voodoo economics' is more than a snide appellation: we are faced with nothing less than worship of the great god Market.

Another useful approach might be ideological analysis. John Stone, who perhaps more than any other Australian is responsible for the institutional dominance of the views in question, strongly contests the 'ideology' label. It is, he claims, simply a matter of logic and rationality. But conceding the appropriateness of 'rationalism' as a title for the dominant economic syndrome obscures the extent to which it derives from an a priori but suppressed world view, that is to say, an ideology. It is significant that modern economics has aspired to be treated as a branch of mathematics rather than as a social science. All of the main schools of social analysis in the past century—from Marx and Weber to contemporary deconstructionists—have practised the art of 'suspicion', a constant alertness to the hidden agenda. Economics alone retains its primal innocence.

This was demonstrated elegantly by Donald McCloskey in *The Rhetoric of Economics* (University of

Wisconsin Press, 1985). Economics, McCloskey argued, is stuck in a modernist, positivist mould, claiming scientific status for intuitive arguments and using mathematics as much for rhetorical as for demonstrative effect. Ironically, economics claims the status of a science on terms rejected by the natural sciences for at least a generation.

In Michael Pusey's *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*, sociological analysis is brought to bear on the issue with devastating power. Pusey, who is associate professor of sociology at the University of NSW, is interested in more than documenting the infiltration and imposition of an ideology; he is concerned with a fundamental shift in Australian social structures. The state, hitherto the axis of Australian nation-building is, he argues, being systematically decentred. Economic management, rather than a concern for society, is now regarded as the sole legitimate function of government.

The heart of the study is an analysis of 215 interviews with members of the Special Executive Service, the key decision-making section of the Australian Public Service. He concludes that most of them are 'way to the right of centre' on political and social issues, even those


'All of the main schools of social analysis in the past century—from Marx and Weber to contemporary deconstructionists—have practised the art of 'suspicion', a constant alertness to the hidden agenda. Economics alone retains its primal innocence.

—Paul Rule

who regard their political views as left of centre. They are predominantly Australian-born Anglo-Saxon males, in their 40s or older, who come from upper social strata, were educated in private schools, and are graduates of university economics or business schools. Their ascendancy has largely been accomplished in collaboration with politicians of their own generation, who have 'a shared and restricting formative training in economics'.

In this new order the central departments—Treasury, Finance, Prime Minister and Cabinet—dominate the 'market' and 'service' departments. New career patterns have been established—departmental head at 40, into the private sector at 50. Periods in service departments, especially outside Canberra, are regarded as demotion and exile. The public service no longer serves the public, but assists ministers in abstract policy formation. What is valued is not 'practical rationality' but 'formal rationality of a very concentrated kind'.

This analysis explains some salient features of contemporary Australian life. These high-flying bureaucrats are almost universally suspicious of trade unions, which they regard as a vested interest, though they do not regard our rip-off entrepreneurs as such. The



reason? Entrepreneurs serve 'the economy', rather than some ill-defined social interest.

Departments concerned with health, welfare, and services of all kinds have been disempowered, marginalised and infiltrated by the econocrats. Pusey takes as his example the old Commonwealth Department of Education, which has been restructured into the economics-driven Department of Employment, Education and Training. (Note the order.)

Some of Pusey's critics, even those who share his basic distrust of the Canberra economists, have accused him of nostalgia for a discredited welfare state that reached its apogee in the Whitlam years. Pusey is aware of the administrative failures of the Whitlam government, although as Whitlam himself has pointed out, by most of the standard economic indicators—productivity, unemployment, inflation, the deficit—his government's performance was markedly better than that of either the Fraser or Hawke governments.

But if the 1976 report of the Coombs royal commission into Australian public administration, set up by Whitlam, had been implemented, there is good reason to believe much of the present mess could have been avoided. Anyone interested in constructing conspiracy theories about the 1975 constitutional crisis might do well to forget the CIA and look closer to home.

THE SECOND PART of *Economic Rationalism in Canberra* is heavily theoretical, dealing with 'rationalisation and modernity' and the state. It will not interest everyone but it is enormously stimulating. Pusey shows that a certain kind of theory, positivistic and scientific, has been invoked to exclude any consideration of values from economic and social discourse. Politics in the normal sense has been discredited and the state—that is, the whole public order—has been reduced to administration.

My reservations about this impressive and convincing book lie in its explanation of the phenomenon it so brilliantly depicts: citing class background and economic theory seems inadequate. There is nothing about the role of the media, especially the political correspondents and commentators. How often have you heard reports of events in Canberra presented either as though they were a sporting event, or in terms of success or failure in meeting some unspecified standard of economic correctness, or conforming to a universal and unchallengeable truth?

Perhaps Pusey has given insufficient weight to the 'Canberra' in his title. It is in that city that our permanent public servants, near-permanent political journalists and would-be permanent politicians conduct their curious trades. I looked in vain in *Economic Rationalism in Canberra* for data on *place* of birth and education. Pusey singles out the Australian National University as the home of the kind of econometrics he deplors, but does not tell us precisely how many of his subjects were educated there.

I would have stressed, much more than Pusey does, the increasing number of top public servants whose entire experience of life has been in a company town. It is ironical that the bureaucrats, who in the name of principle impose hardship on ordinary Australians, live in an environment that is literally constructed—to their benefit—on the opposite principles: it is highly planned and subsidised, free from the dirt and distractions of productive enterprise, and is the least market-oriented of Australian cities. Pusey comments on the remoteness of the new intellectual elite, but not on its physical remoteness.

The issues raised by this book will not go away: they take us to the heart of our current crisis, which is a crisis of the state rather than of the economy. The first signs of a backlash against economic rationalism have already emerged, and Pusey has played an important part in this. He deserves credit for helping us to understand how we have got into our black hole and, by implication, how to get out again. ■

Paul Rule teaches religious studies at La Trobe University, and is a member of the Melbourne Catholic Committee for Justice, Development and Peace.

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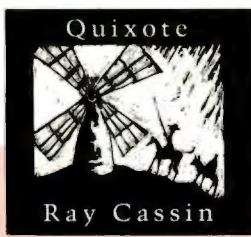
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A day awash with Good Feeling

IT IS A CLASSIC spring day in Melbourne. In other words, it is misted over with rain and cooler than anyone thinks spring ought to be. But if we can't have a fine day we can at least have fine words. So here we are in Treasury Gardens, assembled to hear the Grand Old Martyr and His Stern Conqueror speak from the same platform, and for the same cause. They will tell us about the Great Ogre who wants to buy one of the great newspapers of Spencer Street. We already believe that this would be a bad thing, since the Ogre owns too much of the media as it is. But we are not here to find out anything new. This is the Era of Good Feeling, when old foes are reconciled and the only fight left is the great Battle of Good versus Evil. Our rally in the gardens will be a religious exercise. We will hear the words of the prophets, confess our faith, and make rude gestures towards effigies of the Great Ogre. We will not burn the effigies because this is Melbourne, and we are very civilised.

I arrive and stand at the back of the assembled multitude, a spot which becomes the middle of a crowd of some hundreds. Tomorrow I will be surprised to read, in one of the great newspapers of Spencer Street, that others estimate it to be a crowd of some thousands. But who's counting? I greet former colleagues and watch brothers and sisters from my union arrive with a banner. They stand on the edge of the rally, because the campaign against the Great Ogre is managed not by the union but by something called the Independence Committee. The committee believes not only that the Ogre should be prevented from buying one of the great newspapers of Spencer Street, but that a consortium of wealthy Melburnians should buy it instead. Not everyone at the rally shares this second belief, but we refrain from saying so. This is the Era of Good Feeling.

The band of prophets arrives, and there are cheers for the Grand Old Martyr and His Stern Conqueror. They have trouble climbing on to the truck from which they will speak to us. It begins to rain again and I slip on the wet grass, treading on the foot of the woman standing next to me. She calls me a clumsy oaf, which I think is uncalled for in the Era of Good Feeling. The band of prophets is now ready to speak, and a Melbourne Personality acts as master of ceremonies. He is an actor, and tells us a joke about newspapers in the sort of American accent favored by non-American actors. It is an old joke.

The Personality introduces the first prophet, a columnist from one of Spencer Street's great newspapers, who reminds us of its glorious past. I wonder whether he should be the one speaking in an American accent, thus: 'Well, gather roun' chillun', and let me

tell y'all how we got from there to here.' We applaud, in Melburnian fashion, instead of shouting, in revivalist fashion, 'Right on!', 'Amen, brother!', and 'Hallelujah!'

As well as the Grand Old Martyr and His Stern Conqueror, there is another politician among the prophets. She is also an ex-leader of her party. It is the small party whose leaders can always afford to sound indignant because they do not expect they will have to form a government. During her speech this ex-leader quotes herself from Hansard. I notice people around me beginning to doze. I have seen people sleep through the homily at other religious ceremonies, but they are usually sitting down.

The Stern Conqueror speaks before the Grand Old Martyr. The organisers have presumably arranged it this way, on the Marriage-Feast-of-Cana theory of serving the best wine last. But, as at Cana, the planned order of things goes awry and the Stern Conqueror makes the better speech. Even those of us who voted for the Grand Old Martyr concede that he seems, well, *old*. The Stern Conqueror, in contrast, grasps the religious nature of the exercise. In true revivalist fashion, he begins a fervent dialogue with his audience. Do we want the Great Ogre and his foreign minion to own one of Spencer Street's great newspapers? 'No!' we roar, again forgetting to add 'Amen' and 'Hallelujah'.

Another columnist from one of Spencer Street's great newspapers also makes a speech. He is a Melbourne Comedian, so we hope he will be funnier than the Melbourne Personality. Like the ex-leader of the small political party, he quotes himself. It is a self-congratulatory kind of day. Perhaps because he is embarrassed about sharing a platform with the Stern Conqueror, the comedian adds that he is a working-class anarchist. He also has a very middle-class following, though he does not tell us this. He is a celebrated critic of the foibles of the Melbourne Establishment, which suggests he must be part of it.

As is appropriate in a religious rite, we end our rally with a Solemn Affirmation, in which we declare our resolve to reject the Great Ogre, and all his works and pomps, yea, and his foreign minion too. Then we file back across Spring Street and resume ordinary life. I pause, and the pseudo-twilight makes me think that it will soon be Christmas. I think about that Quixotic character created by Dickens, Ebenezer Scrooge. He was wrong about Peace On Earth to All People of Good Will, but would have been right about the Era of Good Feeling.

Good Feeling? Bah, humbug! ■

Ray Cassin is production editor of *Eureka Street*.

'Women will do much'

Questions of equality concern women in and out of the church. Lavinia Byrne IBVM, former co-editor of The Way and now an associate secretary with the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, tackled these questions head-on when she was in Australia last month.

'A WOMAN DEACON friend of mine—immaculate, very Anglo-Catholic—wears the most beautiful long cassock, lined with pink satin, double box pleats at the back, which she has had hand-tailored for her. Beautifully covered buttons all the way down the front. She arrived at a vestry the other day and the bishop who was there with the chaps turned and said, "Please Ann, don't vest in here." She said—she's very Cockney, wonderful—"Why not? I'm not taking any clothes off."

'So you see, in England at the moment there's a real female agenda around and there is a fascinating piece of political chemistry going on as well. If you find women pretty repellent anyway you are going to resent having them arriving in the vestry.'

So your current work puts you into contact with the other churches but also with secular and government agencies?

Yes. The BBC, the National Women's Commission, for example. Working with the Women's Commission I've become familiar with some of the training courses and videos available for women in management. I was fascinated to see on one of these videos a shot which illustrates what I am trying to say. Two young women in designer sweat shirts—middle-management women—are sitting having freshly pressed orange juice in a smoke-free zone, talking about women in the workplace. One of them said, 'Telling a woman not to feel guilty is like telling her not to breathe.'

I reflected afterwards on the theological origins of that sense of self-image. I am distressed when I make the connection with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which sets up all women as temptresses in the person of Eve. And also sets up women who work as failures because the scriptures tell us that woman was created



as the helpmeet, the aid to man. I very often feel I would love to be married and have a wife. Wouldn't it be wonderful to come home and find my slippers warmed and the newspaper ironed. But it is a very sick anthropology that says that woman exists totally for man in the hierarchy, where man stands at the pinnacle of creation and everything is made for him.

We have known that it is a totally sick anthropology for a long time. Just how long do you give the churches to make significant changes for women?

I've been fascinated to read a book recently called *Women in the Church* written by a Congregationalist minister called Hattie Baker, who wrote: 'I have been surprised, receiving letters from women whose consciousness has been raised, to discover that they are leaving the church in such numbers.' Now she wrote this in 1911.

Today women are voting with their feet and my own experience is that the church is registering concern, apart from anything else, because of the numbers game. Now that's not a very moral reason, but as soon as people begin to reflect along those lines they come to the insight which I certainly have put before any church leader I meet, which is that the gospel has unique resources to bring to Christian women.

If you look at the deeds and actions of Jesus in the scriptures, he doesn't crack mother-in-law jokes. He doesn't make quick, snide allusions to women. He just uses the observer's eye. I believe women are quite right to hold the gospels up as a mirror to the church and say what's going on? Why do you no longer mirror that good news for us?

But for how long did the Christian—I won't say tradition, practice, rather—mirror that good news?

About 30 years, I'd say, five of them during the life of Jesus, 25 of them afterwards. But then the old patriarchal notion of a woman as a possession reared its ugly head again and women became part of an economy of transactions between men.

About your own transactions—why did you move from co-editing a religious journal, with men, to your present position?

Last October I saw an advert in *The Tablet* for an associate secretary for women's concerns at this newly formed Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. Now I have been a passionate advocate of Christian unity since the age of eleven.

Did you understand what Christian unity meant at 11?
No. I thought it meant them joining us, so that we, the Catholics, would get Wells Cathedral back. But you cannot afford to be tribalistic nowadays. We live in stirring times. It is very exciting.

Most of the women I have spoken to over the past 10 years say something like that. Generally, men do not.
This is a time of great liberation for men, if they could but see it that way. But it is not my task to tell them that it is, nor is it my task to liberate them. That just sets me back as the helpmeet of men, as the one who is going to set them free.

This is a time of liberation for them but they must do that work. It is within their grasp, within their control.

There is certain holy ruthlessness about that.
Absolutely right. Yes. Because otherwise we are patronising them. Men need to attend to their own wounds and look at the source of their redemption. This is hard stuff.

Yes, it is hard stuff, because one of the things one reproaches men's orders and the celibate male priesthood with, is their capacity for distancing themselves from women's experience. Are you just giving me a reverse image of that? Yours is a hard prescription.
Yes, it is. Nonetheless I find these times thrilling, because we have a vocabulary and a set of images and metaphors to use to describe us at the moment. This agenda has become mainstream.

There are things like equal opportunities commissions whose work cannot be ignored. The church may not be an equal opportunities employer, but society is required to be. So statutorily the Church of England has had to become an exception to the rule. It becomes a legal anachronism. Which is fascinating.

And about right.
About right, Yes, True. But nevertheless it shows up in legislation that the church is out of kilter with society. Now this is some people's objection to Christian feminism of course. They say it is a nasty secular fad.

How important to you, in the political stance you adopt, is the fact that you are a member of a women's religious order? Which comes first? The feminism? Or was the order the enabling condition?

I've known Mary Ward, who founded my own community, ever since I was 11. And I have been enormously influenced by her. She was a woman who, in 1616, said, 'And it will be seen in time to come that women will do much.' And that phrase has become like a banner headline for me over the past seven years. She is a key figure in the movement towards women's self-understanding and self-appreciation.

Your choice to stay in the Catholic Church has a lot to do with the community you find yourself in. If you were not in that community what would your choices be?

You know the saying they have Ireland—you can take Lavinia out of the bog but you can't take the bog out of Lavinia? Now I'm third-generation English, not Irish, of course, and nnnth-generation Catholic. You could take me out of the Catholic Church. You could never ever take the Catholic Church out of me. My whole way of perceiving reality is extraordinarily sacramental. I only have to go for drive in the country, as I did yesterday—to Ballarat, via Woodend—to see the extraordinary straight roads as a road in and out of a set of human experiences, to see the gums growing as an image of what our institute is going through at the moment.

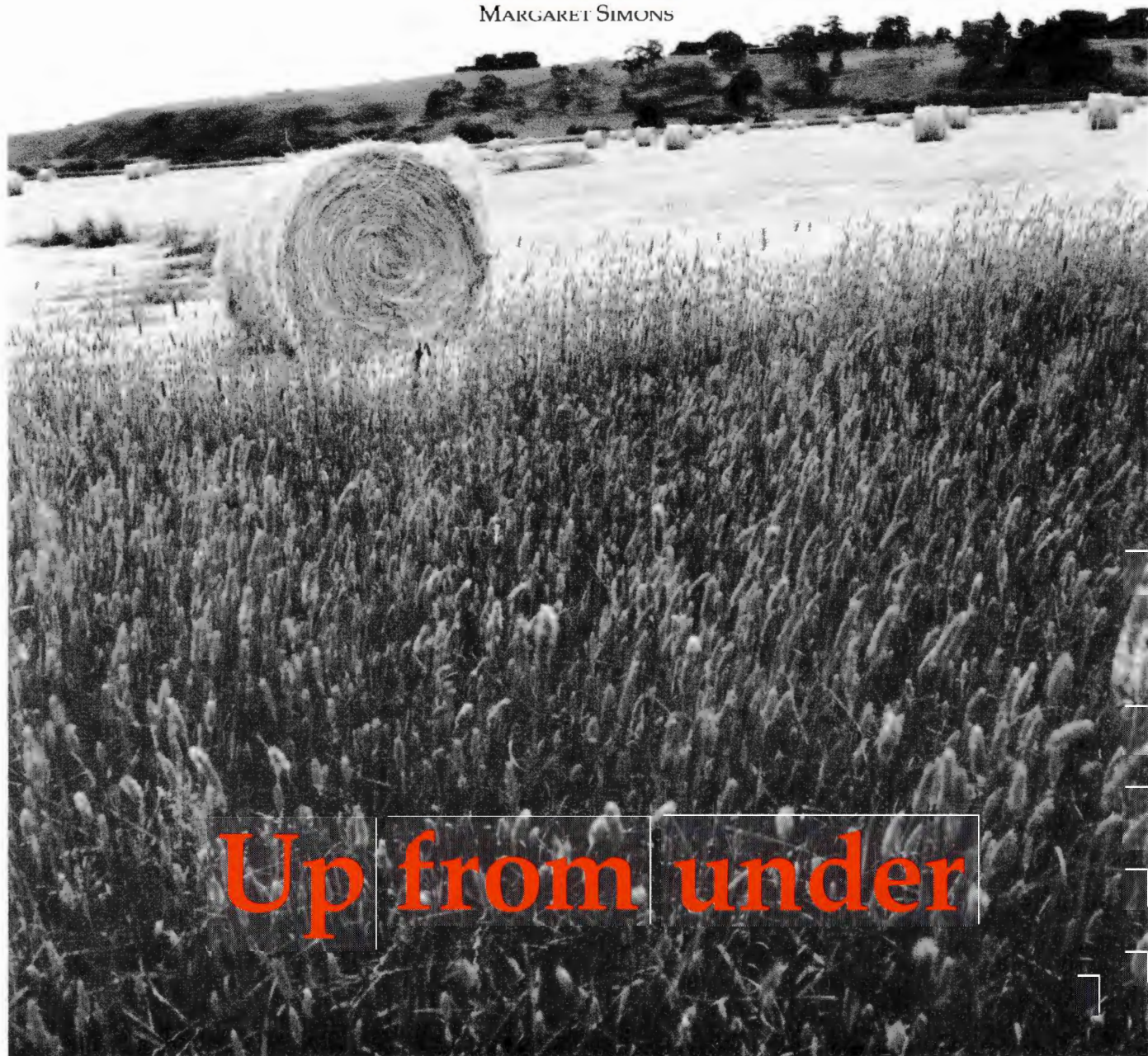
Sounds pagan to me.
Deeply incarnational and highly pagan.

Explain how you put the two together.
At its very best, I believe, the Catholic tradition is one that has always taken human reality and concrete physical reality extraordinarily seriously. It is tradition that says God is mediated to us through bread, salt, oil, water. And these are what you find in your kitchen.

You don't seem to suffer much from paralysing anger.
I happen to be blessed with a sense of humour, and a real old-fashioned, scriptural, biblical, evangelical zeal. I really believe that we are part of something that nobody can put a brake on.

What would you say to young women who do not come from a background of such dense Christianity as yours?
I suppose I'd invite them to read a book that Dorothy Sayers wrote in the 1930s called *Are Women Human?* The most wonderful book. I just do have to give you a quote from it: 'The people who hanged Christ, to do them justice, never accused him of being a bore. On the contrary they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the lion of Judah.' ■

Morag Fraser is the editor of *Eureka Street*.



Up from under

photo: Bill Thomas

A FRIEND WHO was staying with me recently remarked that the mood in this little town seems to have lifted. Last time he was here, the faces in the street were gloomy. Wool was down, wheat was down, there had been a fruit-fly outbreak in the orchards on the river. People walked about with heavy tread, and leaflets from weird political groups appeared in our mail boxes.

The Christadelphians invited us to a meeting at which it would be explained how, 'in ways which are not immediately apparent', the apparent disintegration of the Soviet Union was actually part of a plot to take over the world. The League of Rights organised a talk in a local hotel, and listeners were warned of evil plots that were supposedly behind the banks foreclosing on loans, and the dropping in the floor price for wool.

But this time, when my friend visited, things were different, although in every state except South Austral-

ia and Western Australia this season will be the worst harvest since the disastrous 1982-1983 drought. Queensland and New South Wales are expected to harvest only 235,000 tonnes and 1.24 million tonnes of wheat respectively, compared with more than two million and four million tonnes last year.

But here, in South Australia, the rain fell almost as a wheat farmer would have ordered it. The Australian Wheat Board has announced a lift of about \$9 a tonne in the harvest payment for this season's crop, meaning South Australians will do very well indeed. The wheat has almost burst out of the ground, and, as I write, the green stalks are beginning to mottle with the straw colour that signals the coming of harvest time. By the time you read this, the combine harvesters will be in the fields, and the color of the country will be changing from straw to pink sand showing through the stubble.

Another reason for joy is that a local boy has been chosen to join the training squad for the Adelaide Crows. Also, while my friend was here, the local Speedway Club held a trash-and-treasure day on the banks of the Murray.

The biggest money earner was the auction. The auctioneer had a tear-drop beer belly spilling over his belt, and a booming voice that drew the crowd from all over the park. There were 140 lots—collections of car parts, two pot-bellied stoves, numerous items of furniture, rusted cast iron saucepans, saddles, bags of fertiliser and three children's pushers. 'Where are all the women?' the auctioneer said when the pushers came up for sale. I was the only one there. 'No kids,' I explained apologetically. The auctioneer waved a thumb at me. 'It's easy enough to get pregnant,' he said. 'Could happen anytime with this bunch around.' The crowd cheered. The pushers were passed in at \$2, in spite of many suggestions that I should enter the bidding.

TWICKER WAS THERE in a dirty yellow T-shirt, his brown eyes shining. He once got a mention in the local council minutes as the man who takes more away from the local dump than he deposits there—a problem, since the council had sold salvaging rights to someone else. 'Twicker' is local slang for anyone who is scruffy.

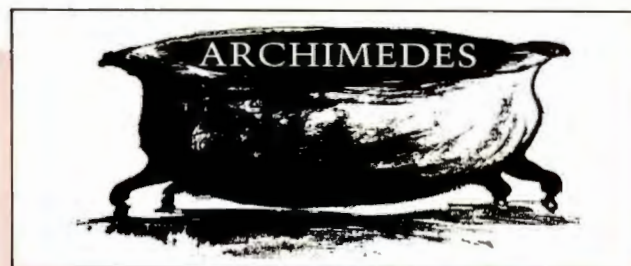
There were fruit pickers with rough hands and soft faces creased around the passionate eyes of itinerants, and a group of quiet young men in hats and moleskins, who bid quietly for farm equipment and a set of kangaroo bars. They were not locals, but down from the north for the day. Twicker got the cast iron saucepans for \$40. He bought the pot bellied stoves for \$50 each. An old woman at my elbow shook her head. 'I've had enough of chopping wood,' she said. 'All electric for me now. He's welcome to 'em.'

Then there was the Bash for Cash. For one dollar, you could grab a long-handled mallet and take your turn at trying to demolish an ancient Vauxhall, which was spray-painted with peace signs and the words 'Hit me.' Local toughs in tight jeans and black singlets gave their stubbies to mates to hold and launched into it. The Vauxhall proved surprisingly sturdy.

One boy aimed a powerful blow, but missed altogether, and the weight of the mallet swung him round in a full circle. 'Shit!' his mates bellowed as the mallet came within inches of their heads. Over by the tea tent, ladies in polyester dresses pursed their lips and shook their heads, but smiled furtively at each other over the rims of polystyrene cups.

It was a very happy day. It was the first really warm weekend of the summer. Suspicion and depression were put aside and the air was full of tolerance and community spirit. On the way home, I explained to my friend about wheat prices, and how even wool was looking better than it had, thanks to the Japanese. He nodded his head, and said: 'You can feel it in the air.' ■

Margaret Simons lives in Waikerie, South Australia.



Eureka dust

ON A SWEET SUNDAY MORNING, 3 December 1854, 100 Ballarat goldminers, aggrieved by the strict enforcement of licence fees and other harrassments, defended the Eureka Stockade against three times as many police officers. The miners were quickly defeated; their leaders fled and hid. One of those who escaped, after being wounded in the shoulder, was Peter Lalor. Later given a pardon, he became a prominent figure in the colony of Victoria.

Living in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond, Lalor enjoyed title to the Eureka Hotel. At the rear of the hotel, by the way, runs a small thoroughfare now called Eureka Street, and backing on to Eureka Street you can also find the office of a certain magazine and its publishers.

Lalor's Eureka Hotel is a curious anomaly, since the first hotel of that name was of a most unhappy reputation among the diggers. The story goes like this. Two miners stopped late one night at the original Eureka Hotel near Ballarat for a drink. They were refused admission and, in time-honoured tradition, responded by breaking a window of the hotel. Next morning one of the miners was found murdered. The proprietors of the hotel—a very unpopular couple called Bentley—and two others were charged with the murder and, initially, acquitted. The diggers rioted, burning the hotel to the ground, and the events at the Eureka Stockade followed not long after.

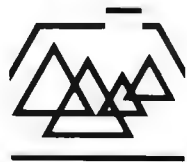
The original Eureka Hotel and the Eureka Stockade got their names from the gold-bearing area known variously as 'Eureka' or 'Eureka Gully' or 'The Eureka Lead'. We can romantically imagine that one of the first diggers was well-read in classical antiquities and, upon discovering the first gold there, cried out in Archimedean spirits, 'Eureka ... I have found it!' Most of the miners called the gold they unearthed there 'Eureka dust'.

And here is the second anomaly. Archimedes' cry of Eureka, you will remember, also had something to do with gold. In discovering the universal law that a body immersed in a fluid will displace its own weight of that fluid—that's why the water spills over the edge of the bath when we're overweight—Archimedes also cottoned on to a way of testing whether or not the golden crown of King Heiron had been corrupted with silver.

So it goes. The miners search for gold, rebelling against government constraints. The miners' leader becomes part of government, and names his hotel after a symbol of corruption. And Archimedes? He works for the king and tests the quality of the king's gold against corruption. Riches, power, pride! ■

—John Honner SJ

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Taking soaps seriously

TV soap operas have become an Australian export industry. But why are we so good at making them and what do we think of them? Eureka Street asked The Age television writer

Dennis Pryor *what he thought, and invited others to respond.*

They were: Chances star **Jeremy Sims**, television producers **Jane Phelan** and **John Kearney**; and, from Eureka Street's editorial board and staff: **Peter Steele SJ**, **Ruth Pendavingh**, **Madeline Duckett RSM**, **Morag Fraser** and **Ray Cassin**.

The convenor was **Peter L'Estrange SJ**, *and the forum was held at Newman College, Melbourne.*

DENNIS PRYOR: We started describing ourselves as *Homo sapiens*, then Huizinga came along with that wonderful book '*Homo ludens*'—man at play, man as a playing creature. Now I want *Homo narrans*—storytelling man. I'm convinced that one of the basic instincts of humankind is telling stories. This instinct is as old as the Lascaux cave paintings, which are telling yarns. Then you've got all the work of the Homeric bards, which ended when some fool started writing the stories down. You've got all those Greek romances, which are pure Mills and Boon. Then, coming into Latin, there's the story of Cupid and Psyche, which again is very much the romantic novel. And when we get to the the 19th century, you've got two strands in addition to 'respectable' literature. There's housemaid's fiction, and an enormous boom in pornography. In our time, the whole Mills and Boon thing is about storytelling. It seems to me that this is where the modern literary theorists are going astray—they are ignoring the importance of storytelling.

When our children are sad or have had a bad day, they will say 'tell us a story'. The story soothes them, and that soothing quality of storytelling, I think, is one of the elements in soap operas. And you find surprising support for entertainment in storytelling. Try this: 'The longing for amusement, distraction, sightseeing and laughter is the most legitimate desire of human nature.' The work is called *Vodka, the Church and the Cinema*. And the author? Leon Trotsky.

I'm staying quite a long way from the actual soaps, and I hope you won't mind that because I wanted to think about them in a wide-focus way. The art of the moving image is the defining art of the 20th century. There is a wonderful museum on the Southbank in London called the Museum of the Moving Image. It has a lot of hands-on stuff, which is really fascinating, and it made me realise for the first time how different this moving-image notion was. The cinema is *the* art of the 20th century.

I want to challenge the view that television is an extension of the cinema. I think they are two very different things. Now we can look at cinema, we can look at television, and we have a privilege unique in human history, that we can actually see the very beginning of these artforms. We can watch the development of it in silent movies,

FORUM

where they're clearly photographing a stage performance. Then some genius says 'How about we do a close-up?' and suddenly editing and the whole art of the cinema is born.

Bruno Bettelheim wrote an interesting essay on the art of motion pictures. He talks of his experience of watching movies, which began in his lifetime. He says 'the unreality of the setting, its attractiveness, and most of all the enveloping darkness added to the dreamlike quality of the experience.' Now the first thing that strikes one about that is that we don't look at television that way—no enveloping darkness. If you go back to 1956, people used to draw the curtains and indeed turn off some lights, but then the usual do-gooders said 'You'll ruin your eyes doing that'. But now we see it in normal lighting conditions. With the movies you've got darkness. It's very private, very dreamlike, although that is breaking down. You find more and more that people are chatting during movies.

Ruth Pendavingh: I take that to be an outcome of watching television.

Pryor: Exactly, because you view television in the light. It is waking and not dreaming. I remember hearing Hector Crawford talking to a group of would-be scriptwriters, and he was saying: 'Look you've got to write it so that somebody coming in three-quarters of the way through the program can pick up the plot, and you've got to write it in such a way that it can be interrupted by making a cup of tea, scolding the children, etc., so that all the domestic activities can go on during the viewing.'

I'm using the movie comparisons largely to make one think about television by contrast. In movies, time and space are infinitely variable. You can flash back 20 years in a moment; you can make the action proceed very slowly or very rapidly. Television tends not to do this. Television soap is in real time, and you don't suddenly go back 20 years. The narrative moves at a pace conditioned by the slot, whether half-hour or one hour, by the number of commercials you've sold, and by the necessity for putting in pseudo-climaxes to carry people over the commercial break. So timing is utterly different on soap, and the real time of story moves with the real time of domestic viewing. I think this is part of the reason for success of soaps. Even the commercial breaks are quite realistic in domestic terms. These are the times when you make a cup of tea.

Again, I want to contrast soaps with movies. I think that the begetter of soaps is not film but the radio serial. There's almost no visual element in soaps—if you close your eyes, usually you know what's going on. Whereas if you close your eyes in a movie, you're often in very serious trouble. Now the reasons for that are very much economic. As somebody once said of Australian soaps, we have the best-lit walls in the world. In a soap you hurl light at the walls, it bounces off so that you don't have people moving in and out of light. You diminish those problems so that an actor doesn't have to pick that mark precisely, in a way that you have to do in film. I notice a great difference watching British soaps like *Eastenders*. You almost imagine this glottal-stop hero saying, 'Yair, guv'nor, I can't find the light.' Whereas the Australian actor, I think, has an easier time, and that's why we're so good at making soaps quickly and economically.

One characteristic of Australian soaps is the use of very young actors, and I think that possibly explains the overseas success of shows such as *Neighbours*, where these very young people seem, to a British audience, to be living in a kind of paradise. And the structure of soap is familial, whereas film is so often hero-based. You couldn't imagine Schwarzenegger in a long-running television series. TV heroes are really quite rare. If we take a real freak, like Mr T in *The A Team*, he is still in a family structure—the team is a surrogate family.

Again, although they're not true soaps, think of copper dramas. You have all this intimacy in a copper station, which is a family substitute, and you've always got one of the coppers who is bent, or thought to be bent, and this is as horrible as finding that a member of the family has been stealing from the family. That familial structure ties in exactly with the kind of circumstances under which the show is viewed.

You've had the experience in symphony concerts, when the symphony is ending and it does da-daa, da-daa, da-da, da-da, and you never know when to start applauding, except if you're a real expert and know how many da-daas there are at the end. But there *is* an end, a closure. The same thing used to happen in songs, but how long is it since a popular song had an ending? It just fades. And so it is with the majority of soap-opera plots; there's no closure. You don't get that wonderful wash up that you'd get at the end of a Dicken's novel, where you find out who marries whom and lives happily ever after. In soaps, typically you've got three overlapping plots, and they weave continually from

Everybody's cat-loving next-door neighbour: Vivean Gray played Mrs Jessop in The Sullivans.



one to another. That lack of closure, that sense of people rolling on forever, means you've got the capacity to survive, because there is no end to it. Tomorrow is another day, as Scarlett O'Hara told us.

I think our soaps identify strongly with youth. This is manifested in the actors, and also in their comparatively naive acting style. There is a kind of incoherent dialogue which I think is wonderful for the kids who are watching it. They talk that way: 'Did ya see Craig?' 'Yeah', 'What's he doin?'' 'Nuthin.' 'When's he comin?'' 'Tomorrer.' Soap dialogue is done in these simple, one-word utterances, and a lot of simple, non-verbal noises. The adults are interesting in soap opera. There are the caring, the wise, the villains, and then there are those described by the wonderful word 'crusty', which you only hear in bakeries and soap operas: 'Mr Blenkinsop, crusty next-door neighbour'.

The relationship of plot and character is interesting. One of the rules, the writers tell me, is that you've got to keep on adding rapidly to the plot, so the audience won't have time to see the holes in it. Character is determined by events rather than by psychological appraisal. Aeschylus did it, too. Take Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*, a wonderful woman who commands the stage. She chops Agamemnon and then says 'Isn't that terrific, what a good day's work!' But in the next play of the trilogy there's almost nothing of her. The character appropriate for play no.1 isn't appropriate for play no.2. Sniffier critics get worried about this, but it doesn't worry me at all that you can adjust the character to fit the plot.

Jeremy Sims: It worries the actors, I can tell you!

Pryor: I quite agree. It's very annoying for actors, who find themselves saying 'You had me built up as a shit for weeks and now I've got to be generous?'

One of the things that I see more and more of in soaps is social comment. I almost feel there's a check list. 'Hey, you haven't done AIDS for months; you haven't done single mothers for months!' It's one of the things that drives me crazy with *Country Practice* and *GP*—what's the disease of the week? And an interesting thing with the social problem in, say, *Country Practice*, is that a cop-out ending is characteristic. You build up, say, the abortion debate, and then something happens. The father says, 'I love you, I love you, come and marry me,' or there's a spontaneous abortion. Something gets you off the moral hook.

The other interesting thing is how important women are in soaps. They have never had full standing in the feature film, but think of the ultimate woman's soap, *Prisoner*. It was one of the really great successes, it went for years and years, and when Sheila Florence died people were recalling her because she was in that.

A final remark from Bettelheim. He says, 'Moving pictures give the illusion that it is permissible to spy upon the lives on others, which is exactly what children and adolescents love to do, to discover how adults manage their desires.' In the television soap opera, I think, people in the story look very like the kids who are watching it. It enables a child, youngster, teenager, to observe how his or her co-equals manage their desires. And it is the supreme icebreaker, it gives you access to your peer group because you know what's happening on *Neighbours* or *Chances*. I've had the awful experience of saying to a class of 12 people 'Can you find any book that we've all read?' and failing every time. Yet we used to be able to say 'Oh you did matric in 19—, you did *Macbeth*, didn't you? Then OK, we can start with *Macbeth*.' But among young people soaps are now the icebreaker, the reconciler, the role model, the unifier, and this is an experience that crosses the class lines. I'm sure you'll be saying 'Yes, but it isn't just the kids who watch soaps.' And I haven't come to grips with that. I don't know the demography of the soap audience. But I do know that Australia is very good at it and that you can recognise ours wherever you go—just look at the walls—and that it represents a slotting into a fundamental human desire for telling stories.

Now tell me what nonsense that is.

Sims: Soaps are like playing cards—there are a million ways of playing with them. And there are definite types within the soap-opera genre. It's amazing, watching a production company search for the formula and for the demographic of who watches what. I can guarantee that a producer knows the answer down to every single decimal point: what age-group watches, what they earn, what social stratum they come from, everything. It's quite scary to watch them.

Country Practice, as you said, is an issue-based show and so is *GP*. *Home and Away* doesn't have issues—it is youth-based, and is about teaching kids how you conduct a relationship, or how you go to the beach, or how you have your first car lesson. Then there's



In soaps, 'crusty' characters can be found next door or behind the bar, as well as in bakeries: Maurie Field, as Vic Buckley in *Flying Doctors*.



Searching for the issue of the week: Robert Grubb, as Doctor Geoff Standish, and Lenore Smith, as Sister Kate Wellings, in *Flying Doctors*.

Flying Doctors, which is based more on morals than on issues. It has issues, but they're presented on a level where people can say 'That's right or wrong', rather than just 'I know what it's like to be in that situation'. And then there's my show, *Chances*. Listening to your talk made me understand much more specifically what they're trying to do, because they steered clear of issues completely when they started it. The lust issue in *Chances*, which is the only show which deals with that, somehow negates a whole portion of things that are appealing about soap operas. I'm not sure how it does that, but I know that we can't do a lot of the things that other soap operas do, because this lust factor takes it out of the realm of soap operas somehow. For instance, my character is basically a Faustian character who searches for good and evil. The bottom line is that he's constantly corrupted by sex and money, and that's what people like to see.

Pryor: The money issue is interesting. You're more money-oriented than the other shows.

Sims: Yes, money and sex go together. When people fall in love in the other shows, money is never an issue. Whereas I don't really know about *Chances*. I don't think it fits in with the other shows. But the weird thing is that it's now rating better than any other soap on television. When we started, there were lots of love affairs and very little nudity. It was still a soap opera. There aren't really any love stories on the show now. There's intricate plot in a lot of stories, which is sometimes unbelievable because everything happens all the time. It's a series now, rather than a serial. You can watch it from beginning to end and not really have to know where the characters came from or where they are going, because there's a beginning, a middle and an end to each show. I think most soap operas don't try to be exciting because you don't want to shock people out of what they're watching. You can't build things up to a huge climax because that would change the characters. They would have learned and gone forward, and you don't really want them to do that. But in *Chances* that happens all the time.

Morag Fraser: Both of you talk about soap and television as a reactive thing—you talk about response to demographics. How can you explain *Hill Street Blues* and *St Elsewhere* in America, where the formula did get changed? Was it a case of a particular production company not being controlled by demographics, or is there a possibility of change and development within the industry?

Sims: That's the biggest question I cope with every day. I firmly believe that nothing gets done properly unless it's done by an individual and taken from there. But the great thing about soap opera is that it's a committee-based art form. It is not a matter of one person saying, 'I have this great idea, I'm going to get a team together and we'll do it, but I'll be the boss and it will be my idea that gets up there.' With the soap, you've got the executives of the station, you've got the executives of the production company, a director who only comes in to do that show and then goes away for four weeks and comes in again, an executive producer, a producer, actors who change their lines because they can't say what they're supposed to be saying. There are so many people involved, and then there are guys who handle the demographics and decide we will do this or that because of who's watching.

Jane Phelan: Something in my experience may shed light on this. I was with *Tonight Live* and we did a week of 'nudie hobbies'. We argued quite fiercely about the value of a segment like that over five nights, but we went with it. The argument that was put to me was that it would rate, and it did. The first-night ratings were as they always were, but over the course of the week we tracked up.

Fraser: But for how long?

Phelan: Well, once you get an audience, they'll tend to stay. It dropped off a little bit, but we had an overall pick up for doing that.

Fraser: The history of television is littered with examples of shows that were bad raters to start with and then became staples—the two I was talking about are cases in point.

Phelan: The difference in the 'States is that they have such a large audience that you can make a show that will appeal to a certain demographic. In Australia costs are such that producers have to go for broad appeal. There's no leeway to make quality shows, unless you're with the ABC where you can go off and do something without regard to the size of the audience you pick up.

Pendavingh: Which the ABC does all the time.

John Kearney: The other fact about Steven Bochco, who made *Hill Street Blues* and *St Elsewhere*, was that he had a banking source behind him besides the network. He basically said to the network 'I'm going to make a show which fits this demographic' and he went off and did it. Having been through three changes of timeslot with NBC, he finally got to the point where they rated enough, so the network said 'We'll cover for half.'

Peter Steele: Dennis, could I come back to Trotsky and link it with what you said about storytelling? We all laughed when you said it was Trotsky who had been writing in celebration of the pleasure and satisfaction and healthiness of listening to stories. But one way of seeing politicians—whether they're celebrated ones like him, or whether they're like some of the ones we have—is that they are storytellers. They are constantly primed with tales they can tell us, with rumours they can monger. Whether it's Bush or Gorbachev or anybody, they have a tale to tell, a template that they can put onto the chaos of experience. I wonder whether you'd like to hazard a guess, or whether anybody else would, of what politicians could learn from studious attention to soaps, and whether it would be for our good if they did this?

Pryor: I think they have already learned a lot about television technique.

Sims: Ronald Reagan is the perfect example of that—a man completely without ideas but he knew how to talk. Everybody thought that he was just slightly vague, but he was a complete fool. Soap opera allowed him to become president.

Pryor: I think another lesson politicians have got from the telly is Harold Wilson's point about a week being a long time in politics. Politicians have learned from the issue-oriented soaps that if you just leave the issue it floats away.

Kearney: Right, we don't get the copy any more. I remember when I was starting work, in Treasury Place [Melbourne] you always saw the big throng—which in those days meant four reporters and 20 radio guys—waiting for Henry Bolte. Henry would come out and there were always teachers' strikes. 'They can strike till they blue in the face,' he'd say. 'Let them strike over Christmas and show how serious they are, then I'll consider paying them when they're on strike.' And if you didn't get Henry, you'd get Arthur Rylah, who would say something even more neurotic. Now, as you say, they've learnt from television that if you let it all flow, it becomes an amorphous mass and flows away.

Pryor: MTV is the classic instance. It think it is the Platonic form of television, because it flows forever. Everything overlaps everything else, and in the 'States it goes on all day. The moral of this for political life is that to avoid the crises, you just keep the flow going. Bob Hawke is terrific at it. He keeps repeating what he's said, regardless of the question. So it is turning politics into entertainment. So much of each election campaign is entertainment, and the big soap is coming when we get the new Hewson tax. That's going to be fascinating.

Sims: I think we've just got to accept that television has permanently changed the way politicians communicate with their public. There aren't going to be any more throngs in Treasury Place, and the 10-second grabs count for more than the headlines.

Fraser: There are other ways of looking at those 10-second grabs, though. Remember 'Read my lips, no new taxes.' That actually tied Bush to a policy.

Pryor: That was a mistake.

Fraser: Yes it was, but it was a grab. These things function as mnemonics.

Phelan: Politicians work very much on the assumption that if you keep your 10-second grab simple, then make everything else you say as convoluted as possible, everyone at home will go 'Ah ...'

Fraser: But it's difficult to make a 10-second grab totally non-specific.

Pryor: Bob Hawke would not have said 'No new taxes.' He would have said 'I have no intention of increasing taxes,' meaning 'at this moment I have no intention of increasing taxes.'

Steele: Many forms of television which have no title to be dramatic are in fact made dramatic. Have you noticed that in the weather reports, by contrast with 10 years ago, people don't say 'around the country', they say 'around the nation'. But 'the nation' has got nothing whatever to do with geography—it's a political and theatrical designation. On television they say, 'around the nation', as though it's a case of 'Wherever the flag is flying, we're having this weather!' ■

*'Money and sex go together':
Jeremy Sims,
as Alex Taylor,
with Molly Brumm,
as Stephanie Ryan,
in Chances.*



A poor Englishman in Ireland*

IT WAS STILL SEPTEMBER, by no means the last of a good summer. But his room was at the back of the house. At the front he might have caught something of the warmth bubbling inside all that ripe verdure on the Green, or in the seasonal crowds rippling across their pleasure ground. But in this dark room I felt a chill. I made him up a fire. I have always been fond of that task. There is a comfort in the setting of fires. The way the powder can be dusted in its entirety through the bars, and the fragments with some energy in them yet, raked over and freed of encumbrance and settled on the grate for their final blaze. Then the new edifice, of twisted paper and coals and cakes of turf, the hierarchy of restrained combustion. I clear the debris of one performance and set up for the next. How perfect in its achievement each fire can be, and yet how easily repeated.

The basket in his room was small. I knew I would have to return at intervals to stoke and check.

— What are you at there? he said.

— I thought a fire would be companionable, Father.

— I'd prefer the other, he murmured.

I stood and turned and looked at him. He was a poor frail creature all right. None of the dignity of the elderly *in extremis*. Yet the lick of hair hanging on the forehead was too youthful an affectation for this pinched, nervous, middle-aged face. And the pathetic little womanly slippers so neatly, oh so neatly together beside the bed.

— Our blessed Lord will recognise you as his own, Father, I said.

— And how should he do that, Father Darlington?

If he looked me in the eye, it was only fleetingly.

— You have laboured for him. Worn yourself out in fact.

— I have made a most wretched botch of every task I've been given.

It would not have done for me to encourage this maudlin streak in him. I crossed to the foot of the bed and tapped on the frame.

— Now Father, I said, the logic of that is too easy a comfort for the Christian soul. Our own failures should not be thought of as firm assurances of the company of the crucified.

— Father Darlington, you yourself were offering me hope.

— You don't need any human being to give you that.

— No, no, despair is not a temptation for me.

The weary way in which he said this was annoying. Why should I be made to feel obtuse by people speaking cryptically to themselves?

— Nor should it be, I said simply.

— It is not beyond our Saviour, he shrugged, to mark out some good in a soul that can find no wholesomeness there himself. But don't you find, Father Darlington, that in our poor fleshly state we ache, distractingly, for some recognition of worth in ourselves? And it has to come from another. Without that, self-regard is impossible.

* There is no other authority for any of [the negative stories about Hopkins] that doesn't seem to lead directly back to Darlington.—Robert Bernard Martin, *Gerard Manly Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, HarperCollins, 1991. ISBN 0 00 217662 9 RRP \$50.00. Cf also the dean of studies episode in ch.5 of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

He had the most subtle, though probably indeliberate way of playing the pathos and inveigling pity. But I wasn't going to give him his commendation. I saw his problem certainly. I perceived nothing there that I could rate as achievement. I was not going to do him the disservice of some hypocritical praise. In his desperately pitiful way he was honest in the scrutiny he gave his career, and I was not going to play him false by any less honest review of it. A preacher without sense of audience, a schoolmaster with no talent for discipline, a religious with no fraternal ease, a citizen of a catholic and an apostolic church unable to discard his national bigotries ... Whatever he was put to became an addition to the list of skills he did not have.

That is a just summary. It errs only insofar as charity has skewed it.

He had no future. That was the sad truth.

— Air, Father, he said.

The window was open very slightly at the top.

— The evening is coming on draughty, I said, raising the lower sash an inch. You have little idea of the nature of the day from this room. I believe the clouds are moving in. I slipped my splayed fingers into the air. A general change is supposed to be on its way. I can almost feel the drop in temperature. All over Ireland, I shouldn't wonder. We have had a good summer. But, *donner und blitzen*, a more forceful display of the Almighty's presence.

— What about a little breeze, Father Darlington?

— Of course, of course, I answered him as I turned, the Lord in a little breeze. I could never be oblivious to the warning of Elias.

— No, I mean a draught, Father. Does your fire not need a draught?

— Indeed it does.

I rucked my soutane into my lap as I went on to my haunches by the grate. Odd the trivial observations we make about our species, but as I bobbed down it occurred to me that there is a manly way of lifting and tucking a skirt and I have always winced when I see a priest unable to manage it.

I struck the match down through the palm of my hand. It fizzed and flared and settled, and I extended it.

— Always another little blaze, eh sir.

He was standing there with his head on one side, legs apart, hands thrust into his trouser pockets. Insolent. I could always feel the contempt. In some young men it is the primary emotion. A priest will always be an object of it. No ploys of amiability or equality will turn aside the ill-feeling. They despise us. Or maybe they wish to despise us. There is an order, a lack of individual ostentation about our lives—or at least there should be—which is a reproach to them in their self-consecrating ways. This ineffable holiness of the undergraduate temper is not a notion I sympathise with.

The match licked at the ball of my thumb, and I dropped it, with a start, into the unlit grate.

— For my purgatory, Mr Joyce. One way or another I should be inured to fire.

— The good man is tried in the furnace, sir.

— I would prefer my ordeal in this life, Mr Joyce.

— Damnation after death is certainly ineluctable.

He seemed to think the remark was worth a smile.

— The wary soul guards against it, does he not? It is his final duty. We have an expression, and according to that expression ...

— We must die.

— Very good, Mr Joyce, quite so.

I rose to my feet, with some spring.

— But then Barabbas, whom you refer to, is an utterly maligned man. Known for one thing only. A brief appearance in the life of a purported criminal. And given mention by a chronicler in whose interests it was to smear him. He will be allowed before the bar in time.

— Or out of it.

— Of course. As I was saying, we have an expression. When one of our men is no longer highly active, and has no set offices to be placed beside his name in our annual listing of the Society's deployment, we annotate him with the words *curans valetudinem*.

— On the retired list as it were.



— Precisely.

— Imprecisely surely. You have given him an active occupation, instead of leaving him in passive indolence.

— My original point entirely, Mr Joyce. Seeing to his own well-being seems to me a worthy activity for a man of God.

— Pardon my being personal, sir, but do you look forward to your own days under that description?

— If I merit it. Worn out with other labours. Not, of course, if it were a cover for laziness and temperamental antipathy to any useful work.

— Such as happens?

— I have known it, Mr Joyce, I have known it. As one adult human might admit to another. For all his arrogance I saw no point in being evasive or distant with the man. He was not to be won over. Yet he understood the language I speak.

— Do we have a right to speak in our own defence, would you say, Mr Joyce? Prior to the one judgment that matters, I mean.

— Why should we bother, sir?

He spoke with lazy indifference.

— He searcheth all hearts, doesn't he? What could we adduce that is not already known?

He moved to one side of the fireplace and leant against the mantel. It was an attitude of equality, perhaps of defiance.

— Why bother with this? He indicated the fire with an abrupt kick.

— Dublin can be a cold city, Mr Joyce.

— Of course. So why bother with so little heat?

He needled the whole time.

— You are not generous, if I may say. It is an unlovely trait. Perhaps you position yourself so that you do not feel the heat. You may even deceive yourself that the only true symptoms are darting flames.

I knew his silent view of me. Pale, loveless, without enthusiasm. The predictable, superficial judgments of a young man.

— Ah, he said, so even the man of God may speak up for himself.

— We have a set speech to make eventually. We know the topic, we know the questions. It would be remiss of us not to rehearse.

— A matter of eloquence, then?

— Well our own words must plead for us, Mr Joyce. It is our answers that will send us to the sheep or the goats. Not the silent penetration of the divine gaze.

There was mockery about his mouth, but also the tension of real interest.

— And what language would you use, sir? *Curans valetudinem*, as you are.

— I doubt whether it would be an occasion for Latin.

I squatted, bouncing athletically, and lit the fire at three strategic points. The flames rose evenly across the base of my pyre.

— But I am not being facetious. Should the words pain us as we deliver them?

In the bed Father Hopkins started to cough, an unrhythmic lurch of sound, as much inhalatory and asthmatic as any bouncing of air over the throat and up out the mouth. There was no smoke. The fire was drawing well. The man all over.

Mr Joyce glanced at him.

— The English tongue, he said. But issuing from an alien throat.

He continued to stare, but he appeared abstracted.

— The language is home, he said, where you live. Take a word like home. Notice the soft caressing hum of it. It is where you take comfort. Or ease away, turn away, the harshness of the world. Even the world of the soul. The oblivion of old England, the hearth, the jollity, the ale. Take ale. The glide of it. Just enough of a catch in the muted diphthong to give a little taste. But a little is all, and you are lulled.

He looked at me with a lazy challenge.

— Invoke any word, he said.

— Christ, said Father Hopkins. Or so I thought he said.

— Exactly, said Mr Joyce, spinning around and focusing his weak eyes on this wraith. On the one hand a natural expletive. An explosive word to clear the throat with.

— Master, said Father Hopkins. He made it sound as though he were pleading.

— Your words, not mine.

— Christ.
 — While on the other hand, Mr Joyce gestured, the laboured sough, clipped at both ends, of the genteel English.
 — Do not presume, fretted Father Hopkins.
 The paper was gone, the sticks going, the coal and the turf were taking.
 — I baulk at that language, said Mr Joyce.
 — Stand and use it, I said. I was exasperated. You are an oblique pair, but you'll both have to make your apologias some day, and it's simple questions you'll get and simple answers that are required. The clouds of heaven will not be showing my kind of courtesy.
 In the basket the sticks winced and cracked. I withdrew a pace.
 — Thank you, Father Darlington. That should be all.
 — I'll leave your door open.
 — No, no, it won't be necessary.
 — A little wholesome air. A chance for us all to look in on you.
 — Close the door. Fasten the window. Lower the ceiling. Shut the nations together. Leave the imbroglio to produce what it may.
 They are beyond me. I can distinguish nothing. The words seem to be coalescing.
 — Home.
 I hear the cry. Or is it laughter? Sour laughter?
 — Master.
 I'm sure I make out the word, but there are howls. Is it protest or imprecation or the profound clamour? I wait for the final word. I want that final word. But I do not get it. ■

Free Will

*Your choices are dangling in the wardrobe.
 They are lavender, navy or grey
 as a turtledove rasping through midsummer
 above the cobbled back lane.*

*Your decision will haunt you,
 so fraught with categories
 and a thicket of repercussions:
 you are in a blue funk.*

*What do mere shirts have to say
 in a wooden world?
 They feed into the shady way today
 will ravel and unravel you.*

*A voice that is not of human origin
 barracks you down to hell
 or through heaven's indigo funnels.
 It speaks you clean out of mind.*

*'I am,' you croak (like God himself,
 without the horsepower)
 but whiplash winds are dashing you now
 through undreamed galaxies.*

*The day slides away and you fall
 with a cotton torrent of laundry
 into the turquoise-lacquered
 Too Hard Basket.*

*Fight back, feathery faintheart.
 It is high time to unfurl again
 the enormous rippling spinnaker
 of hope.*

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Resonant silences



SO MUCH OF WHAT IS GENUINE in the spiritual experience of Australians is unspoken. This must be true of the genuinely spiritual in any time or place, given that it has to do with God's free gift of himself, which always 'prevents', goes before, our own thought and language. But it seems to be particularly true in Australia, for good reason and for ill.

The ill is the spiritual impoverishment of public language and custom which has prevailed since the first European settlement, conditioned as it was by the rationalism of 18th century England and quite incapable of recognising anything spiritual in the customary life of the Aboriginal inhabitants. The good reason for our inarticulateness is that which always and everywhere keeps human life open to the divine. As St John of the Cross put it: 'One word spoke the Father, which was his Son, and he is speaking it always in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul' (*Sayings of Light and Love* 98). The silence of a secular desert can be a 'resonant solitude' for hearing the Word.

Even in the least propitious suburbs of our cities and minds, there are daily intimations, visitations, of this dark meaning of the holy. It is com-

Four hundred years after his death on 14 December 1591, the Carmelite mystic, St John of the Cross, is strangely able to evoke deep resonances of recognition in modern, secularist Australia. He is a fount of renewal of contemplative life for many who might otherwise think of themselves as remote from Catholic and Christian tradition. 'And hence it is that contemplation, by which the mind has the highest recognition of God, is called mystical theology, which means a secret wisdom of God; for it is secret even to the mind that receives it. And so St Dionysius calls it a ray of darkness.'

(*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, 8, 6)

monly ignored or denied, rendered 'manageable' by psychological reduction or deflected by social busy-ness and intellectual theorising. But John of the Cross and the apophatic tradition, that theology of negation in which the perception of God is located beyond the adequacy of words or thoughts or images, can help us to live with that mystery, not so much by naming it—it is beyond all names—but by pointing towards it precisely in its namelessness.

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way you do not know.

In order to arrive at what you do not possess

You must go by a way you do not possess.

In order to arrive at what you are not

You must go by a way you are not.

(*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I, 13, 11)

So the value of St John of the Cross is not in his being one interesting option in a pluralist, multicultural world of religions. His words illumine essential needs of human existence to which we are drawn but cannot chart the way, places of the spirit where perhaps we have arrived but ourselves are unable to identify.

There is a happy irony in the fact that this man, rightly reputed to be one of the great ascetics of Christian tradition, is at the same time a guardian of the sensuous. It seems to me

Fred Williams, 'Hillside I' 1965-66

that Australian culture has a particular need here. No amount of genial good will, even reinforced by a sunny climate and good beaches, can save hedonism from the cycle of pleasure and sad satiety: the witness to this by the great hedonists of the world is more convincing than the strictures of desert ascetics.

Often enough it is implied that the best we can hope for is a truce, a division of the spoils, between body and spirit. With a Castilian gift for refusing compromise—and, at root, a Christian gift of knowing the Incarnation—John exemplifies a more whole-hearted way: *todo y nada*, all and nothing, charting the course of his spiritual ascent of Mount Carmel.

His lyric poetry celebrates the love of God as ardent desire, desolating absence, ecstatic union, all with an erotic imagery that is happily direct and uninhibited, sheer tenderness and passion. He had a profound feeling for physical form: he drew brilliantly with pen and ink and often carved in miniature. None of this is a mitigation of his relentless spiritual counsel of austerity. In the ways of prayer he had to learn to live through seasons of desolated imagination and emotional aridity, 'without the sweetness of spiritual feelings'; only thus do we learn to pray out of a love that is fidelity and self-surrender rather than self-gratification.

But this 'dark night of the senses', far from suppressing his sensibility, seems only to have refined and intensified it. After moving by way of renunciation 'through' created beauty towards its mysterious source, John speaks not only of rediscovering things 'in God', but also, in their particularity and physical immediacy, of created things becoming an immediate encounter with the holy—'not like seeing things in the light, or creatures in God, but that in that possession of God one feels that all things are God' (*Spiritual Canticle* 14:5).

TO AN AGE that places a premium on individual autonomy, on 'empowerment' and taking control of one's life (what implications for the lives of others?), John offers a salutary Christian leaven. Personal liberation is to be realised precisely through displacement of self from the centre, by sur-

rendering to the invasion of one's life by the holy. It sits easily with the Australian gift for ironic, unresentful self-deprecation. Although his own spiritual life abounded in sublime mystical phenomena, he insists that the real meaning of any such experience is that it points beyond itself to a transcendent Giver.

The value of these gifts lies in not 'resting in them' as his own accomplishment but in allowing himself to be drawn beyond them in a breaking open of the limits of his present self-possession into the dark night of further regions of faith. 'All the goodness that we have is lent to us and God holds it to be his own; it is God at work and his work is God' (*Points of Love* 29). Here is an alternative for a failed materialist credit economy: an ancient, proven method of living beyond one's means!

WE HAVE OUR OWN powerful visual counterparts to this spiritual austerity. The passionate energy of John's poetry and doctrine is best reflected in the baroque swirl of light and dark of El Greco; but his essential poverty of spirit is beautifully figured in some of the most prophetic visions of Australian landscape in recent times, all of them in the mode of a great simplification—Drysdale's and Nolan's desert images, Fred Williams' distillation of the essence of the land through abstraction, clarity and spareness of form, and Lloyd Rees dissolving forms in radiant light and luminous cloud.

All achieve their aesthetic power by diminishment of detail. And it's not unlike John of the Cross, who often went out to immerse himself in a landscape in order to pray—often a landscape veiled by night—and whose poetic form of language could dissolve into a sublime stammering through closeness of God. 'My Beloved, the mountains, the solitary wooded valleys, the strange islands, the sonorous rivers, the whisper of the amorous breezes, the tranquil night near the rising of the dawn, the silent music, the resonant solitude.' (*Spiritual Canticle* 14f). Together they make a good analogue for the undemonstrative quality of the spirit in Australia, which may be all the more inwardly intense for want of an easy exterior.

Finally, if John can point towards a presence of God in the silent and arid

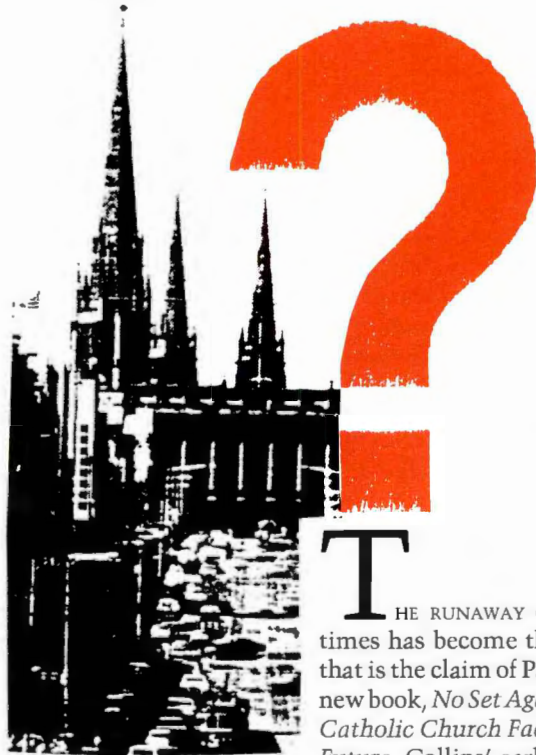
regions of secular life, he can also help to retrieve the living meaning of religion itself for those to whom it has become obscured under an unlovely shell of ideology or moralism or bathos. The presence of the living God encountered in contemplation is not set over against doctrine or church or sacrament, as the living to the dead. The 'golden substance'—divine life—is not just concealed beneath, but is mediated by, its 'silvered surface', its human form of expression in Scripture and the great professions of faith. John understood his own mystical wisdom to be simply his personal entrance into the divine realities which they announce.

And only too often, as John also bears witness, the subjective 'surface' of our experience of religion is anything but bright, polished silver. It can be as dull, abrasive and opaque to the light of divine meaning as the clay vessels which concealed the torches of Gideon's soldiers as they moved through the night (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* II, 9, 3). But the light is there nonetheless. Because God, as living mystery, conceals himself precisely as he reveals himself, so the experience of concealment can itself be an authentic form of revelation of divine presence.

And so, for John of the Cross, there is no region of human existence that need be despaired of. As one who was himself led through vast inner regions of both Paradise and Inferno, he can teach us how in silence we may hear the Word, how in loneliness we may know the meaning of belonging, and in abandonment, fidelity. All is redeemable and, indeed, destined for glory—not just in a mythic promise of the future, but as light presently born inside the clay, the homely, lovely clay of the human heart. ■

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There is a happy irony in the fact that this man, rightly reputed to be one of the great ascetics of Christian tradition, is at the same time a guardian of the sensuous.



A voice from the outer

THE RUNAWAY CHURCH of other times has become the church adrift: that is the claim of Paul Collins in his new book, *No Set Agenda: Australia's Catholic Church Faces an Uncertain Future*. Collins' earlier work, *Mixed Blessings*, was an assessment of the heady years after the Second Vatican Council, and in the new book he turns from the past to the future. His prognosis has the same bitter-sweet edge as the diagnosis he offered in the first book. He talks of crisis, but insists that crisis also supplies the moment of opportunity; and he is quick to point out that there *are* good things happening. Yet it is not an encouraging prognosis: words such as 'sadly' and 'tragically' punctuate the text.

Collins describes a 'lethargic and passionless' church that is retreating from an engagement with the wider world to the safety of what he calls 'a subculture'; a church unsure of its identity and therefore of how it should proceed. It is a church, according to Collins, that has lost confidence in the program of Vatican II but has no program to put in its place. He claims 'to stand back and see the whole picture' in a way no one else seems able to do, and, on the basis of what he sees, to offer 'at least a partial agenda' for Australian Catholicism.

A brave goal indeed, and the book has range enough to match its bravery. First at the level of genre. There is useful documentation of what's going on around Catholic Australia, and there is a potted history, which is at times a little perfunctory.

There are anecdotes of varying relevance, and research reports with lots of stats. There is prescription—with lots of 'shoulds', 'musts' and 'oughts'—and futurology, with much crystal-balling. There is ideological axe-grinding, with lots of swipes at 'the reactionaries'. Then at the level of

No Set Agenda: Australia's Catholic Church Faces an Uncertain Future, Paul Collins. David Lovell Publishing, Melbourne, Australia, 1991. ISBN 1 86355 020 8 RRP \$16.95

theme. In just over two hundred pages Collins treats a dizzying array of topics under three large headings: 'The People', meaning bishops, clergy, laity and religious; 'Ministries', which includes parishes and liturgy, schools, seminaries and universities, and new ministries in the church; and 'The Future of the Church', covering issues such as conscience, social justice, the environment etc. Given such range, it is hardly surprising that the book is uneven. It focuses well the key question of the relationship between the church and the world—engagement or disengagement?

It is also good on issues such as worship and its impoverishment, the need for a more cogent and contemporary apologetic, the need to recover Catholic tradition in new and imaginative ways, especially at the point of spirituality, and the need to enter the realm of public discourse, which will mean dealing with the media less timidly and more effectively. At other points, however, Collins crosses the border into the realm of wishful thinking, e.g. on the abandonment of clerical celibacy in the Latin church, and the absolute exclusion of governmental educational priorities from Catholic schools. He is also bit severe on the bishops who, booted from all sides as they are, seem more victims of confusion than confusion, with the episcopal purple taking on new shades of meaning.

COLLINS' MOST SURPRISING and idiosyncratic claim comes at the end of the book. It is that the great issues of church life that the book has broached converge in the issue of the environmental crisis. I think ecology a vital issue for the church at the level

of both thought and action, but I am not convinced that it is or should be the linchpin of a reading of Australian church life. Collins supports the extraordinary claim that Australia can sustain no more than 12 million people, using this as an argument against further immigration and in favour of making Australia one of the world's last national parks. I remain open to persuasion on the point, but I am not persuaded by Collins' arguments. In the same context, he argues for 'more impersonal images of God', and edges toward New Age understandings of God as 'part of time' and 'in the process' of the universe. That sort of stuff leaves me uneasy.

It is in this concluding section on the environment that the apocalyptic tone which has simmered through the book comes to the surface: it's five minutes to midnight, and unless something is done quickly, we're all headed for disaster. Again, I do not deny that we face grave ecological problems, but I doubt that the apocalyptic tone—appropriate perhaps to the more dramatic of the environmental problems—is well suited to the analysis of so complex and undramatic a set of problems as Australian Catholic life currently presents. What is required is something no less purposeful but more patient and more subtly attuned to the mess of things in dioceses, parishes, schools, houses of formation etc.

In the end, *No Set Agenda* is too personal a view to justify Collins' initial claim to see the picture whole. He wants to speak for what he calls 'mainstream Catholicism', which he opposes to a 'tiny minority' of reactionary Catholics of whom 'far more notice is taken than their numbers

warrant'. Yet in one of his nice self-deprecating touches Collins admits that 'there is a sense in which I have now moved beyond the Australian Catholic mainstream'. As a priest working for the ABC and living what he calls an 'eremical life' as a religious, his position is certainly unusual. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why the book is idiosyncratic, and perhaps that will prove to be its real contribution. It is not that it saw the picture whole, nor that it gave the church adrift a new agenda, but that at an intriguing moment in the story of Catholic Australia an unusually well-informed Catholic wrote with geniality and intelligence about the life of the church he loves.

One parting shot. While reading *No Set Agenda* I happened upon a copy of the latest offering from the ultramontane Catholic polemicist, Michael Gilchrist, which bears the title, *Catholicism into the Nineties: What Can be Done?* In Collins' terms, Gilchrist

would be an archreactionary, but like Collins he seeks to point the way forward for the church. In the process, he throws at least as much mud at types like Collins as Collins does at the 'reactionaries'. Taken together, the two books give a vivid sense of the polarisation evident in Catholic Australia, a polarisation which I would judge to be more pernicious than many of the things that alarm Collins and Gilchrist. Collins writes a good deal about the need for creativity and imagination. I agree, but they may need most at the point of this deepening polarisation. To have imagination enough to envisage gestures of reconciliation (a joint work from Collins-Gilchrist perhaps?) and courage enough to enact them: that should be at the heart of agenda, and that is what can be done. ■

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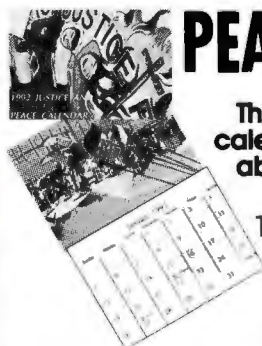
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Unburdening memory



Lily Brett and her husband, David Rankin.

LILY BRETT WAS A BABY BOOMER. She was born in 1946 and spent her childhood under the blue skies of Australian suburbia. But she doesn't see those years as naive and uncomplicated in the way that many of our baby boomers remember them. Lily Brett's parents had survived Auschwitz. They arrived here with little other than the burden of their memories. So Lily Brett grew up coming to terms with experiences she had never had.

She wasn't alone in this either. Australia has settled more survivors of the Holocaust per capita than any country besides Israel. Lily Brett's fiction is peopled with the children of this community. Her new book, *What God Wants*, is named in wry appreciation of their confusion. Few of them, as she tells it, have got much idea of what they want for themselves—quite

What God Wants, Lily Brett. Queensland University Press, 1991.
ISBN 0 7022 2359 X RRP \$29.95

apart from having any clues as to what God might want. The hope that Lily Brett holds out to them is, simply and ironically, that the question of what God wants won't go away.

Lily Brett has inherited the story of her parents:

My mother had a niece who was nine years old in the Lodz ghetto, the last one working, and she used to carry her bowl of soup from the factory she worked in to my parents. She was skin and bones. They were all skin and bones and she used to say 'have this soup, I'm not hungry'. Now my mother watched that niece

who was nine years old walk to the gas chamber. She also watched another sister's newborn baby being thrown down several stories from a building. You can imagine that those people would have been preoccupied with what God was doing.

What God Wants is never far from these experiences. On the other hand, it is not the story of Lily Brett's parents. It is her own story, the story of the next generation: not one vast bloody canvas but a discomfiting weave of small events. The writer listens in on conversations in nursing homes and cafes and offices and hol-

iday resorts. It sounds for a time as if the children of the survivors have done pretty well for themselves. But Brett also hears what is being said just out of earshot; she opens her prose to the thin, dry voices of characters who cannot call the Holocaust their own.

It simply festers in their imagination.

ESTHER SCHENKLER is an example. When Esther was 17 she had her mother's Auschwitz number tattooed on her right forearm: A4257. Her parents understandably accused her of making a mockery of their tragedy. In fact, she was mocking herself. Esther had already been through an abortion. Later, her marriage collapses. Lost, she spends Saturday afternoons riding the lifts in quiet buildings, imagining she is getting close to the experience of a foetus floating in its amniotic fluid. Finally, she returns to her old school and her old locker. Locker 1012. She shaves her head like a prisoner. Then, in the comfort of the metal locker, she takes her own life. It's hardly a bedtime story. This woman pins more hope on herself as a number, an Auschwitz number or a locker number, than she does on herself under her own name.

What God Wants is more a confederation of stories than a novel. The stories relate to each other as branches of an extended family: Esther Schenkler's suicide, for example, re-emerges as an item of gossip in the lives of other Jews with whom she went to school. The book suggests the ways in which a tight-knit community that does not break the mould of pain in which it has been formed, will eventually trivialise the pain.

Brett's women are obsessed with dieting. They spend days of their lives on the phone repeating the same conversations. They run the gauntlet of scatty sexual infidelities. But beneath the humour in which the daily round of Caulfield and St Kilda is packaged, there is also a suggestion of aching emptiness in the lives of characters who fail to identify what they really want and settle for something less.

Yet Lily Brett also expects us to admire her characters. We admire their verve. They have inherited a hunger for life, any life, and play life's mundane themes with virtuosity. Characters who can worry about the quality of

almonds and honey cake are precisely the ones who never say die. Rosa Cohen is such a one. Just as with the character of Lola Bensky who emerges from her chrysalis as a poet in Lily Brett's first book of fiction, *Things Could be Worse*, Rosa Cohen shares a number of Lily Brett's personal attributes, not least the fact that both the character and the author have now settled in New York with non-Jewish husbands.

Rosa has been a psycho-analysis junkie. She has also been a junkie on the history of the Holocaust. So much so that a bowl of chicken bones will look to her like 'the site of a mass burial'. But in New York she takes steps to freedom. She walks 10 blocks alone. She buys a chicken at Rego's Roosters. She walks home again. It's not much but at the same time it's a living of her own.

What God Wants ends in a cemetery in Springvale. Ironically, it is a place of great life. 'It is a place,' says Lily Brett, 'where people look after their dead, a place for the laying out of the past'. Here we discover that, against the odds, a man of 70, Moishe Zimmermann, is about to become a father. His new wife is an outsider from the Philippines, what Moishe calls a 'post office bride'. 'It's a funny business, this business of what God wants,' says Moishe. Lily Brett would vouch for that. In writing the book she says she was surprised herself how shafts of light appeared from unexpected places.

AT ONE STAGE she sets up a lunch between sisters who've spent their lives at loggerheads. Things don't go well. One sister gleefully lets slip, for instance, how desperately their mother had tried to have the other aborted. Lily Brett says that she thought initially this scene would serve only to show that these two women 'just could not connect with each other'. But they do.

Strange to say, the connection is forged from a heartless *cri de coeur*: 'I want us to be close ... I want to be able to share things with you. I'd like to be able to share tips with you. Do you know that if you light a match in the bathroom after you've been to the toilet, the lighted match extinguishes any smell.'

It's not much to share, but it's the

first faint pulse in their relationship. So, too, in the Springvale cemetery where a number of characters become united in the gift of a child to aging parents. 'It would be better,' says the father, Moishe, 'if the things that God wanted were a bit closer to the things that we all want'. There is a sense here that what God wants is, in fact, not much. Just life, that's all.

SPEAKING OF THE TITLE of *What God Wants*, Lily Brett slips backwards and forwards between the experience of her generation and that of her parents.

The question occupies many people in the book in one sense or another because I think the people are struggling hard to find meaning in it. Both my parents were atheists. They were not atheists before the war. They both came from Orthodox Jewish homes but they both separately at different points during the war lost their belief.

My mother always said there was no God but would refer to God the whole time and ask herself 'what does he want?' I think that survivors of the Holocaust either really reaffirmed their faith and became fairly religious or lost it altogether. Both my parents saw babies having their heads smashed open and found it very hard to believe in God. I myself struggle with the question quite a lot.

What God Wants is the quirky fruit of that struggle. It lives in the present and looks to the future as the best tribute it can offer to an horrendous past which is, nonetheless, in the past. It doesn't hurt to recall, in the present, how many of those arriving in Australia of recent times, especially from Asia, bring with them horrendous memories of their own. With any luck, their children will include tellers of simple stories with memories as spacious as that of Lily Brett and the wit to provide alternatives to obsession or forgetting. ■

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FLASH IN THE PAN

Impromptu, dir. James Lapine (Greater Union). 'Radical chic' is a phrase coined in the '60s, but its pedigree stretches back into the 19th century. Before Leonard Bernstein began giving parties at which wealthy New Yorkers could rub shoulders with the Black Panthers, there were the salons of Paris, where jaded aristocrats could rub shoulders with bohemians like Georges Sand and Eugene Delacroix.

It was a mutually degrading relationship, with the bohemians living on the hospitality of those whom they professed to despise, and the aristocrats eagerly courting their despisers. *Impromptu* lampoons this hypocrisy, just as Tom Wolfe lampooned Bernstein's parties, but its satire has less sting. Lapine, and the script by Sarah Kernochan, take a more indulgent view of their subjects than Wolfe did of his.

This indulgence, perhaps, is because they are also showing us our own world in embryo. *Impromptu* has Georges Sand (Judy Davis), a liberated woman long before anybody was able to recognise one, pursuing Chopin (Hugh Grant), a 'sensitive' man long before anybody was able even to imagine one. She does so in affectedly macho fashion—even to the point of fighting a duel on his behalf—and when he eventually succumbs, she becomes the dominant partner.

Impromptu is a comedy of modern sexual life, thrown into relief by its period setting and sweetened by the music of Chopin and Liszt. (There are some good musical jokes to spice the dialogue.) It is also a triumph for Judy Davis, who uses all her considerable skill in portraying an aggressively female woman who 'plays' the part of a man, and is thoroughly convincing as both.

—Ray Cassin

Mortal Thoughts, dir. Alan Rudolph (Village). The women's buddy movie seems here to stay, and on current showing it is proving much more interesting a genre than its masculine counterpart. *Mortal Thoughts*, like *Thelma and Louise*, explores women's responses to male violence, but with none of the exuberance of Ridley Scott's film.

Joyce and Cynthia work together in a salon; Joyce's husband—either typecast or wonderfully played by Bruce Willis—has been making life intolerable for them for a long time. He is dead; killed by one of the two women. The film works largely in flashback, as Cynthia (Demi Moore) is interviewed by an earnest but caring cop (Harvey Keitel), who plays a remarkably similar character in

could not if we knew what was 'really' supposed to have happened. So when the ending comes, and we finally do find out what happened, our sense of what that means is much fuller for having seen the alternatives as live ones. The photography is marvellous, and the acting—with the exception of Demi Moore's slightly wooden Cynthia—marvellously transparent.

—David Braddon-Mitchell

The Commitments, dir. Alan Parker (Village and independent cinemas). This entertainment is one way of updating oneself on Ireland. Devoid of decaying great houses, thatched cabins or decaying Connemara coastline, it is set in a variety of unlovely Dublin locations, in particular the outer Dublin public housing estates built to accommodate the tenement dwellers of the inner city ('Europe's worst slums').

It's not so much the working class who live there as the unemployed class and it's one of their sons, Jimmy, (Robert Arkins) who has the vision: a band committed to 'soul'—The Commitments. The Irish, he says, 'are the blacks of Europe, the Dubliners are the blacks of Ireland, and northsiders are the blacks of Dublin'; only 'soul' can give expression to the energy, rawness and the yearning of being young, Dublin and 'black'.

Some of the funniest scenes illustrate the eclecticism of Irish popular musical culture. There's a wedding with the kind of showband that made country and western the idiom of Sunday night dances the length and breadth of Ireland. There's the audition sequence where everyone from uilleann pipers to Joan Baez and Led Zeppelin turn up to face the question 'Who are your influences?' And there's the family home of our hero, where Elvis is revered by a wonderfully realised father, Mr Rabbitte (Colm Meany).

The music is the heart of the film and it's great. (The vocals were recorded live). How could the band not succeed, one asks? Well, at the moment when glory beckons the band disintegrates. The film handles all this very well and in particular the tensions between the band's male and female members. It gets just right the social and sexual immaturity that leads to self-destruction.

The Commitments is very entertaining and along the way you are

Eureka Street Film Competition

What would Scarlett O'Hara have given Ashleigh Wilkes for Christmas? If you think you know, tell us and we'll award two tickets, for the film of your choice, for the answer we like best. Write to: *Eureka Street* film competition, PO Box 553, Richmond, VIC 3121. The winner of last month's competition was Kathleen Donohoe, of Kensington, NSW, who knew that Jerome Cowan played Miles Archer in *The Maltese Falcon*—for the full five minutes he was on screen, before being shot dead.



Thelma). The process of finding out who really killed James, and who is covering up for whom, is an exercise in determining the limits of friendship, the responsibility of those who tolerate violence for its victims, and the morality of revenge.

The atmosphere is potent, and its structure as a thriller is put to better use than it often is. We are made to contemplate a range of possibilities about what might have happened, and live them morally in a way that we

offered a sub-Joycean tour of Dublin, with glimpses of Moore Street, the Gardiner Street environs, the Liffey quays, and Grafton Street cast in a new light. (You can actually take a rock tour of Dublin: 'This is where U2 started, that's the Bad Ass Cafe where Sinéad O'Connor was a waitress, and this is where they filmed *The Commitments*.')

Throughout you have a sense of the overwhelming youth of the population, as well as the familiars of urban decay (drugs, thuggery). And a rather kitsch priest—he carries a breviary—tells something of the truth about the church in Ireland, at its best and worst. Above all there is rawness, vitality and hope.

—Margaret Coffey

Soap Dish, dir. Michael Hoffman (Greater Union). It is fitting that a film partly about an actor who wants to play a one-man Hamlet should be a soap within a soap within a soap. Sally Field is somehow very appropriately cast as Celeste, the star of the award-winning daytime soap *The Sun Also Sets*. Her life turns to soap when her one-time boyfriend, the would-be Hamlet, Jeffrey Anderson (Kevin Kline), is brought back as part of a diabolical plan to displace Celeste as star of the show.

It's all pretty good fun, but you had better like soap. This is no exposé of US daytime television, if anything it's a loving homage to it, ending in a string of reasonably good gags and a set-piece of sentimental excess. The moments of parody are indulgent; if you laugh, you laugh the way you might at the eccentricities of a favourite relative.

But it is well paced and well acted. Whoopi Goldberg is terrific as the scriptwriter Rose, the only close to three-dimensional character in the film. The various implausible subplots tick along effectively, and the *dénouement* when life is supposed to blend with art on live TV is very funny indeed. But of course all that really happens is that soap blends with soap, and in a few years' time you'll be hard pressed to remember you ever saw this movie.

Still, worth catching, especially if your Greater Union cinema has discount days early in the week.

—David Braddon-Mitchell



From pure drops ...

The thirst for purity seems to be easy prey for those with commercial instincts. A health-food restaurant in the new Melbourne Central shopping complex has been touting glasses of 'Tasmanian rain water' at \$2 a glass.

... to pure froth

In other parts of the world, however, what one drinks amounts to a political statement rather than a yuppie fashion. When what used to be East Germany held elections prior to joining the German Federal Republic, some candidates stood on behalf of the Beer Lovers' Party. Their declared aim was to protect the purity of German beer, which perhaps meant keeping it blond and blue-eyed.

Germany's Beer Lovers were not successful, but across the border in Poland a party of the same name has won 10 per cent of the vote, putting it ahead of the Social Democrats (the renamed communists) and the Catholic Action Party. This means that the Beer Lovers could hold up to 28 seats the the 460-member Sejm (assembly).

The president of the Beer Lovers, Janusz Rewinski, is a comedian by trade but insists that the Beer Lovers are no Polish joke. They want people to drink beer rather than vodka, he says, which means they are another reaction to the legacy of communism. Alcoholism has long been a serious problem in Poland—the Economics Ministry estimates that a million people are drunk every day—and this has usually been attributed to a desire to blot out the grimness of life under the old order.

Rewinski says a ban on alcohol would be futile, but people can be

encouraged to change their beverage: 'It is better to go forward into Europe in a slightly tipsy state than in a drunken stupor.'

Per sæcula sæculorum

Eureka Street readers old enough to remember Latin as a familiar part of the school curriculum may also remember Brother Tarcissius or Sister Immaculata extolling the brevity and precision that was possible in the old Roman tongue. Unfortunately, Vatican bureaucrats who still use Latin as a working language are not quite the heirs of Virgil and Cicero.

The Libreria Editrice Vaticana has just published the first volume of a Latin dictionary containing modern terms, and it reveals Vatican lexicographers at their elliptical best. They offer *aeronavis abstractio a prestituo cursu*, which literally means 'aircraft removed from its official destination', for 'hijacking'.

Or try *coruscantes disci per convexacaeli volantes*, 'convex flying flashing discs', for UFOs. One entry seems to predate Legionnaires disease: *machinatio aeri purgando*, 'machine for cleaning the air', denotes an air-conditioning system. And just in case Rupert Murdoch ever takes over *L'Osservatore Romano*, there is *exterioris pagine puella*, for 'cover girl'.

At least no one can say that the modern world has left the Vatican at a loss for words.

The line is dead

Remember the photo of the Telecom billboard published in our September edition? It advised passing motorists with car phones, 'Don't just sit there, phone somebody else's client.' **Joady Donovan**, a marketing controller for Cambridge University Press, informs us that on another such billboard, in South Melbourne, the copy has been amended to: 'Don't just sit there, phone a client.' Dare we claim the credit for this outbreak of compassion?

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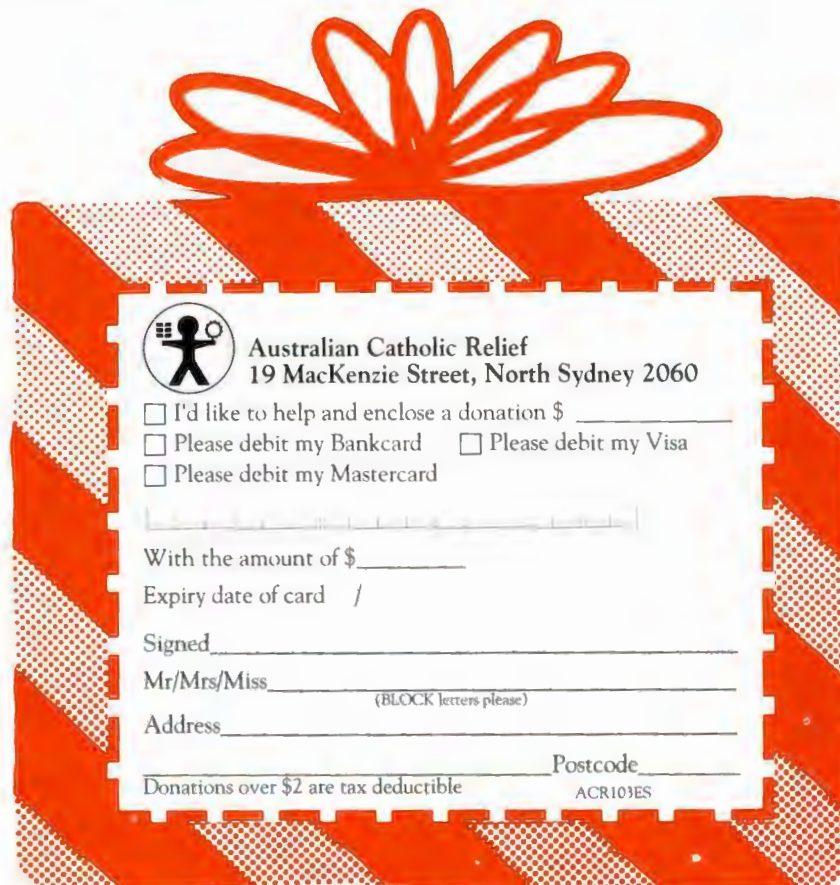
Of all the gifts you can give, there are none more precious than the gift of life. Yet, of all gifts, the gift of life can be the least expensive and the most rewarding.


For unlike most gifts, it grows and keeps on growing.

It can take the form of vital sustenance - food and water, or of education, health, or a spark of hope for the future.

While our children might dream of that special toy - a bicycle, a doll or, in this age of technology, a computer - the other children in our family are dreaming too. But their dreams are of the simple and basic needs that we so easily take for granted.

To choose the gift of life is the easiest gift decision you can make this Christmas.



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